

Remaking America's Dairyland:
Undocumented Workers, American Farmers, and the Tenuous Alliance of Modern
Dairy, 1986-2009

By

Dustin M. Cohan

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Patrick Iber, Associate Professor, History
Paige Glotzer, Assistant Professor, History
Marla A. Ramírez, Assistant Professor, History
Allison Powers Useche, Assistant Professor, History
Benjamin Marquez, Professor, Political Science

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For my Uncle Paul

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NOTE ON SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2019, I began researching undocumented workers and found a handful of news articles that used interviews with Mexican dairy workers to explain their growing presence on midwestern dairy farms beginning in the 1990s.¹ Like any historian, my first inkling was to search publications and the internet to see where I could find archival material related to the topic. My initial search led me to a number of scholarly works on the subject in other academic fields, but their sources were often survey and numbers driven. While there seemed to be ample sources on dairy farming in Wisconsin-based collections, much of this focused on pre-1960 history that had little to do with immigrant labor. Nevertheless, I spent weeks digging through archival boxes at the Wisconsin Historical Society and other repositories, but failed to find anything significant related to immigrant labor on Wisconsin dairy farms.² Certainly, the Society's government records helped provide an understanding of the size and economics of America's Dairyland over time, but the information did not cover unauthorized labor.

Exiting my time at institutional archives with little to show for my efforts, I continued to engage with other academic fields and found that rural sociologists at UW-Madison had done extensive research on the topic in 2008. Like the journalists I first encountered, these scholars' key sources were self-conducted interviews. While these publications were invaluable in getting my research process started, I knew that I would need to develop my own alternative archive and fill it with the only tool at my disposal: oral history. From that point forward, I became more of

¹ Rick Barrett, "Dairy farms fear Trump's immigration policies," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 6 Mar 2017, accessed 18 Aug 2019, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/money/business/2017/03/06/dairy-farms-fear-trumps-immigration-policies/98700808/>; Alexandra Hall, "Under Trump, Wisconsin dairies struggle to keep immigrant workers," *Wisconsin Watch*, 19 Mar 2017, accessed 18 Aug 2019, <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2017/03/under-trump-wisconsin-dairies-struggle-to-keep-immigrant-workers/>; and Ruth Conniff, "The Houses that Milk Built," *The Progressive Magazine*, 1 June 2018, accessed 18 Aug 2019, <https://progressive.org/latest/the-houses-that-milk-built-mexican-workers-sustain-us-dairy-hometowns-180601/>.

² I also visited archives at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, Minnesota Historical Society, Minnesota State Archives, University of Minnesota, and *Hoard's Dairyman* (industry periodical).

an investigative journalist out in the field than a traditional historian mining archives for information. To explain how undocumented immigrants remade America's Dairyland in the 1990s and 2000s, I needed to speak to people and conduct oral histories to recreate their experiences.

Without a single contact in the dairy industry, I began by seeking out the journalists and sociologists that had previously connected with undocumented workers in Wisconsin's dairy industry. In 2009, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Program on Agricultural Technology Studies surveyed workers on a few dozen dairy farms and extrapolated statistics that found roughly 40% of the state's dairy workers to be immigrants.³ This finding led some regional outlets to publish articles, but their coverage was limited outside of the Midwest.⁴ Fortunately, I was able to speak with one of the academic authors, Sarah Lloyd, who gave me invaluable research advice, but could not offer me direct contact with undocumented workers themselves. In the decade following the survey, national journalists began picking up on the story, especially during the 2016 election campaign when President Donald Trump rallied against Mexican immigration. With the national spotlight on undocumented immigrants, news stories of Mexican dairy farm workers began to appear with greater frequency.⁵ Reading through the chronological progression of these sources, I identified and contacted seven separate

³ Jill Harrison, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane, "Changing Hands: Hired Labor on Wisconsin Dairy Farms," February 2009, Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

⁴ Miriam Jordan, "Got Workers? Dairy Farms Run Low on Labor," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2009, accessed 18 August 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124890678343891639>; Jacob Kushner, "Immigrants now 40 percent of state's dairy workforce," *Wisconsin Watch*, 4 November 2009, accessed 8 August 2019, <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2009/11/immigrants-now-40-of-states-dairy-workforce/>.

⁵ Elise Foley, "Undocumented Workers Are The Backbone Of Dairies. Will Trump Change That?," *HuffPost*, 6 Oct 2017, accessed 18 Aug 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/wisconsin-dairy-industry-undocumented-workers_n_59c3cfb7e4b06f93538cfd3f; Lydia Zepeda, "Immigrant Food Workers Deserve A Break Today," *The Progressive Magazine*, 13 Oct. 2015, accessed, 19 Aug 2019, <https://progressive.org/op-eds/immigrant-food-workers-deserve-break-today/>;

And Barbara Miner, "From the Archive: The New Immigrants," *Milwaukee Magazine*, 30 Jan 2017, accessed 18 Aug 2019, <https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/the-new-immigrants-curtiss-wisconsin/>.

journalists who had published on the topic from 2015 to 2019. Only one of the seven agreed to meet with me, and while they were generous with their time, they could not provide me with any information leading to new interviews. The reporter explained that of the people they had interviewed less than a year prior, there was only one remaining on the same farm. This experience made clear the sensitivity and tenuousness of relations with undocumented dairy workers. If I had any hope of making contacts, I would have to do the investigative work myself and find people in unorthodox ways.

My first big break came when I followed up on a 2018 article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.⁶ The piece introduced a non-profit organization called Puentes/Bridges, which since 1999 had been helping farm communities in Wisconsin and Minnesota bridge gaps in cultural understanding between Mexican workers, dairy farmers, and the communities they inhabit. After making contact, the group's director, Mercedes Falk, agreed to help me arrange interviews with Puentes' founder, a dairy farmer, and several Mexican-born dairy workers. On several days in late December 2019 and early January 2020, I administered and recorded 10 oral histories with nearly 24 hours of material. This first foray into America's Dairyland provided me with a foundation of what to expect and how to get people talking, which was easier said than done. My Spanish was rusty, but I tried to use this to my advantage, endearing myself to Mexican immigrants with my renowned ability for self-deprecation. Out of the ten, I stayed in frequent contact with four, whom I would routinely reach out to for clarifications and to ask questions. Every person I spoke to said they would help me find more people to speak to, but in every case these promises never materialized. While disappointing, this was not surprising. For any

⁶ Madeline Heim, "Even as Donald Trump rails about immigrants, Wisconsin dairy farmers build bridges to Mexico," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 17 October 2018, accessed 19 August 2019, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/10/17/wisconsin-dairy-farmers-build-bridges-mexico/1670444002/>.

undocumented worker, speaking to an academic or journalist could be perceived as dangerous. Getting people to talk to me required not only trust, but my presence and assurance. Nevertheless, these initial contacts and the Puentes/Bridges program have been among my biggest supporters and most helpful historical narrators.

In addition to the connections I made, this primary set of oral histories helped me hone my craft as an interviewer of vulnerable populations. Going into my first experience, I compiled a laundry list of open-ended questions, which I barely touched, and decided to follow a single maxim: speak as little as possible. Before pressing the record button on my device, I thanked the respondent profusely for their time and patience with my Spanish. To begin, I asked people what their first memory was and what they most remembered about their childhood. Starting at the beginning helped center the conversation on their lives, and I emphasized the importance of their experiences by continuing to come back to questions that highlighted their feelings and impressions. It was critical to get this point across, because people often consider their lives to be trivial in the grand scheme of history. It was my goal in every interview to get narrators to express their honest observations about, not only the broad strokes, but the specific moments in their lives that affected them deeply as human beings and undocumented immigrants. Building this foundation enabled me to get better insights into peoples' experiences leaving their homes, crossing the border, bouncing around the US, and eventually arriving in Wisconsin. Throughout, I took notes by hand that proved invaluable in transcribing and translating the recordings weeks later. While academic work on oral history methods helped me gain a sense of how the source material could be used, there was little that could have prepared me for the difficulties of finding and gaining the trust of undocumented immigrants in rural America. Thus, my techniques grew organically as I learned what words and tones of voice worked best in courting interviewees. I

made plenty of mistakes, from scaring off prospective interviewees with my overly friendly greetings or killing an interview because I misspoke in Spanish. Over time, I assembled a list of effective questions that I revised to fit each persons' identity and personality. Despite the fruitfulness of this first series of interviews and the method it helped me develop, I found myself without new leads in mid-January, and the material I had collected was not nearly enough to produce a dissertation.

Looking for another way in, I began cold calling and emailing large dairy farms around the state to see if they would be willing to talk to me; an arduous process that had meager results. I sent roughly 500 messages out by email, voicemail, and written letter. Rather than explain my intentions of writing a dissertation about undocumented workers, I told recipients that I hoped to speak with them about their history in the industry in hopes of documenting and preserving their stories for posterity. Over the next two to six weeks, I received roughly twenty responses, of which six people agreed to meet with me. While conducting their oral histories, each person promised to help me find immigrant dairy workers to interview, but in post communication this assistance never materialized. Approaching the final days of January 2020, in addition to the sixteen oral histories with dairy farmers and workers, I had also interviewed thirty other people—agricultural economists, industry experts, dairy specialists at university extensions, rural sociologists, and journalists—that were connected to the industry.⁷ While this was a good foundation for understanding changes in the dairy industry broadly, I had still not been able to tap into an undocumented worker network and lacked sufficient first-hand evidence to begin writing. If I wanted to tell a history of undocumented dairy workers in rural Wisconsin, I would

⁷ A special thanks to Sarah Lloyd (from the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems), Ed Jesse (emeritus professor in the UW-Madison Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics), Will Hughes (25-year veteran of Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection), and Fred Hall (from the Agriculture and Natural Resources division of the Iowa State University Extension).

have to go there, investigate first hand, and find the in-between spaces where Mexican immigrants existed outside the farm and their homes.

Absent any new links to immigrant dairy worker communities and facing the obstacle of secrecy associated with underground networks of undocumented migrants, I used unconventional tactics to find and gain the trust of interviewees. A month prior, a Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* journalist had told me that they found willing interviewees at Mexican cultural events near the city of Manitowoc, which inspired me to take a similar approach in places like Dodgeville, Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, and Wausau, Wisconsin. While it would have been convenient to find a large event where people would be concentrated, it was the dead of winter in February 2020, and there were no soccer leagues, rodeos, or summer festivals to attend. Instead, I reached out to all of my undocumented dairy worker contacts, one of whom suggested that I seek people out at the local stores that sold Mexican products. Sure enough, there were many Mexican groceries and eateries in Wisconsin, usually owned by Americans of both European and Mexican descent. Drawing out an itinerary, I pinpointed Mexican (and Latin American) stores and restaurants located nearest to regions with the highest number of large-scale dairies, aiming to find the largest concentration of hired immigrant laborers. While I had hoped that owners and patrons would be welcoming, people reacted differently to my questions. Despite my willingness to spend money at their establishments, managers at retail shops and restaurants often refused to let me stay and engage with their customers. On more than one occasion, proprietors implied that they would physically kick me out if I tried to come back. While I had envisioned myself to be a cordial interlocutor, many people seemed to identify me as a long-haired academic invader from

the “liberal city” of Madison.⁸ Like an unrelenting salesman, I endured repeated rejections hoping that someone would pity me and engage in conversation.

Throughout February and most of March 2020, I stood outside ethnic Mexican businesses and restaurants around the state, trying to spark conversations with people in parking lots and the small aisles of stores. As I had become accustomed to, many people refused to speak with me or ignored me entirely. Midway through February though, I found myself in a small-town Mexican restaurant speaking to a man working as a server who gave me a lead that changed everything. My previous failures had taught me to take things slower and approach people with less direct questions. After ordering food and eating, I sat at my table for several minutes observing the flow of business, the other customers, and the staff. My waiter noticed that I was hanging out and as he walked past me I caught his eyes and asked, “*¿Cómo van las cosas hoy?*/How are things going today?” The greeting caught him off guard and he seemed pleasantly surprised, maybe shocked that I engaged on a personal level. He looked me up and down, and responded, “You really want to know?” I chuckled and uttered, “I really do.” He smiled, signaled with his index finger to give him a minute, and walked into the kitchen. Five minutes later, he came out with another customers’ food, served them, and sat down across from me. “I knew you were different when you walked in,” he explained. “The hair, the clothes, the shoes [*laughs*] what are you some kind of reporter?” I laughed, shaking my head no. “My name is Dustin. I’m a graduate student doing research,” I replied. For the next 20 minutes, we chatted about my dissertation, his experience working around the Midwest, and his knowledge of undocumented immigrant communities that had evolved around dairy farm work. He told me to stay until they closed so

⁸ A common refrain directed at me by people I encountered in rural Wisconsin bars and restaurants.

that we could talk more. By the end of the night we had scheduled eight meetings with workers on nearby farms, which I completed in the next two days.

Among the group were several people who had relatives that had been milkers in the 1990s and early 2000s, and they were more than willing to share their information. One of these contacts had family in multiple places across Wisconsin, and after some negotiating agreed to drive me to them. Meanwhile, I continued seeking out conversation at ethnic Mexican stores and restaurants. When businesses told me to leave, I stood in parking lots and tried my best to get people to notice and speak to me. Before I knew it, I was making new contacts every day, many of whom had returned to Mexico, and would have to be reached by phone. During the final week of February and into March, I had at least three oral histories scheduled for each day. The tide had turned, and I was starting to reach a number of recordings that would suffice as the basis for my dissertation. From February 21 through March 26, I toured Wisconsin with my digital audio recorder, bags of Mexican groceries that I brought as offerings for my narrators, and a lot of sweaters. While my schedule required that I return to Madison on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I spent most of the other days on the road. For the first time since I finalized my dissertation topic in October 2019, I felt that I was on the right track. I had some promising leads on people in Mexico who had been among the first undocumented dairy workers in the state, but as the COVID-19 pandemic began to consume life as we knew it, my process slowed and then stalled.

As of March 15, 2020, the University of Wisconsin-Madison officially told its researchers to cease all human-to-human contact. With a family to consider, I had little choice but to stay home and try to continue my research via the phone and internet. While these avenues allowed me to stay in contact with many people and even make some new connections, the world of undocumented workers was hard to experience virtually. By mid-April, I had no choice but to

cease research, in hopes that I would be able to continue in the coming weeks. But when weeks turned to months, I had no feel or precedence for knowing how best to continue, if at all. With great regret, I conducted my last oral histories over the phone during April and May.

From late December through May, I conducted 103 recorded interviews and extended life histories. Of that total, 67 were current or former dairy workers born in Mexico. Here is a breakdown of those people:

| Characteristics of Interviewees | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| | Interviewed | Migrated from 1986 to 2006 | Identified as Indigenous | Conducted in person | Conducted by phone or video conference | Conducted by phone call to Mexico |
| Men | 55 | 51 | 47 | 48 | 7 | 5 |
| Women | 12 | 5 | 9 | 9 | 3 | 3 |
| Total | 67 | 56 | 56 | 57 | 10 | 8 |

Note: all indigenous identified as Nahua.

INTRODUCTION

On a cold January afternoon in Pepin County, Wisconsin, I walked up an icy path from my car to Eduardo Xocopil's front door and caught the sun's reflection in the window.¹ Blinded, I climbed up the makeshift wooden steps and slipped as four-year old Quito opened the door to their trailer and greeted me. "Hello," he exclaimed. "You must be the history guy!" "Lord willing!" I replied. Quito smiled as Xocopil and his wife, Verónica Becerra, came from behind and welcomed me. We sat down at their 6X6 kitchen table and started talking as Becerra poured freshly brewed Café Bustelo coffee.² Glancing around their home, I noticed insulation coming out of holes in the wall, a linoleum floor blackened by dirt and wear, and large pieces of wood covering several broken windows. With four kids and a dog, the Xocopils had their hands full keeping a lid on their modest home. As I learned from our conversation though, these material deficiencies reflected Xocopil's independence and reflexive attitude towards their tenuous existence in the United States—a process that began in the 1980s.

"We were always poor, but [in] the 1980s it got very bad," Xocopil explained. "When I was old enough, I left because we needed money...I crossed [the border] in 1992, and I knew I had to change, you know, this isn't our land. We're illegals...any day could be our day [to get deported], so we buy the things we need and I send money to our parents at home [in Mexico]...most from dairy farm wages."³ Like thousands of other undocumented Mexicans immigrants that worked in Wisconsin's dairy industry during the 1990s and 2000s, economic

¹ The information presented in this dissertation is highly sensitive. To protect the parties involved, I use pseudonyms rather than people's actual names.

² A classic Latina/o brand of American-made coffee that originally became popular with the Cuban immigrant community in New York City in the 1920s. Albert Sergio Laguna, *Diversión: Play and Popular Culture in Cuban America* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 111-12.

³ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

need drove Eduardo Xocopil from his indigenous Nahua *pueblo*, or village, in the high mountains of west-central Veracruz, Mexico to come to the US without legal authorization.⁴ After enduring a dangerous border crossing and spending days evading immigration authorities, he developed a keen awareness of his legal precarity in the US, which shaped both his daily behavior and future goals. For Xocopil, transitioning to an undocumented life meant recognizing his immigration status as a mandate to work, keep a low profile, and work towards economic stability in both the US and Mexico. Instead of investing heavily in a life in the US, Xocopil and his immediate family lived modestly and sent remittances to their relatives in the Veracruz mountains. Notably, Xocopil's efforts to accumulate wealth did not start immediately upon his arrival in the US. Prior to securing a job in America's Dairyland—the Wisconsin state slogan and a term used to symbolize the expanse of the state's dairy industry—he sent meager funds as he struggled to earn enough to live. In roughly twenty years though, Xocopil had saved enough to build a concrete home and buy a car for his parents in Mexico—luxuries that people in their indigenous *pueblos* had rarely experienced.

To reach that level of transnational success as an undocumented immigrant, Eduardo Xocopil endured exploitation and made innumerable sacrifices. “I broke two fingers working in the barn,” Xocopil exclaimed. “But that’s not so bad, right? These cows are beasts and when they kick you or step on you, what will you do then? No hospitals. No telling the boss. We can’t miss work; someone will take our spot, or we lose hours. So, you work with broken fingers.”⁵ Large-scale dairies were dangerous places. Dealing with heavy machinery and hundreds of cows

⁴ Undocumented Nahua most often identified themselves as being from a particular *pueblo*, not a state or the nation of Mexico.

⁵ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

weighing an average of 1,500 pounds each, laborers were at significant risk of injury.⁶ For undocumented immigrants like Xocopil, there was even greater concern. First, most were without health insurance or money for a doctor's visit. Second, even if they had the funds, many believed that going to a clinic or hospital could spark questions about their immigration status, which would get them arrested and deported. Whether real or perceived, fear of immigration authorities and local police drove undocumented dairy workers to operate in the shadows. Last, getting seriously injured meant that a worker would have to miss time on the job, which could lead a boss to fire and replace them. With these perceptions, it was common for undocumented dairy employees to work through sprained ligaments, bone fractures, and dislocated fingers, among other bodily traumas.

Eduardo Xocopil's success on the job and in life became a matter of tenacity and self-belief. "The bosses know [about the dangers], but they don't talk about it. So, I showed them that I'm a good worker and I'm smart. I always showed up and did my job. So, they started to listen to me. I showed them problems, and we fixed them. Then, I asked for more money, I got that. Two years later, I became the manager."⁷ Dairy farmers were not ignorant to workers' perils, and in some instances played on their workers' vulnerabilities to keep their operations running efficiently without interruption. This kind of exchange usually went unspoken. Fear drove undocumented immigrants to persevere through trying conditions and not communicate health concerns to their superiors. Responding to these circumstances, migrant workers like Xocopil adapted, establishing agency in the industry as they managed pain and persisted in Wisconsin dairy barns. Over a few years, Xocopil earned the respect and attention of his superiors by

⁶ "Holstein Cattle," Department of Animal & Food Sciences, Oklahoma State University, 1 June 2023, accessed 29 Sept 2023, <https://breeds.okstate.edu/cattle/holstein-cattle.html>.

⁷ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

proving himself to be a loyal, intelligent, and uncomplaining employee. He was acutely aware of the way that his mindset and abilities had curried favor with ownership, and he leveraged his rising star to obtain a raise, improve the dairy's working conditions, and earn a promotion. It was this mentality that enabled Xocopil to accumulate savings over time and take steps toward financial stability for his family in the US and Mexico. His story was not unique. Indeed, thousands of undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants exhibited resiliency, becoming upwardly mobile, negotiating their rights, and bargaining for power in rural Wisconsin.

This story captures the dilemma of thousands of indigenous Nahua migrants beginning in the 1980s and 1990s. Leaving their *pueblos* for economic reasons, they struggled to gain a foothold in the US. Living and working as undocumented Latina/o immigrant was no simple task, not to mention the countless numbers of migrants who failed to cross the border before they had a chance to start.⁸ During the period, anti-immigrant politics sparked greater public attention on the US-Mexico boundary, normalizing the notion that undocumented Latina/os, majority Mexican, were everywhere in the American Southwest, taking jobs and public funds away from law-abiding American taxpayers.⁹ Meanwhile, it also became commonplace for news outlets and publications to construct unauthorized Latina/o immigrants as stuck on the lowest rung of the US socio-economic ladder.¹⁰ In other words, a perpetual drain on the economy. As the story of

⁸ In referring to immigrants from multiple Latin American countries, I use the term Latina/o to emphasize the way that authorities and society constructed them as racially distinct from migrants of European descent.

⁹ Robert Lindsey, "Aid to Aliens Said to Spur Illegal Immigration," *New York Times*, 23 Dec 1985; Kevin Roderick, "On the Border: U.S. Senate Candidates Focus on Policy to Combat Illegal Immigration," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 1986; Dan Williams, "Mexico's Border Problem: Illegal Aliens from South," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Oct 1986; John M. Glionna, "Tormentor of Migrant Worker is Sentenced," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Jul 1990; T. Golden, "Mexicans head north despite rules on jobs," *New York Times*, 13 Dec 1991; Brian Naylor, "More Border Cops to Curtail Immigration," *Weekend All Things Considered (NPR)*, 9 Feb. 1992; and Mandalit Del Barco, "Prop 187 Already Deterring Illegal Immigration," *Morning Edition (NPR)*, 29 Nov 1994

¹⁰ Harry Bernstein, "Stopping Flood of Illegal Immigrants," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Jun 1992; "Poor, Tired, Huddled Producers," *Wall Street Journal-Eastern Edition*, 11 Oct 1994; and Jim Hoagland, "Illegal Immigrants: Not just California's Problem," *The Washington Post*, 30 Oct 1994.

Eduardo Xocopil shows—and this dissertation elaborates—these assumptions were often inaccurate.

This dissertation explores how undocumented indigenous people from Veracruz, Mexico bargained for power and negotiated their rights in the dangerous and unforgiving world of modern dairying. Despite exploitation, discrimination, and a constant threat to their safety due to immigration status, these immigrants acquired agency on an individual and collective level. The bulk of this story takes place between 1986 and 2009, tracing the lives of undocumented Nahua as they left their indigenous *pueblos*, continued to perform circular migrations in an era of border militarization, and reshaped the balance of power on Wisconsin dairy farms as the industry evolved from small to large-scale production models.¹¹ It tells of how Nahua migrants went from being a population dependent on subsistence farming and isolated in the high mountains of Veracruz, to a group that exercised its learned skills and knowledge of modern dairying to create new wealth and connect their indigenous communities to the global economy. It was during these twenty-three years that the US escalated its pursuance of unauthorized migrants along the border and throughout the country's interior; that undocumented Nahua persevered through fear of law enforcement and the threat of injury on the job; and that Nahua communities fostered and maintained transnational networks that enabled them to survive and thrive as forces of change in the modern dairy industry.

The roots of migration trace back to 1982, when the Mexican government defaulted on a series of bank loans, sparking rapid inflation, devaluing incomes, and compelling millions of the

¹¹ Here militarization refers to the way that IRCA equipped the US Border Patrol with military resources like assault rifles, tactical gear, radars, and audio-visual surveillance technology. Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 230.

country's lower and middle-class citizens to migrate to large cities, both domestically and across the border into the US.¹² Over the next seven years, real wages dropped 50% as inflation peaked at 159% in 1987.¹³ Meanwhile the cost of food as a proportion of real wages surged from 30% in 1982 to over 50% in 1986.¹⁴ Particularly in the high mountains of west-central Veracruz, indigenous Nahua communities had lived for centuries off of the fruits of their subsistence farm labor. For the first time in their history, a significant group of young men left their families behind to find supplemental income working in factories, on construction crews, or in other manual positions. For most, Mexican cities were migrants' preferred destinations, but the economic crisis had also dealt a severe blow to urban manufacturing. As an example, between 1980 and 1985, Mexico City and Monterrey lost roughly 38,000 and 56,000 jobs, respectively.¹⁵ Try as they did, Nahua migrants struggled to earn in Mexican cities. Back in their home *pueblos*, Nahua family labor systems adapted to the loss, but were forever changed by the burgeoning culture of migration and new social networking patterns that accompanied it. With abysmal economic conditions in Mexico, more Nahua men chose to risk crossing the border without documentation.

Meanwhile, US lawmakers sought to curtail the increasing rate of unauthorized immigration by passing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA).¹⁶ The law had three key components. First, it established an amnesty program for undocumented immigrants,

¹² Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, "Evolution of the Mexico-U.S. Migration System: Insights from the Mexican Migration Project," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 684 (July 2019): 33; Enrico A. Marcelli and Wayne A. Cornelius, "The Changing Profile of Mexican Migrants to the United States: New Evidence from California and Mexico," *Latin American Research Review* 36, no. 3 (2001): 106.

¹³ Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila, "Earning a Living: A History of Real Wage Studies in Twentieth-Century Mexico," *Latin American Research Review* 41, no. 2 (2006): 127.

¹⁴ Gustavo Garza y Salvador Rivera, "Desarrollo económico y distribución de la población urbana en México, 1960-1990," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 55, no. 1 (Mar., 1993): 198.

¹⁵ Rubén Hernández-León, *Metropolitan Migrants: The Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 46-47.

¹⁶ "Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986," 8 USC 1101 (2009).

allowing for the naturalization of those that had been unlawfully residing in the US before 1982 or people employed in agricultural work for at least ninety days in the twelve months before May 1986. The process took time. In 1992, there were only 13,000 naturalized Mexicans in the US, but by 1996 that number had ballooned to 217,000.¹⁷ The naturalization rate among eligible Mexican immigrants also grew, although not as rapidly, progressing from 20% in 1995 to 42% in 2015.¹⁸ Under this provision, nearly 3 million people became naturalized American citizens, roughly 2.3 million of whom were Mexican nationals.¹⁹ Without exact statistical data it is difficult to estimate, but by the year 2000 there were approximately 55,000 Mexican-born people living in Wisconsin, and well over 20,000 had been naturalized under IRCA.²⁰ This growing population and their communities played a critical role in helping undocumented Nahua dairy workers as they adapted to life in rural America. Next, the law instituted employer sanctions that fined businesses for knowingly employing unauthorized migrants. These penalties were notoriously ineffective and unenforced. A key reason for this was that Congress had neglected to create a system for identifying employee eligibility, making it much simpler for businesses and unauthorized workers to avoid detection.²¹ On average during the 1990s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) collected \$2.5 million in fines from employer sanctions.²² To put that in perspective, in 1996 the INS collected \$3.1 million dollars, which was roughly \$0.62 for

¹⁷ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), 138.

¹⁸ Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Mexican Lawful Immigrants Among the Least Likely to Become U.S. Citizens," Pew Research Center, 29 Jun 2017,

¹⁹ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020), 169.

²⁰ These statistics come from a combination of these two sources: "The Foreign-Born Population: 2000," US Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, Dec 2003, accessed 7 Oct 2023,

<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2000/briefs/c2kbr-34.pdf>; and "Latinos in Wisconsin: A Statistical Overview," Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin Extension (Mar., 2014), 11.

²¹ Daniel Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 261-62.

²² Peter Brownell, "The Declining Enforcement of Employer Sanctions," *Migration Information Source*, 1 Sept 2005, accessed 20 Sept 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/declining-enforcement-employer-sanctions>.

every undocumented immigrant living in the US at the time.²³ Notwithstanding a few exceptions, dairy farms in Wisconsin have not been penalized under IRCA's employer sanctions.

Last, the law mandated a progressive plan to increase the US Border Patrol's budget by adding more employees, improving enforcement procedures, and implementing methods to better verify immigration statuses. Although its expanded funding allowed the agency to employ more border patrol agents, impose greater restrictions, and perform more detailed surveillance near border checkpoints, it did not halt undocumented migrations.²⁴ On the contrary, migrants found alternative places to cross and the geography of cross-border movement expanded. While there were 3.2 million undocumented migrants living in the US in 1986, by 1996 that number grew to 5 million, and exceeded 11 million in 2006.²⁵ In other words, the fear of border violence that came hand-in-hand with an expanded Border Patrol budget, did not deter prospective undocumented immigrants as intended. Ultimately, migrants' economic needs compelled them to risk arrest, detention, and deportation, regardless of the growing specter of US border militarization. The collision of IRCA with increased emigration from indigenous *pueblos* led to a history of Nahua immigration defined by increasingly dangerous border crossings and the looming threat of immigration authorities.

Initially, their numbers were small. The first generation of transnational Nahua migrants from the high mountains of Veracruz, consisting predominantly of single men, spent much of their time learning through trial and error.²⁶ While some failed to cross the border, others

²³ Ibid. Calculations based on a total of 5 million undocumented immigrants living in the US in 1996.

²⁴ IRCA increased the Border Patrol's full-time staff from 3,638 in 1986, to 4,561 in 1990, and 6,386 in 1996. David Dixon and Julia Gelatt, "Immigration and Enforcement Spending Since IRCA," Independent Task Force on Immigration and America's Future, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., September 2005.

²⁵ Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 183.

²⁶ There is little primary source material on this early wave of Nahua migrants. What does exist comes from the work of Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran. This work is indebted to his academic efforts in the high mountains of west-central Veracruz. *Zongolica: encuentro de Dioses y Santos Patronos*, Universidad Veracruzana,

struggled to reach northern Mexico. Of the 67 undocumented workers interviewed for this dissertation, many shared stories of their relatives stranded in border towns or returning to their *pueblos* empty handed and hobbled. Those who entered the US struggled to make enough money to save and send remittances, and most often found jobs doing agricultural work in the American Southwest.²⁷ Nonetheless, this first wave of undocumented Nahua set a foundation for future generations that would learn from their mistakes and develop communication sharing methods to forestall the kinds of hardships that the earliest migrants endured.

In the years following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA), the rate of Nahua emigration to the US exploded in lockstep with millions of other Mexicans.²⁸ Despite expectations that the treaty would significantly bolster Mexico's economy through reduced barriers to trade and capital investment, the country's Gross Domestic Product grew steadily around 2% annually over twenty years.²⁹ While economists might consider this a healthy number, it was nowhere near enough to create greater economic equality on the continent. Additionally, the treaty disregarded international labor mobility and took no steps to equalize disparate economic development among the participating countries.³⁰ Still responding to an economic downturn that began in the early 1980s, the Mexican government faced increasing social and political unrest following the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in January 1994 and the assassination of beloved presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta two months

Xalapa, 1986; and *Cuatro nobles titulados en contienda por la tierra*, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, México, 1995.

²⁷ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuatro nobles titulados en contienda por la tierra*, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, (México: 1995), 27.

²⁸ Post-NAFTA data on increasing migration from Mexico to the US found in Roberto Suro and Jeffrey S. Passel, "Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992–2004," Pew Hispanic Center, Washington D.C., 27 Sept 2005, 3-5.

²⁹ The 2% growth is a measure of Gross Domestic Product. William Ayala, "2022 Investment Climate Statements: Mexico," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-investment-climate-statements/mexico/>.

³⁰ Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Douglas S. Massey, "Borders for Whom? The Role of NAFTA in Mexico-U.S. Migration," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (Mar., 2007): 99; and Tamara Kay, *NAFTA and the Politics of Labor Transnationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9-10.

later.³¹ Following a series of economic actions intended to retain foreign investors and stave off a debt crisis, the Mexican national bank devalued the peso in December. Rapid inflation ensued creating a severe recession that decimated the value of agricultural yields, stoking poverty and unemployment across Mexico.³² Although the US provided relief funds in the immediate aftermath, they have also raised farm subsidies domestically to ensure competitive advantages for its farmers.³³ From 1994 to 2003, US taxpayers supported American corn farmers to the tune of \$10 billion in annual subsidies.³⁴ Meanwhile, an impoverished Mexican government cut economic support for its corn producers, most of them indigenous campesinos from southern Mexico.³⁵ The result was a flood of US subsidized corn into Mexico, dealing a severe blow to the Mexican agricultural economy and putting millions of its farmers out of work.³⁶ Consequently, the value of Mexican agricultural goods and real wages crashed, driving millions of the country's working-class poor deeper into poverty. In less than a decade, NAFTA had displaced millions of Mexicans, thousands of whom were indigenous Nahuatl from the high mountains of Veracruz.

As the Mexican economy soured, forcing millions to migrate without documentation, the US expanded its deportation and criminalization efforts. In 1996, Congress enacted the Illegal

³¹ 1994, season 1, episode 3, "The Snake," directed by Diego Enrique Orsoni, aired 17 May 2019, Netflix, 2019.

³² Humberto Banda y Susana Chacón, "La crisis financiera mexicana de 1994: una visión política-económica," *Foro Internacional* 45, no. 3 (Sep., 2005): 447.

³³ Ann Devroy and Clay Chandler, "Clinton Bypasses Congress, Provides Loans to Mexico," *The Washington Post*, 1 Feb 1995.

³⁴ Elizabeth Becker, "U.S. Corn Subsidies Said to Damage Mexico," *New York Times*, 27 Aug 2003, accessed 1 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/27/business/us-corn-subsidies-said-to-damage-mexico.html>.

³⁵ *Campesino* is a complex term, but for the purpose of this text it simply refers to rural folks. For more information on the evolution of the word in terms of its many social, cultural, and political meanings see, Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacan, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-7. For information on Mexico's policy to cut corn subsidies with NAFTA see, Jonathan Fox and Libby Haight, "Subsidizing Inequality: Mexican Corn Policy Since NAFTA," Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington D.C.: 2010): 18.

³⁶ Timothy A. Wise, "Agricultural Dumping Under NAFTA: Estimating the Costs of U.S. Agricultural Policies to Mexican Producers," Working Paper no. 09-08, Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University, (Dec., 2009): 3.

Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA). An update to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, IIRIRA aimed to curtail illegal immigration by increasing the Border Patrol and interior enforcement, terminating public benefits for the undocumented, greasing the wheels of deportation hearings, and imposing severe criminal penalties on unauthorized immigrants that made it virtually impossible for them to become legal residents or naturalized citizens.³⁷ In the decade after its passage, the number of border-crossing fatalities doubled as migrants tried to evade the Border Patrol's increased presence and surveillance.³⁸ In addition, the law addressed the immigrant smuggling industry by imposing stiff criminal penalties on cross-border racketeering, human smugglers known as *coyotes*, and the use or production of forged immigration papers.³⁹ As a result, it became increasingly dangerous and expensive to find help crossing the border without documentation. For U.S. employers, the law made minor changes to the sanctions set forth by IRCA.⁴⁰ Beyond the increased border militarization and criminalization of immigrants, IIRIRA had an unprecedented effect on detention and deportation. In 1996, before it came into effect, INS removed 69,680 “inadmissible or deportable aliens.”⁴¹ During IIRIRA's first functional year in 1997, that number rose to

³⁷ The Immigration and Nationality Act was originally enacted in 1952, and later updated in 1965 and 1990. Saba Ahmed, Adina Appelbaum, and Rachel Jordan, “The Human Cost of IIRIRA —Stories from Individuals Impacted by the Immigration Detention System,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (2017): 199. Among other changes, IIRIRA gave the U.S. Attorney General expansive authority to build barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border, authorizing the construction of a secondary layer of border fencing to support a previously completed 14-mile fence. Construction of the second fence stalled when the California Coastal Commission raised environmental concerns. Marshal Garbus, “Environmental Impact of Border Security Infrastructure: How Department of Homeland Security's Waiver of Environmental Regulations Threatens Environmental Interests Along the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 328.

³⁸ US Government Accountability Office, “Illegal Immigration: Border-Crossing Deaths Have Doubled Since 1995; Border Patrol's Efforts to Prevent Deaths Have Not Been Fully Evaluated,” GAO-06-770 (Aug., 2006), 3.

³⁹ Leisy Abrego, Mat Coleman, Daniel E. Martínez, Cecilia Menjivar, and Jeremy Slack, “Making Immigrants into Criminals: Legal Processes of Criminalization in the Post-IIRIRA Era,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 3 (2017): 701 & 709.

⁴⁰ IRCA was updated under the Immigration Act of 1990. Public Law 101-649, 104 Stat. 4978, enacted 29 November 1990.

⁴¹ This is the official language used by the Department of Homeland Security, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/table39>.

114,432, a year-over-year increase of 64%. From 1997 to 2013, the number of removals grew annually by an average of 12.7%, and in total by over 520%.⁴² With the increased rate of deportations, came more people in detention centers where physical, psychological, and sexual violence were common.⁴³ While punitive US immigration policies and their enforcement stoked fear among prospective migrants, they did not slow the movement of Nahua from the high mountains of Veracruz into the US. In this way, the compound effects of Mexico's prolonged economic recession, IRCA, NAFTA, and IIRIRA influenced undocumented Nahua experiences, but they did not define them.

In response to the adverse conditions created by the Mexican economy, US immigration policies, and continental trade agreements, Nahua migrants from the high mountains of Veracruz created and sustained transnational networks that aided people in traversing the border, finding work, and getting by as undocumented immigrants. In the 1980s and 1990s, most people living in Nahua *pueblos* shared a single phone line with multiple families.⁴⁴ While this made it difficult to maintain privacy, it enabled migrants to communicate details to a lot of people, quickly. For instance, Eduardo Xocopil's uncle had left for the US in the mid-1980s, but he routinely called home to share details about his experience. When Xocopil decided to migrate in 1992, his uncle helped connect him with a reputable *coyote* that he heard about from other undocumented Mexican immigrants. Once in the country, Xocopil followed his uncle's example, making frequent calls to his family in Mexico, as well as his relatives and friends spread around the US.

⁴² 2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, United States Department of Homeland Security (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2020), 103.

⁴³ Alisa Solomon, "Trans/Migrant: Christina Madrazo's All-American Story," in *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings*, edited by Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 3-5; Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 67; and Josiah McC. Heyman, "Constructing a Virtual Wall: Race and Citizenship in U.S.-Mexico Border Policing," *Governing Immigration Through Crime: A Reader*, edited by Julie A. Dowling and Jonathan Xavier Inda (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 103.

⁴⁴ Each Nahua person I spoke to confirmed that they grew up with telephones shared by multiple families.

Like thousands of other undocumented Nahua, Xocopil developed contacts in the US that helped him find better-paying jobs, places to live, and health clinics that served undocumented immigrants. Through these routine conversations, he heard about a series of jobs working in the Pacific Northwest on timber farms, construction crews, and in food service. Rather than keep this to himself, he shared the information with his friends and relatives on both sides of the border. As undocumented Nahua numbers grew in the US during the 1990s, their transnational networks grew alongside them. By the end of the decade, these webs of communication evolved and eventually led a significant population to the Upper Midwest.

Just as they had done in the face of punitive immigration policies and economic privation, Nahua dairy workers exhibited resilience, pulling on their learned skills, industry expertise, and shared information from transnational networks to overcome workplace discrimination, racism, and other labor injustices. As the story of Eduardo Xocopil makes clear, anyone working on a large-scale farm faced the risk of serious injury. Learning how to avoid these threats was part of the skillset one developed while becoming a dairy worker. Growing up with strong ties to family and community in their indigenous mountain *pueblos*, undocumented Nahua like Xocopil proactively recruited their kin for job openings and used their networks to spread word of opportunities. Unlike labor on crop farms that ended with the season, dairying was a year-round endeavor that offered migrants more stability. Motivated by its steady wages, Nahua came from thousands of miles to milk cows and clean barns. In the same way, they shared knowledge about dairy farmers' reputations, exploitative conditions on farms, and who might be on the verge of expanding their herd and workforce. Additionally, undocumented Nahua combatted ethnic and racial discrimination at work, pulling from their shared knowledge base to find better jobs. In doing so, they resisted oppressive conditions and punished their employers by

creating turnover for their businesses. As they gained skills and expertise as dairy workers, Nahua bargained for higher wages and promotions, while simultaneously leveraging their value to negotiate their rights as workers. Bit by bit, undocumented Nahua worked their ways toward economic stability, converting their wages into savings and remittances that transformed their indigenous communities. Absent a formal union, they organized informally through a web of transnational communications that enabled them to learn from one another's experiences. Hence, although people worked on separate farms they communicated collectively, drawing their community together towards the dairies that treated and paid them better.

While economic concerns were rightfully a top priority, undocumented Nahua also developed network contacts in regional Mexican Americans communities that helped them better understand cultural norms in rural Wisconsin, escape social isolation, and deal with the anxieties of immigration enforcement. Through word of mouth and simple exploration, Nahua migrants discovered Mexican restaurants, grocery stores, and bars located in Wisconsin cities like Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, and Madison. In those spaces, they made friends and connections with Americans of Mexican descent. Expanding their networks into these circles gave Nahua migrants insight into local society, immigration enforcement activities, and rumors circulating about immigrants, generally. During the dreary months of winter, when the rural landscape offered little in the way of social engagement, undocumented dairy workers leaned on these new relations to help carry them through. Whether it was having a drink with a friend, buying familiar Mexican-made products to outfit their homes, or meeting new people, Nahua migrants found a new outlet to satisfy their social and cultural needs. Integrating themselves into the fabric of these regional Mexican American communities, some undocumented migrants developed romantic relationships that helped sustain them. Hearing of their experiences on shared telephone

lines, prospective migrants in their mountain *pueblos* heard stories about love, fear, and work in *el norte*. Whereas it was undoubtedly a dangerous journey, punctuated by potentially fatal border crossings and hazardous working conditions in Wisconsin dairies, it was also an international adventure that brought migrants in contact with other people of Mexican descent and held out the possibility of transforming their lives.

From the mid-1990s through 2009, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants found a dialectic of opportunity and oppression, overcoming the omnipresent threat of deportation, violence, hazardous working conditions, and social isolation to finance both their lives and their futures in the high mountains of Veracruz, Mexico. In Wisconsin, they filled a void in the state's transforming dairy industry. Doing more than the work, they reshaped power dynamics on farms across the state. From 1996 to 2009, Nahua migrants sent upwards of \$12,000,000 in remittances to their wives, parents, and children in Mexico.⁴⁵ By the 2010s, the presence of concrete homes, automobiles with American license plates, electricity lines, and cellular phones in Nahua mountain *pueblos* was a visual representation of the decades of work and pain endured by the community's migratory pioneers. Having been forced out of their homes by extreme poverty and desperation for supplemental income, Nahua migrants responded by remaking their *pueblos* into modern centers where their imported wealth created new avenues of connectivity with the global community. Unlike the children of the 1970s and 1980s, the most recent generations of Nahua have grown up with broader perspectives of the world given their direct participation in

⁴⁵ There is no data on remittances sent from Nahua migrants in Wisconsin to their families in Veracruz. In coming to this approximate number, I performed the following calculations. First, estimates from sociological surveys put the total number of immigrants in the dairy workforce in 2005 at a conservative 4,500. [Jill Harrison, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane, "Overview of Immigrant Workers on Wisconsin Dairy Farms," Changing Hands: Hired Labor on Wisconsin Dairy Farms: Briefing No. 1, Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, 2009.] Of that number roughly 97% were believed to be from Mexico and 35% of those were Nahua from Veracruz. Thus, by conservative estimates, there were at least 1,500 Nahua migrants working in America's Dairyland in 2005. Consider a third (500) of those people sent an average of \$175 home per month. That would be \$87,500 per month, \$1,050,000 per year, or \$10,500,000 per decade. It is my firm belief that the actual number is significantly higher.

transnational networks. Coming from that culture of migration and communication, undocumented Nahua overcame global forces pitted against them, enduring physical, legal, and psychological obstacles, to fight for their rights as workers and people in rural Wisconsin.

Undocumented Nahua that entered the US after 1986 became representative of two key shifts in the history of Mexican immigration: a growing number of emigrations from Mexico's southern region and an increased flow of Mexican immigrants to destinations outside of the American Southwest.⁴⁶ In his seminal work, historian George J. Sánchez explains that from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, the largest percentage of Mexican immigrants came from northern and central plateau states like Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas.⁴⁷ Focused on Los Angeles, California---the historic epicenter of northern migration---Sánchez's work affirms the American Southwest as the primary destination for Mexican immigrants. Later, scholars expanded his study from the post World War II period through the 1970s. The bulk of this literature focuses on the bracero program, and those histories note that the same sending regions continued to be the epicenters of Mexican emigration.⁴⁸ Another fundamental thread in this scholarship points to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as a catalyst for increased undocumented Mexican migration and a growing political debate over its merits. On the whole,

⁴⁶ Mexicans had migrated and worked across the US during the twentieth century, and built considerable bases in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York. However, I emphasize the Midwest as an important post-1986 destination, because there was a pronounced uptick in the region's Latina/o population following IRCA. On average, Mexican descent people accounted for 65% of this total. "Latinos in Wisconsin: A Statistical Overview," Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin Extension (Mar., 2014), 12

⁴⁷ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

⁴⁸ Erasmo Gamboa, *Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II Story of Mexican Workers in the U.S. West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 120; Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 20; and Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 68.

these studies confirm that Mexico's north-central plateau region continued to be the most frequent origin of Mexicans in the US.⁴⁹ While their numbers were much smaller, Mexican immigrants also made their ways to the American Midwest in the twentieth century. As historians Zaragosa Vargas and Michael Innis-Jiménez show, their origin demographics were very similar.⁵⁰ Akin to the Southwest, scholars maintain that the major sending regions for Mexican immigrants remained the same through the 1970s.⁵¹ By the 1980s though, people from Mexico's southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz began migrating to the US in significantly greater numbers. Highlighting this critical shift, this dissertation shows how economic shocks in the 1980s and 1990s propelled previously non-migratory people from indigenous *pueblos* in these southern states to cross the border in search of US dollars. Furthermore, it underscores the increasing flow of Mexican migrants to the Midwest, instead of the historically common Southwest.

Beyond origins and destinations, this dissertation also details how undocumented Nahua broke convention by continuing to practice circular migrations in the post-IRCA period. For over a century, many Mexicans had traveled to parts of the US to earn money on a seasonal basis and returned home when they finished. While the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 put a brighter spotlight on unauthorized entry from Mexico, it did not slow circular migrations. As historian Ana Raquel Minian argues, this all changed with IRCA in 1986.⁵² Rather than cross a

⁴⁹ Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 20-22; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 312n; and Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and René M. Zenteno, "Mexican Immigration to the United States: Continuities and Changes," *Latin American Research Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 110-114.

⁵⁰ Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (1993; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 21; and Michael Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 24.

⁵¹ Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 26; and Mike Amezcua, *Making Mexican Chicago: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 27-28.

⁵² Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 224.

militarized border multiple times, many undocumented Mexicans chose to settle in the US for fear of never being able to return. Understanding the risk of violence, deportation, and death, migrants risked only a single journey into the states. In this regard, they resolved to live undocumented lives, existing in a constant state of legal liminality, because it was preferable to the life-threatening risks of border crossing.⁵³ In contrast to Minian's findings, undocumented Nahua continued to perform circular migrations well into the 2010s. Leaning on their transnational networks to find reputable *coyotes*, safe spaces to stay on both sides of the border, and reliable contacts for transportation, indigenous Nahua from the high mountains of Veracruz defied the norm by sustaining a culture of cyclical movement in the era of border militarization.

While historians have acknowledged that undocumented immigration expanded in the decades following IRCA, they have not been as attentive to migrants' changing labor markets.⁵⁴ From 1986 to 2006, scholars in other fields found that most unauthorized Mexican laborers fit into three occupational categories: factory, manual, or service. Of the three, service industries had taken on the greatest percentage increase in undocumented immigrant employees.⁵⁵ Some of the more common examples from this group include housekeepers, domestic workers, food service employees, janitors, and general cleaners.⁵⁶ Like previous generations, post-IRCA migrants in these industries filled positions labeled as unskilled.⁵⁷ Within this category, social

⁵³ The phrase legal liminality comes from Cecilia Menjívar's work on undocumented Salvadorans and Guatemalans. "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (Jan., 2006): 999.

⁵⁴ Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, 106 & 112; Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 171.

⁵⁵ Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Undocumented workers in the labor market: An analysis of the earnings of legal and illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States," *Journal of Population Economics* 12 (1999): 101.

⁵⁶ Annelise Orleck, *"We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now": The Global Uprising Against Poverty Wages* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Juan Thomas Ordóñez, *Jornalero: Being a Day Laborer in the USA* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Carolina Bank Muñoz, *Transnational Tortillas: Race, Gender, and Shop-Floor Politics in Mexico and the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

⁵⁷ Roger Waldinger and Michael I. Lichter, *How the Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 42.

scientists have shown that since the 1980s undocumented immigrants of color have been more concentrated in dangerous and unappealing jobs, where they average lower wages than migrants with legal status. Furthermore, jobs in the service sector are gendered, with women filling most positions in housekeeping, cleaning, food prep, and waiting.⁵⁸ This dissertation presents similar insights on undocumented workers in the Wisconsin dairy industry during the 1990s and 2000s. Occupational breakdowns on farms across the state reveal a similar pattern of racialization in which Mexican nationals were most likely to work the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs.⁵⁹ Additionally, while women made up a smaller percentage of undocumented immigrants, their limited presence on dairy farms was also a reflection on the common belief that modern dairying, with its heavy machinery and hazards, was men's work.⁶⁰ While women (usually farmers' wives and daughters) had played a sizable role on dairy farms historically, the rise of large-scale dairying changed these dynamics.⁶¹ Despite the growth of female workers' numbers in the 2010s, the industry remained predominantly male.⁶² In these ways, dairy farmers have racialized and gendered their immigrant workforce. Despite the growing diversification of labor markets for undocumented workers in the post-IRCA period, similar trends of exploitation and discrimination can be found across sectors. Writing nearly forty years after the law's passage,

⁵⁸ Matthew Hall and Emily Greenman, "The Occupational Cost of Being Illegal in the United States: Legal Status, Job Hazards, and Compensating Differentials," *International Migration Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 419.

⁵⁹ Jill Harrison, Jill Lindsey, and Sarah E. Lloyd, "New Jobs, New Workers, and New Inequalities: Explaining Employers' Roles in Occupational Segregation by Nativity and Race," *Social Problems* 60, no. 3 (2013): 295.

⁶⁰ While it was common for women to maintain animal feeding roles on large-scale dairies, they were less likely to operate large equipment. Jennifer Vogt, Douglas Jackson-Smith, Marcia Ostrom and Sharon Lezberg, "The Roles of Women on Wisconsin Dairy Farms at the Turn of the 21st Century" Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) Research Report No. 10, UW-Madison Extension (Nov 2001): 8.

⁶¹ "Women on Dairy Farms: Juggling Roles and Responsibilities," Research Brief #29, Center for Integrated Agricultural Studies, UW-Madison, February, 1998.

⁶² Patricia M. Juárez-Carrillo, Amy K. Liebman, Iris Anne C. Reyes, Yurany V. Ninco Sánchez, Matthew C Keifer, "Applying Learning Theory to Safety and Health Training for Hispanic Immigrant Dairy Workers," *Health Promotion Practice* 18 (2017): 507.

historians have yet to seriously engage the cross sections of post-1986 immigration and labor. This dissertation stands on the precipice of that new historical thread.

Entering the country in the post-IRCA period, undocumented dairy workers fit into a new period of Mexican immigrant labor history. While sociologists, ethnographers, and journalists had covered topics pertaining to Mexican workers in the US since the 1920s, Chicano academics in the 1970s and 1980s were some of the first to publish broader histories on the subject.⁶³ Revolutionary in their own right, these earlier scholars often neglected topics like gender, race and ethnicity, and immigrant unionism. Publishing from the late 1980s to 2000, the field's next generation picked up on these less studied themes.⁶⁴ Particularly, the work of Vicki Ruiz was foundational to this expansion of the field.⁶⁵ Her monograph on female cannery workers in California during the 1930s and 1940s offers perspectives on the ways that race and ethnicity mediated both gender and class relations on the shop floor. Ruiz explains how a "cannery culture" evolved in which Mexican women workers formed both interethnic and intra-ethnic

⁶³ Some of the earliest studies include Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Imperial Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928); Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (1930; New York: Dover, 1971); Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little Brown, 1935); George I. Sánchez, *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940); and Ernesto Galarza, *Strangers in our Fields* (Washington, D.C.: Joint United States–Mexico Trade Union Committee, 1956). As work on Mexican immigrant workers became more popular with the rise of the Chicano Movement, historians began producing broader research projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Some key examples are Ronald W. Lopez, "The El Monte Berry Strike of 1933," *Aztlán* 1 (1970): 101-114; Erasmo Gamboa, "Chicanos in the Northwest: An Historical Perspective," *El Grito* 6 (Summer 1973): 57-70; Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Juan Gomez-Quinones, *Development of the Mexican Working Class North of the Rio Bravo: Work and Culture Among Laborers and Artisans, 1600-1900* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, 1982).

⁶⁴ Texts from this generation include Camille Guérin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and the American Dream: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (1994; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Devra Anne Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (1994; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Matt García, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁶⁵ Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); and *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (1998; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

bonds based on family networks, shared experiences of gender, and the common struggle against oppressive management and working conditions that informed their unionism. In doing so, they gained agency as women, workers, and *Mexicanas*. Ultimately, her work helps us better understand the limits and possibilities of gender and class alliances among ethnic Mexicans and white women.⁶⁶ Building on Ruiz's example, this dissertation centers the everyday experiences of undocumented and indigenous immigrants as they fought for their rights as workers despite the absence of union representation. Furthermore, it uses analyses of race, immigration status, and culture to show how Nahua dairy workers and naturalized Mexican Americans developed common ground in the rural Midwest on social and cultural levels. These exchanges show the promise of intra-ethnic solidarity in the post-IRCA period, expanding the story of labor resistance to informal organizations and communities spread across hundreds of miles of rural farm country.

Picking up the torch in the 2000s and 2010s, scholars expanded studies of Mexican immigrant labor, taking on topics like transnationality, indigeneity, sexuality, and immigration status.⁶⁷ One such contribution is Lori Flores's work on the origins of California's farmworker movement.⁶⁸ While much has been written about Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, Flores is the first to show that their great successes in the Salinas Valley had roots in political activism and labor organizing dating back to the 1940s. Finding this, she argues that rural spaces were just as important to the development of the Chicano Movement as activism in Los Angeles.

⁶⁶ Ethnic Mexican is a designation scholars use for all people who share Mexican culture and/or national origins.

⁶⁷ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Llana Barber, *Latino City: Immigration and Urban Crisis in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1945–2000* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2017); and Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁶⁸ Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Furthermore, Flores explains that the presence of braceros in the region had a double-edged effect. On the one hand, the guest worker program hampered ethnic Mexican activism, because it sparked tensions over job competition between Mexican Americans and Mexican braceros. On the other hand, these struggles in the late 1940s and 1950s, punctuated by Mexican Americans' protests against the bracero program, played a central role in shaping ethnic Mexicans cultural and political ideologies that undergirded the Chicano Movement in California. Taking a similar tack, this dissertation pivots the story of Mexican labor migration in the Midwest away from the urban thoroughfares of Chicago to the rural dirt roads of Wisconsin. In an age of diminished unionism, Nahua dairy workers bargained individually on the barn floor and built collective strength through transnational networks. This version of immigrant workers' activism is an important contribution to the field, because it shows us that despite their rural isolation, limited numbers, and the threat of law enforcement, undocumented Mexicans fought for their rights as workers in the post-IRCA and IIRIRA periods. Furthermore, while Flores's study reveals the persistence of intra-ethnic tension among Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in central California, the history of Nahua dairy workers twenty-five years later shows its erosion. While a multitude of factors—job competition, geography, population density, and differing US immigration policies—led to that difference, it offers another insight into the post-1986 study of intra-ethnic Mexican relations and labor.

Another key example of this recent scholarship is Mireya Loza's *Defiant Braceros*.⁶⁹ In it, she excavates the stories of Mexican Indian, or indigenous, braceros in the context of Mexico's concurrent campaign for the modernization of its population. Loza's text is vibrant, incorporating native dialects, personal stories, and a rigorous oral history method to illuminate

⁶⁹ Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

the racialized logics of modernity embedded in Mexican society, the bracero program, and workers' everyday lives. Tracing Mexican ideology and public policy in the postwar period, Loza shows how government and news outlets used terms like "primitive" and "backwards" to describe rural indigenous communities in Mexico.⁷⁰ Despite marginalization, these braceros embraced their indigenous identities in the US. In doing so, they defied the Mexican national project that constructed them as deviant and pressured their communities to homogenize under the mantle of *mestizo*.⁷¹ By participating in the US-Mexico guest worker program, Loza argues, indigenous braceros played a crucial role in shaping narratives of Mexican modernization through the bracero program. Forty years later, indigenous communities in the high mountains of Veracruz continued to fight similar discrimination against their native identities. Unlike indigenous braceros who resisted Mexico's social policy that sought to "modernize" them, Nahua migrants fought Mexican fiscal actions that threatened to dismantle the traditional economies in their *pueblos*.⁷² Expanding the history of indigenous immigrant workers', this dissertation profiles the ways that Nahua dairy workers defied punitive US immigration policies and oppressive conditions on Wisconsin dairy farms to reshape power dynamics in the industry and transform their indigenous homes with new wealth.

In addition to the field of immigration and labor, this dissertation joins a body of scholarship that prioritizes the use of oral history. Responding to a "paucity of written documentation," pioneers like Devra Weber inspired an increasing number of scholars to use interviews as a primary source material to better understand Mexican and Mexican American

⁷⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁷¹ Mestizo is a term meaning mixed race, especially pertaining to the combination of European descent and indigenous people in Mexico.

⁷² Ibid, 31.

lived experiences.⁷³ Simultaneously, the growth of oral history projects, most often in the form of collections held by universities, has provided a platform for scholars to document histories that had been previously unexplored or unreachable.⁷⁴ While these repositories have served some, their depth and scope are limited like any archive. To address these silences, scholars have had to spend time collecting materials on their own, pivoting away from institutional collections and creating alternative paths to documenting history through memory.

The process of building a source base from scratch requires years of work.⁷⁵ There are, of course, the basic steps: locate interviewees, travel to and from people, conduct dozens of interviews, transcribe recordings (which can take days), translate as necessary, and use in writing. But these tasks do not consider the toll of oral history's interstitial moments: the emotional rollercoaster of chasing down human leads, the physical strain of traveling thousands of road miles alone, the endless listening and relistening sessions, and the self-doubt inherent in any project where one must both create the sources and document their history. Additionally, there is always concern over the availability and vulnerability of interviewees. In the case of undocumented dairy workers, fear of law enforcement drove secrecy and a general distrust of people. Needless to say, for those trying to uncover a history without archival sources and with a highly vulnerable population, the stakes are even higher. It goes without saying that most

⁷³ Professor Weber's work is pivotal to the growth of oral history as a legitimate source for telling stories about Mexican men and women in the US labor force. "Paucity" quoted in Devra Weber, "Oral Sources and the History of Mexican Workers in the United States," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 23 (Spring, 1983): 47; Some of the field's best: Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 1987; Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: North California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jose M Alamillo, *Making Lemonade Out of Lemons: Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town, 1880-1960* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Monica Perales, *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁷⁴ Specific to Mexican immigrant labor history, some of the more influential collections include the Bracero Oral History Project at the University of Texas-El Paso, the Latina and Latino History project at the University of California Los Angeles, and the Latino Migration Oral History Archives at the University of North Carolina.

⁷⁵ See the "Note on Sources and Methodology" section of the dissertation for a deeper discussion on my process as an oral historian.

academics live busy lives, but for those who practice oral history as a basis for their analysis in another field, there is an additional level of commitment. Peoples' life stories are precious gifts to any scholar. In order to do them justice, a writer must be fully engaged in the person's humanity. It is hardly enough to pick and choose sentences from a multi-hour interview, these historical narrators deserve to be quoted at length. In other words, doing oral history properly demands its full application.

An exemplar of the field and its practice, historian Ana Rosas constructed a new source base by conducting interviews in Mexico with over sixty families connected to the bracero program.⁷⁶ While it has arguably been the most well documented history of Mexican labor, Rosas was the first to depict the personal and emotional costs inflicted by the bracero program not only on the male workers but their dependents in Mexico. Centering case studies and the human stories of those left behind, Rosas explores how the bi-national program created extreme poverty for Mexican families, forcing mothers to become wage earners and sole heads of the household, while children acted out at school, at home, and in their communities. In this regard, Rosas positions the plight of women, children, and the elderly as fundamental to the bracero program's gendered and transnational history. With a better understanding of the ways that the bracero program strained workers' dependents, she argues that Mexican immigrant families, especially women, responded to these challenges by leading transnational, circuitous, and gendered immigrant family life that cautiously defied program ideals. Whereas Rosas conducted oral histories because archival collections and published texts had not included the voices of wives, children, and relatives living in Mexico during the bracero program, I could only tell the

⁷⁶ Ana Elizabeth Rosas. *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 304n.

story of Nahua dairy workers by conducting interviews and assembling my own archive.⁷⁷

Building off the example set by Rosas and other oral historians, this dissertation uses a collection of self-conducted interviews with a highly vulnerable population in both the US and Mexico. Unlike Rosas, who found her interviews through personal acquaintances or their referrals, I found all of the undocumented Nahua interviewed for this dissertation through investigative research and months of canvassing in Wisconsin's small cities and rural towns.⁷⁸ Through the multigenerational stories of undocumented dairy workers, this text exhibits that in spite of the considerable human costs endured by migrants and their relations at home, both parties shared in maintaining transnational families whose strength inspired Nahua laboring in the Upper Midwest.

“Remaking America’s Dairyland” traces the history of undocumented Mexican dairy workers in four chapters. Chapter one maps out the political economy of dairy from the 1970s through the 2000s, and the industry's transition from small, family-based farming to large-scale operations that required hired labor. While the industry had been slowly consolidating since the 1930s, the precipitous drop in the number of dairy farms in Wisconsin beginning in the 1970s signaled the onset of a new era. During the decade, rapid inflation elevated production costs, stoked price volatility, and helped create supply fluctuations that together tightened farmers profit margins. In hopes of reducing the price of food, then US Secretary of Agriculture Earl

⁷⁷ For Rosas and other historians that have direct social or cultural ties to the people they investigate, it is common to pull on family connections and friendships to find willing interviewees. This can be a great advantage for scholars engaging with vulnerable populations in which people must remain anonymous for the sake of their safety.

⁷⁸ Specifics about how I researched and found interviewees can be found in the “Note on Sources and Methodology” section of the dissertation.

“Rusty” Butz exhorted farmers to “get big or get out.”⁷⁹ In other words, they had to expand their operations to achieve economies of scale, gain competitive advantages through specialization, and remain economically viable in an era defined by corporate consolidation, multinational mergers, and an increasingly global economy. Rejecting this as infeasible in the climate of America’s Dairyland, Wisconsin farmers and industry leaders instead focused their efforts on lobbying the federal government to maintain its dairy subsidy program known as price supports.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles County, California dairy farmers had been on the front end of specialization in milk production, making them uniquely positioned to take advantage of the economic and technological changes that affected the dairy industry during the period. Using drylot farming techniques adapted from European traditional models, they spearheaded what would become the principal archetype for modern dairying. By 1993, California overtook Wisconsin as the number one milk producing state in the country. When efforts to prolong the government’s price support program faltered in the 1980s, Wisconsin dairy farmers slowly adopted advanced feeding, milking, and refrigeration technologies. As they had done in the 1970s and 1980s, many Wisconsin dairy owners resisted the forces of change until their economic situations forced them to expand their herds with increased debt or file for bankruptcy. Even under such dire circumstances, many farmers tried to remain small enough to run on family labor. Still, reacting to capitalist forces, large-scale farms began to appear in America’s Dairyland in the mid-1990s, creating a growing demand for low-wage workers.

Shifting from the Upper Midwest to Mexico, chapter two charts the experiences of Nahua migrants in the 1980s and 1990s as they responded to economic crises and restrictive immigration policies. Grounded in sociological and ethnographic data, it establishes that a

⁷⁹ Michael Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006) 52.

disproportionately high percentage of Wisconsin's dairy workforce in the 1990s and 2000s were not only undocumented, but had originated from indigenous *pueblos* high in the mountains of west-central Veracruz. Tracing their history, the chapter begins by explaining the circumstances surrounding the 1982 Mexican debt crisis and how its deleterious effects on the national economy drove historically non-migratory people from their homes to find supplemental income in the US. Taking into account the dangerous effects of IRCA, it pulls from oral histories to capture the emotional strain created by these large economic and legal forces, as well as their lived experiences crossing a militarized US-Mexico border, migrating internally in Mexico and as an undocumented people in the US, and later finding jobs in America's Dairyland. Despite being positioned between the colliding forces of a faltering Mexican economy, IRCA, NAFTA, and IIRIRA, Nahua men and women performed circular migrations, averaging three to five-year windows. Finally, it demonstrates how undocumented Nahua developed transnational labor networks and became dynamic recruiters. With the power to shape the workforces on dairy farms across the state, indigenous Mexican workers played a central role in remaking the state's dairy industry and its demographics. Moreover, drawing on their personal stories brings together our understanding of global forces and their human ramifications.

As Nahua migrants took jobs on Wisconsin dairy farms beginning in the mid-1990s, they experienced the psychological torment of living undocumented lives in a rural landscape where locals often received them with either ambivalent silence or vocal disdain. After a few trips to get groceries, mail a letter, or send remittances, they learned to tread lightly in small-town Wisconsin. Through their transnational networks, Nahua migrants heard rumors about local police harassment and immigration enforcement raids. As consumers of national news on anti-immigration politics and the recipients of verbal and physical threats in Wisconsin, they were felt

a constant threat of arrest, detention, and deportation. To quell their fears, many Nahua actively avoided interactions with small-town neighbors or local police. As undocumented immigrants in the rural Midwest where their racial difference stood out among the majority white European-descent population, they expressed feelings of isolation and depression. In spite of their exploitation on the job, discrimination in public, and the practical fear that at any moment they could be rounded up, placed in detention, and forced to endure the violent and prolonged process of deportation, undocumented Nahua networks flourished as they developed connections with local Mexican American communities in Wisconsin's smaller regional cities. In doing so, they maintained spirited social lives and a high level of local and transnational mobility. Chapter three focuses on these legal and social dynamics to spotlight the intersection of migrants' everyday trauma with US immigration law and enforcement, as well as their efforts to overcome them.

Zooming in on the workplace, chapter four explores the ways that undocumented dairy workers negotiated power and workers' rights by leveraging their knowledge and skills against farmers' needs and the industry's historical labor shortages. To begin, it outlines the history of family labor systems on Wisconsin dairy farms to show how owners infused traditional paternalism into their management techniques on large-scale operations. Additionally, having grown up before the period of industrial expansion, most dairy farmers had no experience managing people or running such large and technologically-driven enterprises. Furthermore, the increased size of farms and their cow herds magnified the risk of injuries, and without insurance for their workers, owners were ill-prepared to address issues with workers' health. As the population of non-English speakers in their workforce swelled, the effect of exploitation created by dangerous working conditions and oppressive labor systems became magnified by language barriers and racial bias. Against all odds, undocumented Nahua transformed themselves into

expert dairy workers and used their knowledge to bargain for high wages, safer workplaces, and promotions. Over time, they saved money, sent remittances home, and began laying the groundwork for economic stability for themselves and their families in Mexico. Unlike histories that emphasize US agribusiness' exploitation of immigrant farmworkers and organized labor responses, this chapter highlights the ways that Nahua and Mexican immigrants generated power on Wisconsin dairy farms by negotiating on an individual level. In those small victories, they developed techniques that they then disseminated through transnational networks that reached migrant communities on both sides of the border. Building that collective knowledge helped migrants confront arduous conditions and generate agency on their own terms. While the fight for workers' rights and economic stability may have played out individually on Wisconsin's dairy farms, the effective use of transnational networks created a foundation for Mexicans' collective strength in America's Dairyland.

The pages that follow trace the lives of Nahua migrants as they charted long, dangerous, and circular paths from their indigenous *pueblos* to the Upper Midwest. They highlight the suffering created by extreme poverty, the ugliness of post-IRCA border crossings, and the pain of living undocumented lives in the US with transnational families. They also show how people have fought back by performing circuitous migrations, establishing their economic footing in the dairy industry, and exporting new wealth to their indigenous mountain *pueblos*. This is then an important history for our understanding of how global forces have affected even the remotest indigenous communities. It is a history that continues to transform lives across national borders, and one that begs us to consider the consequences of economic and immigration policies as not a matter of statistical calculation, but one of humanity and justice.

CHAPTER 1

Wisconsin Embattled: Consolidation, West Coast Competition, and Transformations in the Dairy Industry, 1971-1993

We knew things were different out west, in California, those guys were just about cows, and they had drylots, but that's not the Wisconsin climate. Our country is hilly and wet. It just didn't make sense...Now it's clear, we needed to adapt that model and make it work for us. But I grew up in this one culture, Wisconsin dairy culture, and everybody wanted to keep it that way, but they caught up to us and passed us by...We will always be America's Dairyland, but it used to be earned.¹

In the 1970s, James Earle was a young man doing what men in his family had done for nearly a century: running a diversified farm. As far back as he could remember, Wisconsin had been dominated by small to medium-sized operations with 10 to 50 milk cows. Like most farmers in the region, milk production was only one part of the Earle's broader enterprise that included a variety of livestock and crops. This Wisconsin, and Midwestern, version of farming culture had deep roots in multigenerational family farms that dotted the countryside since the nineteenth century. While Earle and many other Wisconsin dairy farmers were aware that California milk producers had pioneered a specialized, drylot system—limiting cattle to a confined space to feed, fatten, and produce—they never fathomed that this model could be transplanted to their state's weather and topography.² Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s however, consolidation, industrialization, economic shocks, federal policy, and new labor regimes changed the US dairy industry. These conditions favored producers that specialized, invested in technology to make their farms more efficient, and used economies of scale to stomp out competition and accelerate the forces of capitalism. Representative of these changes was the

¹ James Earle, interviewed by the author, 27 April 2020.

² Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 78.

plummeting number of Wisconsin farms producing milk. In 1963, Wisconsin was home to approximately 90,000 dairy farms, but by 1993 that number had shrunk to less than 30,000—a 67% reduction in just three decades.³ By the end of this period, the array of economic and cultural changes had enabled California to overtake Wisconsin as the number one milk producing state in the country. To understand how undocumented Mexicans became the industry’s primary workforce in the 1990s, we must first examine the process that led dairymen like Earle to take large risks, invest in expensive technology and expand their cow herds.⁴ While Earle overcame obstacles to stay afloat, many farmers his age retired, left the industry, or went bankrupt trying to save their businesses. Thus, the path to industrial dairying and the influx of Mexican farm labor were contingent on the massive changes that Wisconsin dairy farmers underwent in the three decades prior.

Underlying these industrial changes was a system of cheap food and cheap labor, bolstered by US policy originating during the Great Depression and World War II. As early as the 1930s, federal lawmakers had signaled the importance of affordable and abundant food sources as critical to the nation’s prosperity and global power. This idea came further into focus in the early 1940s as then Vice President Henry Wallace exclaimed that “Food Will Win the War,” pulling from a popular World War I poster.⁵ While this political rhetoric had immediate effects for crops like corn, potatoes, wheat, dairy had perishability concerns that enabled its producers and processors to persist as smaller operations with less pressure to create economies of scale, or savings on expenses from increased production levels. In response, farm sizes across

³ “Quick Stats,” USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, accessed 6 June 2022, <https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/results/8398D6B1-E887-3A66-A384-434E5CFFF411#8C9FC400-A38D-3BDA-BFF3-38A3CD965DB8>.

⁴ I use the term dairymen, because this is how people refer to dairy farmers in primary sources and oral histories.

⁵ Pieces of History, “Food Will Win the War!,” *Prologue Magazine* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2017–18), 4-P-60, RG 4, US National Archives; Shane Hamilton, *Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 43.

agriculture grew and became more specialized.⁶ This prompted many farmers to sell off their milk cows and invest more into one or two aspects of their operations. Thus, the number of farms with milk cows in the US, and Wisconsin specifically, dropped precipitously, decade over decade. As refrigeration technology increased on farms and within the transportation industry during the 1960s, systems of cheap food and mass production became more possible in the world of dairy. While producers in major dairy states like Wisconsin, New York, and Minnesota remained small, California dairymen heeded the call, spearheading a new industrial milk production model that used drylot techniques and hired labor, sparking consolidation and structural shifts across the country. As the industry became entrenched in the ethos of cheap, an economic crisis hit in the 1970s that created a vicious cycle of high production costs, price volatility, increasing debt, and supply fluctuations, commonly referred to as the “price-cost squeeze.” Operating on increasingly tight margins, Wisconsin small dairy farmers felt they only had two viable options: grow their businesses or retire.

Without the means or expertise to transition to a mass production model, Wisconsin dairymen sought to maintain their small-farm dairying culture by appealing to the federal government to nurture the price support system—a federal program that established a minimum milk price that producers received from private and government purchasers. If they could ensure favorable price floors, then they could stave off the pressure to go big and cheap. Although many dairy farmers sold their milk without relying on the federal government to buy it, debates over price supports colored dairy’s national discourse, projecting a politics of cheap that identified the need for food abundance as superior to the needs of small farmers, especially in the pastures of rural Wisconsin. While the price of milk soared in the 1970s, delivering unprecedented revenues

⁶ Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, “The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy,” USDA, ERS, no. 3 (June 2005): 2-8.

for farmers, spiraling stagflation, increased imports, and growing opposition to government spending, drove the Nixon and Ford administrations to reduce federal expenditures on milk, cheese, and butter. In response, the Wisconsin dairy industry negotiated a deal with Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, that when he took office in 1977 his administration would institute a progressively increasing support price on a four-year guaranteed plan. Thanks to these efforts the federal government propped up Wisconsin producers during bouts of stagflation during the turbulent 1970s. In nearly every case, dairy farmers combatted economic challenges by expanding their herds and milk production per cow, which created recurring dairy surpluses. President Ronald Reagan fought inflation and oversupply concerns by flattening government spending in the industry, legislating its gradual demise through the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981.

With their attention on political battles in Washington, Wisconsin dairy farmers were distracted from the growing power of their California counterparts. Emanating from Los Angeles County, California, the rise of industrial dairy farming was like a tidal wave that swept over the American West and by the 1980s flooded the tributaries of the US dairy industry. With a foundation in US domestic policy from the Second World War (WWII) and postwar era that emphasized access to cheap food, California farmers' large-scale model of specialized milk production was best positioned to profit from advances in dairy science, farm implements, and machinery. In addition, the drylot style dairying that became prominent in California enabled farmers to organize their operations for full control over animal movement and better utilize evolving technology that tracked cow productivity and health. With their focus on producing a single product, industrial production created efficiencies that transformed California dairy farms into milk factories. Although Wisconsin farmers had access to the same scientific and

mechanical advances, they were unwilling to try for cultural and economic reasons.

Consequently, the dairy world began to turn on a West Coast axis, with LA County at its epicenter. With California's large-scale dairies becoming the new pinnacle of the industry, milk producers around the country felt overwhelming pressure to, as former Secretary of Agriculture Earl "Rusty" Butz famously said, "get big or get out."⁷

From the 1970s to the 1990s, California dairymen made consistent gains as the number of Wisconsin dairies continued to plummet and its remnants fell further and further behind the times. This chapter delves into the macro and micro shifts that affected Wisconsin dairy farmers during this period of drastic change. First, it traces the way that a struggling US economy and inflation created thinner farm margins, sparked rapid price fluctuations, and forced dairy farmers to consider expansion or transition away from milk cows. Next, this chapter examines the politics of dairy subsidies in Washington DC and Wisconsin. Although its rural farming regions had traditionally voted for conservative candidates in presidential elections, Wisconsinites helped elect Jimmy Carter in exchange for his guarantee to keep milk prices high.⁸ While the switch may have been brief, it illustrates the extent to which Wisconsin dairy farmers have been willing to adapt their politics to fit the needs of their businesses. Finally, this chapter investigates how the California dairy industry heeded Earl Butz's call to "get big" and sparked changes across the country from the 1970s through the 1990s. As farmers in Wisconsin fought against the pressure to grow their herds, specialize in milk production, and invest in dairy technology, their

⁷ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2007), 52.

⁸ In November 1976, the five largest milk-producing counties in Wisconsin were Marathon, Dane, Clark, Dodge, and Grant. Measuring the difference between the number of presidential votes cast for the democratic candidate in 1972 and 1976, they each had significant increases. Marathon +6434 (34.8%), Dane +2755 (3.5%), Clark +2621 (56.8%), Dodge +3745 (37.8%), Grant +2724 (39.4%) Other farming counties had similar results: Fond du Lac +4521 (37.5%), Manitowoc +3330 (20.2%), Green +1998 (54.98%), Dunn +2201 (38.7%), Shawano +2811 (71.4%), and Kewaunee +1247 (37.1%).

California counterparts embraced these challenges as opportunities to create competitive advantages. Critical to their success were significant investments in product advertising, cheese processing, and animal feeding systems. By the 1990s, as a small number of Wisconsin dairy farmers began to adapt California dairying techniques to the Midwest, industrialized operations on the West Coast had become the unquestioned leaders in milk production and efficiency.

Early History of America's Dairyland

Prior to the rise of dairy farming in Wisconsin during the late nineteenth century, farmers had specialized in wheat cultivation, while New York remained the number one milk producing state in the union. As American and European settlers migrated into parts of modern day Iowa and Minnesota, they too planted and harvested wheat, creating competition for Wisconsin's predominantly Swiss and German immigrant farming population.⁹ Wisconsin farmers responded to this regional growth and a series of late nineteenth century crop failures by beginning to diversify, rotate their crops, and transition their operations towards greater milk production and cheese processing.¹⁰ Rather than specializing in a single commodity, farm owners began cultivating a variety of crops and livestock in which milk cows were only one piece of a wider business. By the early 1910s, Wisconsin overtook New York as the leading dairy state in the US.¹¹ More broadly, US agriculture during the same period experienced what scholars and industry experts commonly refer to as the "Golden Age" of farming.¹² While the country underwent significant population growth, the natural increase in demand came amid historically

⁹ Wisconsin Cartographers' Guild, *Wisconsin's Past and Present: A Historical Atlas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 44.

¹⁰ Eric Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Association of Wisconsin, 1963), 7.

¹¹ Jerry Apps, *Barns of Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 42.

¹² Carrie A. Meyer, *Days on the Family Farm From the Golden Age Through the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 221.

high commodity prices, creating unprecedented revenues for farmers. These gains only magnified during the First World War (1914-1918). In 1917 and 1918, structural changes designed by the US Food Administration and consumer demand touched off by the First World War pushed the dairy industry into national political discourse, encouraged expansion, and linked it to global markets. In the immediate aftermath of the war, demand receded and prices fell, which dealt a major blow to farmers who had recently expanded their operations. Shortly thereafter, a nationwide economic recession from 1920 to 1922 decimated milk producers. Nationally farm product prices decreased nearly 55% across all segments.¹³ Nevertheless, the popularity of evaporated milk transformed American dairy farmers into international food producers and the number of dairies in Wisconsin continued to grow, exceeding 125,000 by 1930.¹⁴ For many, the notion of Wisconsin as America's Dairyland grew out of this stage in history when so many different farming families practiced dairying. Despite these broadening markets, economic issues continued to deflate farm values in the 1920s and create lingering financial problems for Wisconsin dairy farmers that carried over into the Great Depression of the 1930s.

With domestic and global markets plunging into unprecedented recessions, Congress moved to stabilize the price of milk by passing the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) on 12 May 1933, which created programs for federal milk marketing orders. Permanently authorized through the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937, the new law set acceptable marketing practices, terms and conditions of milk sales, and milk prices. Importantly, these

¹³ Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2021); and Joseph Becker, *Wisconsin Crop and Livestock Reporter*, (Ithaca: State College of Agriculture at Cornell University, 1932).

¹⁴ James K. Conant, *Wisconsin Politics and Government: America's Laboratory of Democracy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 308.

orders are specific to different geographic marketing areas where dairy farmers have voted on incorporation. With the intention of leveling the playing field by returning some market power to producers (dairy farmers), milk marketing orders establish a minimum price to be paid by processors and how these will be distributed among the participating producers.¹⁵ In other words, it created a legal means for dairy processors to purchase fresh milk from producers. To facilitate these guaranteed minimum prices, the government established the Commodity Credit Corporation in 1933 as the federal entity tasked with aiding farmers through loans, purchases, and payments.¹⁶ When surpluses occurred, the CCC would buy the remainder at a designated price. Importantly, these standards were established and amended through a formal public-hearing process, overseen by the Secretary of Agriculture, that enabled interested parties to present evidence regarding marketing and economic conditions in support of, or in opposition to, instituting or amending an order. Nevertheless, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) administered most changes through the rulemaking process, which was approved by milk producers in a referendum. Congress was also authorized to address issues in the marketing order program through legislation. For the next decade, Congress regularly debated the minimum prices that the CCC would pay for surplus dairy products, as Wisconsin dairy farmers continued to suffer under depression conditions.

While federal legislators and dairy farmers across the country continued to work out the kinks of milk production and sales under these new laws and economic conditions, the government responded to depression shortages by making central the country's need for cheap,

¹⁵ The federal milk marketing order program was permanently authorized through the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937. The following year, Congress enacted the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, which was based on the "ever normal granary" concept. This was one of the four legislative acts commonly considered as part of the "permanent" legislation for agricultural price and income policy.

¹⁶ Luther Tweeten, *Farm Policy Analysis* (New York: Rutledge, 1989), 325.

readily available food for Americans.¹⁷ For Wisconsin dairy farmers in the 1930s however, the price of milk had already plummeted to the point where many operators could not turn a profit. As banks closed and credit dried up early in the decade, dairy farmers lacked the fiscal means to expand and ramp up the production of milk enough to balance their books. While those who procured milk for bottling survived price volatility, farmers who produced milk for cheese, butter, and other products sank into inescapable poverty. With falling revenues and precipitous bankruptcies, dairy farmers needed to increase the price of milk to keep their farms. Near the time that Congress wrote and passed the AAA, Wisconsin's dairymen organized a series of strikes and blockades to stop the flow of milk.¹⁸ In doing so, farm owners prevented milk deliveries, captured trucks, and dumped milk from vehicles that tried to evade them.¹⁹ When truckers sought alternative routes, strikers hunted them down, ditched their milk on the roadside, and even mixed oil into their liquid supply to taint the product. On 18 May, Wisconsin officials called in National Guardsmen to clear the roads outside of a dairy plant in Waukesha County, sparking what was later dubbed "the battle of Durham Hill."²⁰ Throughout the day, strikers successfully fought off the armed men and drove them back with homemade bombs. The violence was not limited to this instance. Over the course of 1933, dairymen organized three different strikes and numerous acts of vigilante violence against cheese factories and other dairy processing facilities.²¹ While the halls of Congress echoed with debates over how to steady

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, 43-44.

¹⁸ Tim Yuan-Shiao Kung, *Spilt Milk: Dairy Farmer Rhetoric and Actions During the Wisconsin Milk Strikes of 1933* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996), 29 & 65.

¹⁹ Herbert Austin Jacobs, "The Wisconsin Milk Strikes." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 35, no. 1 (Autumn, 1951): 31-33.

²⁰ Wisconsin Historical Society, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Battle of Durham Hill, 3245, accessed 6 June 2022, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM3245>.

²¹ As late as October and November 1933, dairy farmers bombed an Outagamie county cheese factory and an Ozaukee County cheese plant. Throughout the year, numerous creameries became the victims of bombings, and milk dumping could be seen in various places across the state. Robert C. Nesbit, Revised and Updated by William F. Thompson, *Wisconsin: A History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 489.

commodity prices that led to the AAA, those dairy farmers directly affected by the crisis took the law into their own hands and tried to fix their price issues by creating a supply shortage through force. Ultimately, prices rebounded in 1934, but the impetus was never clearly identified.

As the depression persisted, most of the nation's dairy farmers adapted to the terms of the AAA, but California producers fought back. Seeking to stabilize the state's dairy industry, legislators passed the Young Act in 1935, which created a unique system of regulating the minimum price paid for milk by processors to producers.²² Through the California Department of Food and Agriculture, milk producers received at least a minimum price based on how their product was utilized and categorized based on a series of classes. Unlike New York and Wisconsin, California viewed itself as distinctly different from the nation's mainstream dairy industry due to their uniquely industrial and specialized practices. While Wisconsin's array of small dairy farms became the center of the industry in the early twentieth century, California took the lead on industrializing operations, mechanizing, and establishing a cheap labor regime beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, dairy farmers in Los Angeles County pioneered a technique known as drylot dairying, which emerged first in northwest Europe during the nineteenth century, and was later transplanted to Southern California by a majority Dutch population of immigrant farmers. In this system, owners kept milk cows corralled in a small dense area without grazing space. Contrary to the vastness of rural farms in upstate New York or Wisconsin, Southern California's dairies worked with more limited acreage, forcing operators to be efficient and utilize what was considered urban real estate in a more systematic way. Consequently, there was great divergence in the evolution of the Northern US and California dairy systems.

²² National Commission on Dairy Policy, "Review of Regionalism as an Issue in the U.S. Dairy Industry," US Government Printing Office, (Washington, June 1988), 144, Indiana University Library.

These changes in the dairy industry did not happen in a vacuum. The culture of cheap food, which had permeated the US agricultural landscape since the 1930s, forced its way into the dairy industry and accelerated these trends. Following the US entrance into the Second World War in 1941, the nation encountered a milk shortage. A combination of bankrupted farmers and consistently low milk prices throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s, created a reduced supply of dairy products. As the war effort ramped up, the federal government pushed for increased production to feed the troops and the home front.²³ Iowa State University dairy expert, Fred Hall, confirms that beginning with the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and its 1935 provisions, “cheap food was always the goal.”²⁴ Indeed, in May 1942 US Vice President Henry Wallace argued that American models of science, technology, and self-government could help bring freedom to the world through the collectivism and fair distribution of a global agriculture system.²⁵ For Wallace, freedom was intrinsically linked to abundant food supplies. In kind, US Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard conveyed to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 1943 that “Food Will Win the War.” In essence, available cheap food became a domestic policy priority. If Americans had “plenty to eat,” they could win the war, maintain freedom, and propel the US into becoming the global superpower.²⁶ For a dairy industry already reeling from years of low milk prices and decreasing revenues, the new policy of cheap food posed a significant problem for small operators, and the only foreseeable solution was expansion.

In Wisconsin, the landscape of diversified farming operations meant that a cheap food policy affected all of their operations. As a leading producer of dairy products, canned

²³ Thomas R. Pegram, “Public Health and Progressive Dairying in Illinois,” *Agricultural History* 65, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 38.

²⁴ Fred Hall, interview conducted by the author, 5 April 2020.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

vegetables, meat, and eggs, Wisconsin's farmers endured extraordinary pressure to surpass all previous production levels.²⁷ At the time, the state's dairying operations were nearly all unmechanized. An average dairy farm was a one or two-man operation—the farm operator and sometimes his son—who before the war each put in an average workday of eleven hours. As the war consumed portions of the workforce, dairy farmers encountered some of their first significant labor issues. The director of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture reported, citing loss of skilled farm labor to the services and to industry, that "more dairy herds are being sold through farm auctions in Wisconsin than ever before."²⁸ Although the war effectively ended in 1945, the US policy of affordable food in abundance persevered and shaped the evolution of US agriculture, favoring big producers that took advantage of technology to mechanize and streamline their production to achieve economies of scale. This had the greatest immediate effect on crops like wheat and corn, because they could be cultivated, transported, and distributed without significant perishability issues. By contrast, dairy required certain kinds of refrigeration and special care to ensure that it did not spoil rapidly. Without the pressure that befell large crop farmers, dairy producers persisted with older techniques and practices that did not necessarily benefit their efficiency. The nature of local dairy production and distribution kept Wisconsin milk producers out of the clutches of cheap food policy, but it also enabled them to reject technological innovation in ways that proved detrimental to their future.

A few years after the war, falling commodity prices compelled Congress to compromise on the omnibus Agricultural Act of 1949, which among its many farming programs, created the milk price support system. To counteract any losses farmers endured as the country came down

²⁷ William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965: History of Wisconsin*, Volume VI (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1988), 83.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 86.

from its wartime production levels, the new law guaranteed a minimum price paid to producers based on a level between 75% and 90% of parity—the price a farmer should receive to have the same purchasing power enjoyed by those active during the “Golden Age” of Agriculture from 1910 to 1914.²⁹ As early as the 1920s, agricultural economists created parity based on notions of “fair exchange” with a general goal to assist farmers. Following WWII, legislators instituted six-month parity rate cycles to secure an adequate supply of milk, adapt to changes in the cost of production, and assure a level of farm income to maintain production for future demand. With the CCC as its purchasing body, the price support program never paid farmers directly, but instead purchased dairy products from processors and vendors to ensure that farmers were paid the mandated rate for their milk. In brief, milk processors were required to pay producers at least a minimum support level price, and the CCC would pay the processor the difference between the market value and the designated support price. With the ultimate goal of maintaining a system of cheap production, the milk price support system served to keep agricultural industries humming despite reduced demand or falling market prices. Nevertheless, most dairy farmers and processors did not need the program during its first few decades in operation. Hence, Wisconsin dairymen continued to operate unencumbered by market forces, while the system of cheap persisted in other crop agriculture and inspired a new movement of mass production in the West Coast.

Compared to their Wisconsin counterparts, highly specialized and industrial dairy producers in LA County were well positioned to take advantage of the system of cheap. Since the mid-1920s, the region had been the leading dairy county in the US, outpacing Wisconsin’s three highest producing counties by substantial margins. In the postwar era, the city of Los

²⁹ David Blaska, “Dairy farmers poised on edge of shake-up: Milk industry’s cream has suddenly turned sour,” *Madison Capital Times*, 28 November 1983, NA.

Angeles became increasingly densely populated and geographically expansive, leading dairy farm owners to make lucrative deals selling their urban farming land and moving to the city's frontier. This process was ongoing. As the county's population grew, dairy farmers sold their land, made larger profits, and reinvested them into bigger, more technologically advanced dairies. With increased fiscal power, California's dairymen invented new models of industrial dairying that incorporated increased herd size, specialization, and agricultural technology that necessitated hired labor.³⁰ While many of these dairy workers were white American or European born men, owners began to experiment with hiring Mexican migrants during the 1940s and 1950s. In almost every case of crop agriculture, as industries transitioned to large-scale operations with greater economies of scale, they sought out and relied on an oversupply of cheap migrant labor.³¹ As the system of cheap food compelled US farmers to become industrial producers in the mid-twentieth century, dairy farmers remained small and local due to the perishability of their commodity and the relative dearth of national or global markets.³² At the same time, dairy owners transformed their businesses into vertically integrated enterprises that combined milk production and processing functions into single entities. For all of these reasons, California's dairy industry moved on a different trajectory from the rest of the country. The processes of urbanization, relocation, and expansion fueled LA County's rise in the industry, and set the stage for its continued growth and advancement.

As LA County dairy farms continued to grow in size and sophistication, American consumer trends shifted the industry in the 1950s and 1960s. The former system of local milk

³⁰ Jess Gilbert and Kevin Wehr, "Dairy Industrialization in the First Place: Urbanization, Immigration, and Political Economy in Los Angeles County, 1920-1970," *Rural Sociology* 68, no. 4(2003): 471-72.

³¹ Sometimes, the U.S. government institutionalized ways for farmers to access cheap labor. Some popular examples include the bi-national U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program beginning in 1942, the H-2A visa program in 1952, and the TN visa program in 1994. Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-era California* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 6 and 239.

³² Michael Carolan, *The Real Cost of Cheap Food* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57-58.

production and delivery by a “milkman” slowly went out of style, punctuated by the introduction of plastic containers in 1964. Whereas in 1940, 70% of milk was delivered to residential homes, by 1970 only 27% of milk was distributed in this manner. As grocery store purchases of milk rose in the period, dairy farmers in California were much better positioned to take advantage of consumer changes because of their industrial model and the simplicity of transportation and distribution along the West Coast. Responding to these changes, Midwest dairy cooperatives--- businesses owned, operated, and controlled by a collective of dairy farmers---began to merge into larger regional entities. Cooperatives played a critical role in the industry, maintaining a market for milk by negotiating prices as well as assembling, hauling, manufacturing, processing, and marketing dairy to wholesalers, retailers, and company-owned stores.³³ Some of the largest and longest lasting organizations like Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI), Mid-America Dairymen Inc., and Dairymen, Inc. were all organized during the period.³⁴ At the same time, Wisconsin dairymen faced an existential crisis, fighting to sustain a DairyLand dominated by medium sized farms in a world increasingly defined by forces of consolidation, deregulation, and modern technology that had overcome perishability issues. The gears continued to turn, squeezing out the small and unprofitable. From 1959-69 the number of US farms with dairy cows decreased by 40%.³⁵ By the end of the 1960s, these forces grew, chipping away at the medium-sized farming model that had defined America’s Dairyland.

³³ “Cooperatives in the Dairy Industry,” USDA, Cooperative Information Report 1, Sec. 16, September 2005.

³⁴ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 158.

³⁵ Douglas Jackson-Smith and Bradford Barham, “The Changing Face of Wisconsin Dairy Farms: A Summary of PATS’ Research on Structural Change in the 1990s,” PATS Research Report No. 7, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 2000, p. 7.

Wisconsin Dairy Farmers Under Fire, 1971-1981

Although the dairy industry began to decline in the 1960s due to shifting consumer demand and consolidation in cooperatives, the economic recession of the 1970s created inflation that drove farmers' production costs up and stoked milk price volatility. Multigenerational Wisconsin dairy farmer, James Earle, remembers, "When I started on the farm in the 1960s as a teenager we were making good money. Farming is always up and down, but we were earning. It wasn't until the 1970s with Vietnam and Nixon that we started tightening our belts because we couldn't stop increasing our debt."³⁶ Like many dairy farm owners, the Earle's income increased consistently throughout the 1960s and the family never had concerns about paying their annual debts. Nevertheless, expenses were on the rise during the last years of the decade, but most farmers were unaware of the declining value of their products because their revenues had risen so steadily. As University of Wisconsin Extension agricultural economist Truman F. Graf explains though, by the early 1970s, "Farmers' costs had risen so rapidly that many of the benefits from higher prices had been eroded."³⁷ Responding to claims that dairy owners' incomes were higher than any time in history, Graf clarifies how increases in cost of living, cow feed, industry technology, and maintenance all but eliminated the value of their earnings. Congressman David R. Obey, who represented a highly concentrated dairy area in Wisconsin's Seventh District, received dozens of letters in the early months of 1971 describing the ways that increases to wages, taxes, and feed had created economic hardships.³⁸ With thousands of dairies in its purview, Obey's office became a repository for the issues facing Wisconsin dairymen.

³⁶ James Earle, interviewed by the author, 27 April 2020.

³⁷ Truman Graf, "\$10 milk ruled out by state observer," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 18 April 1974, NA.

³⁸ In 1971, Wisconsin's 7th district encompassed dairy-rich northern counties including Clark, Chippewa, Lincoln, and Marathon; Ben F. Dahlke to David Obey, 26 Feb. 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS; Ludwig Zemanek, 27 Feb. 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS; Lyle Wildman to David Obey, 1 Mar. 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS; William Kalpp to David Obey, 1 Mar. 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS; and Arnold Bakke to David Obey, 3 Mar. 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS.

Additionally, cheese processors also alerted the congressman that the same economic concerns had disrupted the flow of other dairy products.³⁹ From 1967 to 1978, Wisconsin dairy farmers' production costs increased annually by 15.2%, compared to net farm income that increased by 10.6%.⁴⁰ While 1970s inflation consistently drove production costs up, never to come back down, the same economic shocks created mercurial conditions for milk prices.

During any normal period, dairy farmers expected overhead expenses to rise as the economy grew, but the chaotic nature of 1970s stagflation---a combination of prolonged inflation, high unemployment, and stagnant consumer demand---not only elevated costs, it created unpredictable variation in the price of milk and other dairy products like butter and cheese.⁴¹ This volatility meant that farmers could not stabilize their incomes, creating added stress with the looming threat of bankruptcy. Meanwhile, the US government sought to wrangle inflation by reducing food prices to help consumers. Speaking on the situation in 1973, President of the Wisconsin Farmers' Union Gilbert Rohde opined that "Wisconsin, the leading cheese-producing state, will feel the brunt of the falling prices for cheese and manufacturing milk."⁴² With the government bent on minimizing food costs for everyday Americans during the recession, dairy farmers responded by producing more milk to account for their losses. Throughout the period, the industry dealt with "violent fluctuations in price," which left producers with decreasing income values, high production costs, and lingering debt.

With less liquid cash for their businesses, dairy farmers' margins tightened and most found themselves in what industry experts called the "cost-price squeeze," which created shortage issues and forced some out of the business entirely. In 1973, the high price of protein in

³⁹ Frank Keller Jr. to David Obey, 21 February 1971, DROp, Box 199, folder 12, WHS.

⁴⁰ Kevin Hagen, "Rohde: State farm problems those of entire country," *The Country Today*, 9 January 1980, NA.

⁴¹ "Milk marketing system defended at hearing," *The Country Today*, 28 November 1979, NA.

⁴² "Cheese Producers Criticize Import OK," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 30 April 1973

cattle feed led to a decline in milk production nationally, creating a temporary shortage.⁴³ In some instances, economic conditions were so trying that farmers had to sell cattle, which further reduced dairy output.⁴⁴ While production would later rebound, the trend of selling cattle off stuck. During the decade, the number of milk cows sold and exported climbed to historic highs.⁴⁵ In late 1974, Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.) explained to Congress that Wisconsin dairy farmers had been selling off their farms “at the unprecedented rate of 10 per day.”⁴⁶ Over the next few years, this movement swelled and more dairy farmers found themselves in dire straits with no options other than selling out or filing for bankruptcy. In a letter to the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, one anonymous farmer explains, “Another year like 1976 will force us to sell our livestock. We are caught in the cost-price squeeze...our disaster year is just ahead.”⁴⁷ Weathering the storm year to year, dairy farmers were filled with dread as they anticipated greater economic problems in the coming years. Confirming their fears, agricultural economists from the UW-Extension predicted that the downturn would, “have [an] impact on the community for five years to come because of the raised indebtedness of most farmers.”⁴⁸ Facing increased production costs, unpredictable prices, and a prolonged economic recession that reduced consumer demand, farmers had little choice but to take out larger, riskier loans in hopes of keeping their family businesses alive. While this helped some survive, many other milk producers were either unwilling or unable to increase their debt, choosing instead to liquidate

⁴³ Robert C. Bjorklund, “July Milk Production Drop is State’s Worst,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 15 Aug 1973, NA.

⁴⁴ “Dairy Farmers Face Quandary,” *La Crosse Tribune*, October 1, 1973, NA.

⁴⁵ “Foreigners Seek Quality Dairy Cattle,” *Manitowoc Herald Times Reporter*, 13 July 1973.

⁴⁶ “Nelson Testifies...Farmers Sell Out At Unprecedented Rate,” *Sheboygan Press*, 7 October 1974, NA.

⁴⁷ Arnie Hoffman, “Consumers, farmers alike watching rain gauge,” *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 22 Mar. 1977, NA.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

assets, change industries, or file for bankruptcy. Ultimately, more people retired from dairying in the 1970s than any previous decade.⁴⁹

This combination of forces—high production costs, price volatility, increasing debt, and supply fluctuations—reduced the number of dairy farms in Wisconsin and paved the way for greater consolidation in the industry. Early on in the decade, residents were already alarmed by the surging number of people closing down operations. Dairy farmer Clinton Heinzen of Bryant, Wisconsin lamented in March 1971 that, “Every time prices slip we lose more dairymen. We need to encourage young men to become dairymen, a healthy dairy economy is necessary.”⁵⁰ Heinzen’s hopes and worries reflect a broader discourse regarding the loss of Wisconsin’s dairying culture and financial stability that had come to define the state’s rural towns. As violent oscillations in milk prices became the norm, dairy farming started to seem unfeasible and young people in rural Wisconsin chose alternative career paths. Analyzing data from 1970 to 1976 in *America’s Dairyland*, UW-Extension agricultural economist Truman Graf found that while dairy farm numbers diminished, milk production per cow increased by 11%, and the number of dairy cows remained static.⁵¹ Despite farms vanishing across the state, remaining farmers managed to produce 20 billion pounds of milk in 1976, accounting for over 17% of the nation’s output. During the six-year period, the average Wisconsin dairy farmer increased milk production by 38%. Nevertheless, as Graf explains, the 1970s were a time of “traumatic change” not just in Wisconsin, but across the country. While the number of dairy farms dropped by 20% in the heart of the dairy industry, Wisconsin’s losses were sent ripple effects around the US, where the price-cost squeeze decimated smaller regional markets.⁵² As more and more farmers bowed out of the

⁴⁹ “Milk marketing system defended at hearing,” *The Country Today*, 28 November 1979, NA.

⁵⁰ Clinton and Bryant Heinzen to David Obey, 2 March 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS.

⁵¹ “Economist’s prediction: Third of dairymen to quit,” *Country Today*, 2 November 1977, NA.

⁵² Robert C. Bjorklund, “Dairies keep nation moving,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 June 1977, NA.

dairy business, larger producers bought up their cattle and expanded operations, thus greasing the wheels of industry consolidation.

Price Supports & Politics, 1971-1981

While the economic constraints of the 1970s created industry consolidation, dairy leaders, cooperatives, and farmers worked to maintain the US price support system, which set minimum rates that producers received for their milk. From 1949 to 1974, during the first twenty-five years of the milk price support program, most dairy farmers did not rely on the government to buy their products at the set price floor.⁵³ Largely, free market forces enabled producers during the period to sell milk at a rate significantly above the mandated minimum. By the late 1970s though, transformations in the economy and national politics had created conditions where the price support rates began setting price ceilings for milk.⁵⁴ Since the law required that Congress and the President agree to new rates every six months based on economic conditions, the program was regularly debated.⁵⁵ As production and equipment costs rose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, dairy cooperatives lobbied the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations for higher price supports. In response to reduced incomes and persistent economic concerns, US dairy farmers expanded milk production to account for their losses, ultimately generating surpluses. As the decade wore on, Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland warned dairy farmers that overproduction threatened to ruin the price support program.⁵⁶

University of Wisconsin agricultural economist Truman Graf and Wisconsin Farm Bureau

⁵³ Dale Heien, "The Cost of the U.S. Dairy Price Support Program: 1949-74," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 59, no. 1 (Feb., 1977): 1-2.

⁵⁴ Robert Cropp and Ed Jesse, interviewed by the author, 5 December 2019.

⁵⁵ "Fact Sheet: Milk Price Support Program," July 2004, USDA, Farm Service Agency, accessed 9 January 2023, www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/mpsp04.

⁵⁶ Edward Cowan, "Wage-Price Council Asks Cut in Milk Support Level," *New York Times*, 15 March 1977, p. 51.

president Donald Haldeman agreed that the imbalance between milk supply and demand were becoming detrimental to the industry, because it put too much pressure on the federal government to buy surplus dairy products.⁵⁷ By the end of the decade, the program's rates reached a pinnacle, only to tumble in the ensuing years as government expenditures on agriculture endured massive cuts during the Reagan Administration. To understand how the federal price support system unraveled in the 1980s, one must first investigate how it evolved in the 1970s.

Shortly after Richard Nixon took office in January 1969, dairy cooperatives, notably Associated Milk Producers Incorporated (AMPI), began to curry favor with the administration by making contributions to the president's reelection campaign, and promising more. On 15 December 1970, a dairy industry coalition sent a letter pledging \$2 million to the Nixon reelection campaign. In it they urged that, "The time is ripe politically and economically to impose the recommended [import] quotas."⁵⁸ Penned by an AMPI lawyer, the letter was direct about the industry's desires. At the time, US producers had lost significant market share due to the increased presence of imported dry milk, cheese, and butter from Europe and Australia.⁵⁹ To recoup some of their losses, several major cooperatives, led by AMPI, devised a lobbying strategy akin to quid-pro-quo, where they intended to line the president's campaign war chest in exchange for a reduction in dairy imports. While Wisconsin's small dairy producers had little input on the day-to-day activities of their cooperatives, the national presence and power of these collectivist business organizations had a significant impact on individual farmers' bottom lines.

⁵⁷ David Blaska, "Dairy farmers poised on edge of shake-up: Milk industry's cream has suddenly turned sour," *Madison Capital Times*, 28 November 1983, NA.

⁵⁸ "Nixon imposed quotas after funds promised," *Appleton Post Crescent*, 24 October 1973, NAs.

⁵⁹ "Dairy Industry: Potential for and Barriers to Market Development," Government Accountability Office, RCED-94-19 (December 1993): 14-16.

In this instance, two weeks after his office received the letter, Nixon imposed import quotas on ice cream, cream cheese, and other dairy products.⁶⁰ In the near term, the AMPI-led dairy lobby won a small victory for its constituency by reducing competition and helping maintain a higher market value for dairy products, thereby increasing farmers' profits amid surging inflation.

Following this initial success, dairy interests commenced a new national campaign in the early months of 1971 to increase the milk support price. That March, the nation's top three dairy cooperatives—Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI), Mid-America Dairymen Inc., and Dairymen, Inc.—met with President Nixon and Treasury Secretary John B. Connally in the White House Oval Office.⁶¹ In the weeks leading up to the meeting Congressman David Obey and other political representatives from America's Dairyland received hundreds of letters and phone calls in support of HR-6188, a bill to increase the support price.⁶² White House Tapes confirm that the industry representatives promised \$2 million in campaign donations with the expectation that the administration would raise price supports.⁶³ After the dairymen had left, the recordings reveal that Nixon and Connally agreed to “milk” the farmers for all they could.⁶⁴ Determined to win a second term, the president made clear that he wanted to fleece the dairy industry and temporarily fix price supports to their liking to court their votes, after which he would cut ties and the support program. Minutes after the meeting adjourned, Nixon explained to his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman that “[Connally] knows them well, and he's used to shaking

⁶⁰ “Curbs on Dairy Imports Set,” *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1971.

⁶¹ “Dairy Fund Plan Reported To Follow Nixon Meeting,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1974.

⁶² Robert Henmann to David Obey, 2 Mar. 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS; Michael Maas to David Obey, 5 Apr. 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS; Harry Binn, 1 Mar. 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS; and Arlene and Ralph Will to David Obey, 3 March 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS; Mr. and Mrs. John Konapek, 26 Feb. 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS; and Judith Herrmann to David Obey, 2 March 1971, DROp, box 199, folder 12, WHS.

⁶³ Brooks Jackson, “Watergate Fund for Defense Tied to White House,” *Fond du Lac Reporter*, 11 June 1973, NA.

⁶⁴ George Lardner Jr. and Walter Pincus, “Dairy Farmers Got Nixon Support in Exchange for Campaign Cash,” *The Washington Post*, 30 October 1997.

them down, and maybe he can shake them for a little more.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin told a Senate Committee that the White House Office of Management and Budget dropped its opposition to higher price supports shortly after this meeting.⁶⁶ A few weeks later, the Nixon administration helped raise the milk support price by 6%. Ultimately, the president and his staff conveyed to dairy leaders that the White House’s support was available at a price. If groups like AMPI, Mid-American, and Dairymen wanted to help their constituents, all they needed to do was put money down and dairy farmers would reap the rewards through higher-priced government buyouts.

Two years later, in the midst of a failing economy and growing rumors of foul play by the Nixon Administration, Assistant to the President for International Economic Affairs, Peter M. Flanigan produced a report calling for increased dairy imports and the slashing of millions in government spending for the industry.⁶⁷ First, it sought to reduce the price of retail milk by increasing the flow of foreign powdered milk. Over time, the US established a dependency on imports to maintain this low price.⁶⁸ Second, the Flanigan Report hoped to lessen government spending by eliminating the price support system as it existed. From 1970 to 1979, the annual price of surplus dairy products purchased by the government ranged from \$77 million to \$714 million, making it one of many expensive agriculture programs.⁶⁹ Third, the report advised President Nixon to strike a deal with the European Common Market to lower quotas on its dairy

⁶⁵ Dennis Leloo, “Dean of Ag College Charges ‘Consumers Un-American When They Force Prices Down At Cost of Farmer’,” *Sheboygan Press*, 2 April 1973, NA.

⁶⁶ George Lardner Jr. and Morton Mintz, “Nixon Won’t Let Hardin Testify,” *The Capital Times*, 25 Oct 1973, NA.

⁶⁷ “Hearings Before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,” US Government Printing Office, US Senate, 93rd Congress, 27 April 1978, 98; and Richard Nixon, “Message to the Congress Transmitting First Annual International Economic Report of the President,” The American Presidency Project, 22 March 1973, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/256273>.

⁶⁸ John O. Ellenbecker, “Dairy Crisis Looms, Co-Op Leader Says,” *La Crosse Tribune*, 23 March 1973, NA.

⁶⁹ “Fact Sheet: Milk Price Support Program,” July 2004, USDA, Farm Service Agency, accessed 9 January 2023, www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/mpsp04.

imports in the US, in exchange for favorable grain quotas on US exports to Europe.⁷⁰ The report notes that although this move would hurt the dairy industry, the gains on grain exports would far surpass these losses, and would provide an overall boon for US agriculture. The dairy industry viewed these proposals as catastrophic to their health. By bringing down the price of milk at the grocery store, the government placed the brunt of the economic suffering on US dairy farmers. On 1 April 1973, as advised by the Flanigan Report, Nixon signed the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, which reduced import quotas for several dairy products including cheese.⁷¹ Within six months prices plunged and became increasingly volatile.⁷² While dairy farmers and the industry at large continued to criticize the Nixon administration's handling of imports, the cheap food rhetoric forced the issues of domestic producers to the side in favor of the consumer.

In addition to imports, the federal government furthered the rhetoric of cheap food by endorsing agricultural industrialization and making significant cuts to price supports, thus angering dairy farmers and inducing a cascade of negative responses. It was at this time that Butz famously encouraged US farmers to “get big or get out,” and “adapt or die.”⁷³ Behind this rhetoric of large-scale production, Butz encouraged American farmers to take advantage of new technology to create economies of scale that would make them more competitive and profitable as they lost margin on the price of milk. In response, Congressman David R. Obey (D-Wis.) claimed that the Nixon Administration was out to decimate the dairy industry, while his

⁷⁰ Edwin L. Dale, “Farm Bill Stirs Official Concern,” *New York Times*, 4 Jun. 1973.

⁷¹ Andrew M. Novakovic and Robert L. Thompson, “Dairy Imports: How Serious a Threat?,” *Journal of Dairy Science* 61 (1978): 1627-28.

⁷² Elmer B. Staats, Comptroller General of the United States, “U.S. Import Restrictions: Alternatives To Present Dairy Programs,” Government Accountability Office Archives, ID-76-44, B-114824, 9 December 1976; and Truman F. Graf, “Analysis of Plans to Increase U.S. Dairy Imports--Atlantic Council and ‘Flanigan’ Reports,” University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Agricultural Economics, December 1973.

⁷³ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 52; *King Corn*, directed by Aaron Wolf, (Amherst, MA: Balcony Releasing, 2007), DVD; and Liz Carlisle, *Lentil Underground: Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2016), 25.

colleague Representative Vernon Thomson (R-Wis.) said that the administration's decision to import more cheese was "terribly wrong."⁷⁴ Word circulated among farmers and industry leaders that Nixon wanted to phase out price supports and eliminate dairy import controls.⁷⁵ Considering the implications, AMPI General Manager, Dr. George F. Mehren, threatened that there would be a dairy shortage unless the government increased support prices.⁷⁶ In that same spirit, Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.) argued that at the current rate, the dairy industry would lose self-sufficiency by 1980. To counter this movement, Nelson argued that it was imperative for the government to increase its support price.⁷⁷ Additionally, he blasted Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz, stating that he had "undermined the American dairy farmer at every turn," by pushing for increased competition in the industry to the detriment of small farmers.⁷⁸ Feeling the reverberations across Wisconsin, Nicholas P. Spallas, Fond du Lac chairman of the International Dairy Conference, expressed alarm as he saw an increasing number of his fellow dairy farmers calling it quits. "Dairy farmers are no longer just threatening to quit," Spallas exclaimed, "they are already in the process of wholesale abandonment of their farms due to untenable conditions prevailing in the dairy industry."⁷⁹ Following Senator Nelson's example, Spallas called on Earl Butz to remedy the situation by raising the support price. While many dairy leaders hounded the federal government, top Department of Agriculture economist J. Dawson Ahalt maintained that raising support prices would be economically unwise.⁸⁰ Ultimately, the Nixon administration chose to freeze price supports, a path that clearly favored the American consumer over its producers.

⁷⁴ "Cheese Producers Criticize Import OK," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 30 April 1973

⁷⁵ "NFO Dairymen OK First Milk 'Floor Price' Pact," *Madison Capital Times*, 29 March 1973, NA.

⁷⁶ John O. Ellenbecker, "Dairy Crisis Looms, Co-Op Leader Says," *La Crosse Tribune*, 23 March 1973, NA.

⁷⁷ "Official raps plan to hike dairy props," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 25 September 1974, NA.

⁷⁸ "Nelson assails Butz on dairy import issue," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 21 April 1975, NA.

⁷⁹ "Higher Support Price," *Sheboygan Press*, 29 November 1974, NA.

⁸⁰ "Official raps plan to hike dairy props," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 25 September 1974, NA.

As dairy farmers weathered the economic storms of the early 1970s, many felt that the federal government had made them disposable, forcing some to retire while others took risks to increase their herd sizes to account for tighter profit margins. For many, buying more cows to expand milk production was the only answer to persistent inflation and increased volatility in market milk prices. Despite the projected increases in revenue necessary to buoy their businesses, few farmers wanted to expand their herds. Unlike the industrialized and highly specialized operations evolving in California and parts of the West Coast, Wisconsin dairy farmers largely believed that an ideal herd would have no more than 50 cows.⁸¹ Since the golden era of dairy farming in the 1910s, this cultural assumption had dominated farm owners' perspectives, and had created a strong resistance to expansion among operators, especially in times of economic recession. Seeing the age-old culture of Wisconsin dairying slipping away in the 1970s, dairy farmers and their political representatives continued to call for higher support prices and increased tariffs on imports.⁸² By contrast, downward trends in the dairy industry were enough to scare many people away to early retirement or another career. A by-product of this was an increase in domestic cow sales and exports.⁸³ When a farmer shut down their business, they could either sell their cattle for milk production or slaughter. As the beef supply grew and flooded the market, its prices tanked similar to milk. Less than six months after Nixon signed the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973, beef prices dropped from roughly \$.38/lb. to \$.16/lb. Just as it did in the dairy sector, changes to federal agriculture programs created thinning

⁸¹ This notion that 50 cows was the perfect number was so prevalent in Wisconsin that it even showed up in an episode of the television show *The X Files*. During the investigation of a crime in Northern Wisconsin, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder talk to a former dairy farmer. When asked why he had quit the industry, the man replies, "Ah, business changed. People changed, too... Competition. Used to get by with 50 milks cows. Now you got to have 500. Used to turn them out to pasture. Now you keep them in pens and grain feed them." Chris Carter, *The X Files*, season 2, episode 10, "Red Museum," 9 Dec. 1994.

⁸² "Import Quota or Tariff 'Necessary'," *Manitowoc Herald Times Reporter*, 14 Feb. 1975, NA.

⁸³ Robert C Bjorklund, "Swiss Open Cattle Show Season," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 30 Jun. 1974, NA.

margins, price down cycles, forced retirement, and bankruptcy. In an effort to counteract tumbling beef prices, some exported their cattle, but their numbers were negligible. In the aftermath of the Flanigan Report and the Nixon Administration's move to cut federal programs for the dairy industry, farmers increasingly distrusted the government's projections, data, and economic advice, making them even more reluctant to adopt industrial-scale operations endorsed by Earl Butz and fellow supporters of "big" farming.

Following Richard Nixon's resignation in August of 1974, Gerald Ford held firm on milk prices, committing his administration to limiting federal spending. In January of 1975 and 1976, Ford pocket vetoed bills that would have raised price supports, and the Senate sustained both.⁸⁴ He argued that the bills were "highly inflationary to consumers and unnecessary."⁸⁵ Ford contended that a milk price hike would unduly saddle taxpayers and stimulate overproduction of milk. The Department of Agriculture agreed that increases were "not necessary to assure adequate milk supplies and would be highly inflationary to consumers."⁸⁶ By contrast, Congressman Obey maintained that Ford's veto would cost Wisconsin dairy farmers \$13 million.⁸⁷ In towns across the state, local newspapers ran articles predicting that small-scale milk producers were going extinct as cow sales soared. Truman Torgenson, Lake to Lake Dairy Cooperative Manager, projected that if conditions persisted Wisconsin could lose between one third and one half of its dairy farms in the next ten years.⁸⁸ Oddly enough, Torgenson argued that

⁸⁴ Gerald R. Ford, "Memorandum of Disapproval," January 1975, box 22, folder "1975/01/04 SP4206 Milk Price Support (vetoed)," Legislation Case Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library; Gerald R. Ford, press release, 30 January 1976, box 17, folder "Milk Price Supports - S.J. Res. 121," Loen and Leppert Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library; and Richard L. Madden, "Senate Sustains Ford's Milk Veto," *The New York Times*, 5 February 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁸⁵ "Ford vetoes "unnecessary milk price support bill," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 4 Jan. 1975, NA.

⁸⁶ While Ford vetoed the price support bill, he also called for a compromise increase. Accordingly, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz ordered the milk support price up by 67 cents. J. Phil Campbell to Roy L. Ash, letter, 24 December 1974, Box 22, folder "1975/01/04 SP4206 Milk Price Support (vetoed)," Legislation Case Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

⁸⁷ "Veto could cost dairy farmers \$13 million," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 4 Jan. 1975, NA.

⁸⁸ "Small-time, inefficient dairyman doomed," *Monroe Evening Times*, 8 Apr. 1975, NA.

it would be a good thing for small-scale, inefficient dairymen to exit the industry. “Farming,” Torgenson opined, “long ago passed from the state where it was a mode of living to being a commercial enterprise.”⁸⁹ In the economic environment of the 1970s, the everyday milk producer could not achieve an acceptable quality of life for themselves and their families. The dwindling number of dairy farmers illustrated this. From 1964 through 1974, Wisconsin dairy farm numbers dropped from 83,700 to 52,600, a reduction of over 37%.⁹⁰ Congressman William A. Steiger (Wis-R), clarified that while dairymen complained about the low support price, it was just as much about inefficiency in a changing industry that created hardships for producers.⁹¹ Despite Steiger’s criticism and Congressional committee reports advising against raising milk supports, dairy farmers and industry leaders continued to lobby for an increased price floor. Between government cuts, a lack of innovation, and droughts that hit the upper Midwest in the mid-1970s, dairy farmers were in dire straits during Gerald Ford’s time in office.⁹²

As campaign efforts geared up for the presidential election of November 1976, the Wisconsin dairy industry began making significant contributions to political campaigns for the first time since the Nixon Scandal.⁹³ However, unlike previous political cycles, dairy farmers and industry leaders backed the Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, banking on his promise to raise milk price supports in exchange for their votes. In the days leading up to election day, Carter co-authored a letter with Wisconsin Congressman David Obey and Senator Gaylord Nelson,

⁸⁹ “Small-time, inefficient dairyman doomed,” *Monroe Evening Times*, 8 Apr. 1975, NA.

⁹⁰ Ed Jesse, “Growth and Transition in Wisconsin Dairying,” Marketing and Policy Briefing Paper, Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, UW-Madison Cooperative Extension, UW-Madison Extension, 1998.

⁹¹ William A. Steiger, “Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 92nd Congress, First Session,” Harvard University Library (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1972), 8088.

⁹² John Ellenbecker, “Dairymen in Squeeze, Congressmen Are Told,” *La Crosse Tribune*, 6 Sep. 1975, NA.

⁹³ “More funds may have big impact on Congress races,” *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, 26 Oct. 1976, NA.

promising dairy farmers an increase to price supports.⁹⁴ While most Wisconsin milk producers had helped elect Republicans in 1968 and 1972, the tide turned Democratic in 1976.⁹⁵ Like both the Nixon and Ford administrations, opponents of the price hike worried about inflation and considered subsidies to be at the heart of government overspending that had compounded economic shocks during the period. Republican preliminary candidate, California Governor Ronald Reagan, argued against increases to price supports, describing them as “subsidizing those that cannot compete.”⁹⁶ Campaigning for Carter in Wisconsin, Nelson and Obey presented Ford and Reagan’s platforms as affronts to the hard working and moral people of rural Wisconsin. Not only were Republicans criticizing their intelligence and business aptitude, but the entire culture of dairying in America’s Dairyland. “Me and my old man both voted for Carter that year,” dairy farmer James Earle said. “Hadn’t been since FDR that my people had done that.”⁹⁷ Like many young dairymen in Wisconsin during the 1970s, Earle had grown up in a house that supported the campaigns of Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Barry Goldwater. The 1976 election was a turning point for James Earle, his father, and thousands of Wisconsin voters. In 1972 voter turnout was relatively low (1,799,604) and Nixon won by over 175,000 votes. Four years later, over two million people turned out to vote, Carter defeated Ford by 35,245, beat Nixon’s 1972 numbers by 50,802, and outpaced McGovern’s 1972 showing by 230,058.⁹⁸ While Republican representation expanded slightly, the outpouring of Democratic support signaled a calculated effort made by dairy farmers to secure higher support prices.

⁹⁴ Brian B. King, “Carter boosts milk price supports 9%,” *Daily Herald*, 22 Mar 1977, DROp, box 75, folder 17, WHS.

⁹⁵ Emily Yoffe, “Carter does it for free: Two Milk Duds,” *New Republic*, 23 July 1977, DROp, box 75, folder, 17, WHS.

⁹⁶ “Candidates and issues,” *Washburn County Register*, 23 Oct. 1980, DROp, box 339, folder 1, WHS.

⁹⁷ James Earle, interviewed by the author, 27 April 2020.

⁹⁸ “1972” & “1976,” The American Presidency Project, Data Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

Despite warnings that increased milk support prices would be detrimental to both the economy and the dairy industry, Wisconsin farmers showed out for Carter. Temporary increases in income, though, created fleeting happiness as repeated price hikes later produced overwhelming uncertainty in the industry and created the politico-economic conditions necessary to dismantle the milk price support program. In Carter's first months in office, the administration released reports confirming that the government would purchase enough dairy products to make good on the president's campaign promise to raise the support price.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the Council on Wage and Price Stability recommended a reduction in the milk support level. Nevertheless, Carter was determined to make good on his pledge and he did so by pushing legislation through Congress that locked in an increasing price support for four consecutive years; an unprecedented feat.¹⁰⁰ This rising and guaranteed support price sparked increased entrants to the industry and significant investments in new equipment that was highly specialized and not transferable to other industries. During the period, farmers' historically high revenues motivated them to push their production to new heights. The critical year was 1979, when milk production grew at a rate 23 times that of consumer demand.¹⁰¹ Herbert Selbrede, Dairy farmer and President of the Wisconsin Dairies cooperative explained the overproduction, saying, "Nothing makes milk like money."¹⁰² Producers facing high production costs, price down cycles, tightening margins, increasing imports, and a suffering economy saw the immediate value in expanding their output

⁹⁹ Robert C. Bjorklund, "Supporting dairy prices is a costly proposition," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 Jun. 1977, NA.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Cowan, "Wage-Price Council Asks Cut in Milk Support Level," *The New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. Parity rates increased every year of the Carter presidency: 1978-parity up by 8.9%; 1979-up by 13.7%; 1980-up by 8.4%; 1981-up by 5.5%. Carter enacted the milk price support increases in two two-year increments. In March 1977, he signed HR4612, which established a minimum of 90% parity for milk price supports through 1979. In November of that year, he signed HR4167, setting a new minimum of 80% parity through 1981. ["Carter concerned about milk surplus ahead," *The Country Today*, 5 Dec. 1979, NA.]

¹⁰¹ David Blaska, "Dairy farmers poised on edge of shake-up: Milk industry's cream has suddenly turned sour," *Madison Capital Times*, 28 Nov. 1983, NA.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

and annual incomes. At the same time, dairy farmers received continued support from the Carter Administration and an active dairy lobby that kept the pressure on the president and Congress to maintain higher and higher prices to offset growing production costs.¹⁰³ Even at the support price's high water mark in the fiscal year 1979-80, dairy interests still lobbied for higher rates.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, exponential growth in milk production and farmer debt combined with a four-year guaranteed price hike created uncertainty as another economic downturn began to shock US agriculture in the 1980s.

While dairy interests continued to lobby for federal price increases during the Carter presidency, the bloated nature of milk prices sparked public criticism and a growing recognition of the economic effects of overproduction on both taxpayers and the US government. Similar to ideas shared in the Flanigan Report of 1973, the National Commission for Review of Antitrust Laws and Procedures concurred in 1979 that the milk price support system was anti-competitive, because it created artificially high prices by stimulating the overproduction of milk, which consumers paid for at the store.¹⁰⁵ As expected, dairy leaders defended the milk price support program. They argued that it helped stabilize pricing for producers and consumers, and that without it consumers would pay more for lower quality products.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Carter's four-year pricing increase gave large cooperatives the opportunity to dump their excess milk into government warehouses twice a year at a guaranteed rate of return.¹⁰⁷ While large dairy entities benefitted from high price supports, small farmers were not as lucky. As the 1980s began, the USDA explained that uncertainty prevailed for most dairy producers across the industry.¹⁰⁸ Even

¹⁰³ Robert C. Bjorklund, "Dairymen ask 80% of parity," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 11 April 1979, NA.

¹⁰⁴ "Fact Sheet: Milk Price Support Program," July 2004, USDA, Farm Service Agency, accessed 9 January 2023, www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/mpsp04.

¹⁰⁵ Economist defends federal milk marketing program," *The Country Today*, 29 August 1979, NA.

¹⁰⁶ Milk marketing system defended at hearing," *The Country Today*, 28 November 1979, NA.

¹⁰⁷ Richard F. Fallert, "Milk Pricing: Past, Present, the 1980s," *Journal of Dairy Science* 64, no. 6 (1981): 1110.

¹⁰⁸ Robert C. Bjorkland, "USDA 'uncertainty' disturbs dairy farming," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 18 Nov. 1979, NA.

President Carter admitted, “the dairy outlook is unusually uncertain this year.”¹⁰⁹ If the trend of overproduction continued, agricultural economist Truman Graf explained, the dairy industry “could be in serious trouble. And if dairy farmers create a surplus, they will have a hard time maintaining the high price support rates.”¹¹⁰ Ultimately, growing uncertainty and overproduction exposed the dairy industry and made it a target for government spending cuts in the 1980s.

Concerns came to a head with the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in November of 1980, as the former Governor of California campaigned for significant budget cuts that were later enacted in the Food and Agriculture Act of 1981. The new law changed the price support system by setting milk purchase rates on a gradually declining schedule. Regardless of inflation, from 1981 to 1999 the price trickled down from \$13.10 per hundredweight (cwt) to \$9.90.¹¹¹ At this reduced rate, the program no longer provided support to dairy farmers. Consequently, market forces, not the government, began to determine milk prices resulting in increased uncertainty and price volatility.¹¹² In short, the new administration had scrapped the parity formula set by the Agricultural Act of 1949 and created a new price support system based on an anticipated surplus and engineered to keep milk prices low. Complaining of the same issues that plagued the industry ten years earlier—rising production costs and volatile milk prices—dairy farmers feared that new legislation under Reagan would consume farmers’ profits. As they had done before, dairy leaders predicted that a lowered price for milk would create a surplus. Outraged, Wisconsin dairy farmers wrote to Congressman David R. Obey, explaining that increased expenses had created even greater risk and uncertainty in their lives.¹¹³ Revealing his exhaustions, one farmer

¹⁰⁹ “Carter concerned about milk surplus ahead,” *The Country Today*, 5 Dec. 1979, NA.

¹¹⁰ “Milk surplus grows this year,” *The Country Today*, 12 Dec. 1979, NA.

¹¹¹ “Fact Sheet: Milk Price Support Program,” July 2004, USDA, Farm Service Agency, accessed 9 January 2023, www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/mpsp04.

¹¹² Robert Cropp, “Rough outline of legislation that impacted dairy farmers and milk processors,” 5 Dec. 2019, Robert Cropp Family Archive.

¹¹³ Ron and Jackie Strissel to David Obey, 17 Mar. 1981, DROp, box 199, folder 11, WHS.

gripes that he “thought slavery was over. How can the government toss us aside?”¹¹⁴ Over two hundred letters poured into the congressman’s office in the winter of 1981-82, making the same point that when production costs went up and milk support prices remained stagnant, farmers lost income. Others explained that if they could not recoup their lost income then farmers “will have to add more milk cows.”¹¹⁵ With the economic need to grow, family labor stretched thin and farm owners turned to local avenues for recruiting extra hands.¹¹⁶ Some estimated that in just five years their labor costs had increased by nearly a dollar per hour. Responding to similar worries from their constituents, the Wisconsin State Senate collectively urged Obey to fight for the milk price support program. Despite the predictably bad consequences for dairy farmers, Obey’s efforts failed under the pressure to reduce spending and the price of food.

As uncertainty and skepticism grew in the dairy industry, milk prices endured two significant down cycles in the 1980s that tightened farmer’s budgets further and set more on the path to bankruptcy or early retirement.¹¹⁷ Although the milk price paid to dairy farmers went up considerably in the 1970s and 1980s, it was largely due to inflation and prices were more volatile than at any other time in history.¹¹⁸ Looking at the inflation-adjusted price of milk from 1979 to 1988, there is a steady and precipitous decline. While the decade’s year by year milk price appears stable, month to month shifts posed significant problems for small dairy farmers already struggling with down cycles. Accomplished dairy expert and twenty-five-year veteran of the

¹¹⁴ Norbert W. Lueck to David Obey, 28 February 1981, DROp, box 199, folder 11, WHS.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Donald Smith to David Obey, 18 March 1981, DROp, box 199, folder 11, WHS; and Bill Eberle, interviewed by the author, 23 April 2020.

¹¹⁷ Will Hughes, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2019.

¹¹⁸ Price volatility became scary in the 1980s, but it only grew worse in ensuing decades. During the 1980s, monthly prices ranged from a low of \$11.30/hundredweight (cwt) to a high of \$14.30/cwt. In the 1990s, that range expanded to \$11.30 to \$19.30, and in the 2000s, the range grew again to \$11.00 to \$21.90. There were extreme changes in milk price over several brief periods in the 2000s. For example, from \$17.10/cwt in September 2001 to \$11.10/cwt in July 2002. Then, from \$11.00/cwt in June 2003 to \$19.30/cwt in May 2004. By the 1990s and 2000s, the annual price levels revealed severe oscillation too. From 2006 to 2009, the milk price went from \$11.60/cwt in 2006 to \$21.60/cwt in 2007, \$19.30/cwt in 2008, followed by a crash to \$11.30/cwt in July 2009.

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), Will Hughes reflects,

I started working during the Reagan revolution. It used to be that dairy cycles would last. The largest farms might have been a couple hundred cows. Then, that was a big farm...Usually you'd have 4 or 5 years of prices that were okay, maybe a decent year, then a not so good year, but nothing dramatic. At that time though, there was a big down cycle that lasted a couple of years. This happened right on top of what's now referred to as the 1980s financial crisis in agriculture.¹¹⁹

For nearly a century, as Hughes observes, milk prices had little volatility relative to the tumultuous economic changes of the 1970s. The combination of a weak US dollar and global droughts caused an increase in agricultural exports. As they had in previous instances, the federal government encouraged farmers to meet the larger demands through greater debt, investment in technology, and operational expansion.¹²⁰ Beginning in 1979, when the US economy went into recession, farmers across the American heartland suffered. In Dairyland, high interest rates hindered growth and pushed some out of the industry entirely.¹²¹ More than ever, milk price fluctuations and a steady decline in the US dairy industry's net returns during the 1980s created tighter profit margins and less room for error in farmers' operations.¹²² Rebounding global agriculture markets and a new embargo imposed against the Soviet Union magnified farmers' woes, leading to defaults on loan payments and bankruptcies.¹²³ The farm crisis of the 1980s did not hit dairy as hard as it did industries like corn, wheat, and soybeans. Still, Wisconsin's dairy

¹¹⁹ Will Hughes, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2019.

¹²⁰ Ed Jesse and Robert Cropp, interviewed by author, 5 December 2019.

¹²¹ Tom Berger, "Voluntary incentives to cut milk output best, Obey says," *Wausau Daily Herald*, 21 March 1983, DROp, box 75, folder 17, WHS.

¹²² "Net returns are the difference between gross value of production and total costs." James M. MacDonald, Jonathan Law, and Roberto Mosheim, "Consolidation in U.S. Dairy Farming," USDA, Economic Research Service, Economic Research Report Number 274, July 2020, 4, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/98901/err-274.pdf?v=4718>.

¹²³ Paul Levy, "Foreclosures on Minnesota Farms Still Remain Uncommon Happenings," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 27 March 1983; Steve Brandt, "Foreclosures of Farm Mortgages by State Banks Triple in Two Years," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 14 March 1985; James Wieghart, "Reagan, GOP may pay dearly for ignoring farm crisis for so long," *Madison Capital Times*, 21 Nov. 1985, NA; Iowa Public Television. "1980s Farm Crisis," <http://www.iptv.org/mtom/classroom/module/13999/farm-crisis?tab=background&page=1>.

farmers endured consecutive down cycles that sent some farmers to retirement and greased the wheels of industry consolidation.

As predicted, the largest, most costly surplus in US history overtook the dairy industry in the early 1980s, but few agreed on how it had happened. In four years, government purchases had increased from \$224 million in 1978-79 to \$2.6 billion in 1982-83—an 882% jump. Of all the states, Wisconsin was responsible for the greatest share of the surplus. As dairy farmers combatted economic swings with increased production, they expanded the nationwide supply management problem, which further escalated the volatility of milk prices and production costs. Having made considerable capital investments, dairy farmers needed to maintain a high level of production to keep up with their debt payments to banks. Despite dairy farmers' incomes rising in the 1970s, the value of dollars earned declined considerably. Reeling from these changes, dairy interests blamed politicians and the economy for their struggles. Wisconsin Congressman David R. Obey contended that as long as the economy suffered, interest rates would remain high, and dairy would be in "an intolerable position." Additionally, he pointed to the Russian trade embargo, US trade policies, and record unemployment as the key drivers in the surplus.¹²⁴ As they had with Nixon, dairy farmers believed that the Reagan administration was "trying to keep a surplus here at home in order to keep food prices low in the store."¹²⁵ The president was also denounced for keeping imports high, claiming that the Reagan administration disregarded the intent of the Agriculture Act of 1935, which states that if imports interfere with domestic price supports, then the president should cut imports or impose a tariff. Reagan did neither. Beyond politics and economic shifts, Wisconsin dairy owners accused large-scale milk producers in

¹²⁴ Mark Robarge, "Obey, Gunderson bring VIP to Cadott town meeting," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, David R Obey Papers, Box 75, folder 17, WHS; David Obey to US Congresspeople, 2 Nov. 1983, DROp, box 339, folder 1, WHS.

¹²⁵ Tom Lavin, "Obey gets 'earful' from farmers, dairy industry leaders," *The Country Today*, 31 March 1982, NA.

California for the nation's surplus problems. However, 1982 data reveals that Minnesota and Wisconsin sold the most dairy products, respectively, to the federal government; California was third.¹²⁶ In reality, the causes for the surplus were multifold and mutually constitutive, but the heart of the issue was maintaining cheap food prices for consumers and revising the milk price support program to fit into the modern economic context.

With the goal of halting the surplus, both the federal government and the dairy industry moved to find solutions. First, in 1982 Congress passed the Omnibus Reconciliation Act, which authorized \$0.50 to \$1.00/cwt assessments against dairy farmers to counteract government purchases of surplus milk. This money was eventually refundable to those that did not increase their production. Meanwhile, Congressman David R. Obey and Steve Gunderson joined forces with UW Extension agricultural economist Robert Cropp to create a dairy surplus reduction bill, known as HR-1538 or the Voluntary Incentive Program (VIP).¹²⁷ The legislation looked to provide incentives to reduce production and maintain dairy farmers' incomes.¹²⁸ In November 1983, Congress passed HR-3385, the 1983 Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act. The law reduced the support price by \$0.50 and set the date for two additional \$0.50 cuts in January and July of 1985. Furthermore, it established the Milk Diversion Program from January 1984 to March 1985, which paid dairy farmers \$10/cwt to reduce their production by 10% to 30%. During this time, dairy farmers could sell milk cows, but only for slaughter, not production. In addition, it assessed \$0.15/cwt for dairy promotion and research. The National Dairy Promotion and Research Board

¹²⁶ "California sells lots of milk to government," *The Country Today*, 24 Nov. 1982, NA; and Jim Daly, "Gunderson, Obey find support for dairy plan in Cadott area," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 21 March 1983, NA.

¹²⁷ Mark Robarge, "Obey, Gunderson bring VIP to Cadott town meeting," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, David R Obey Papers, Box 75, folder 17, WHS.

¹²⁸ Dennis McCann, "Block attached strings to deal," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 2 October 1983, DRO Papers, Box 75, folder 17, WHS.

headed this phase of the new law.¹²⁹ Finally, there was a voluntary \$0.50 assessment for the incentive program.¹³⁰ Under the new law, dairy farmers had a mandate to reduce the nationwide surplus by 75% in eighteen months or face an 11% reduction in farmers' incomes.¹³¹ UW agricultural economist Truman Graf estimated that while the new provisions could help some, only 33% to 50% of Wisconsin farmers would be able to participate in the program due to financial debt.¹³² Young farmers and new industry entrants suffered economically under new price levels. A 1984 report from the Wisconsin Agriculture Reporting Service noted that those who bought land at high rates in the 1970s faced price down cycles and high interest rates in the 1980s that forced many into bankruptcy.¹³³

Throughout 1984, the Reagan administration and Congress rethought the very basis of federal farm programs in an effort to decrease government spending. Instead of making major changes to the milk price support program, the Food and Security Act of 1985 created the Dairy Termination Program to reduce the milk surplus. Known as a Whole Herd Buyout, dairy farmers now had the opportunity to place a bid on slaughtering all of their cows and heifers, with the caveat that they would stay out of the industry for five years. Next, the new law created a national commission on dairy policy tasked with studying the future operations of the milk price support program. Additionally, the Act cut price supports further, which led many dairy farmers to accuse the Reagan administration of bankrupting them.¹³⁴ Finally the law established a dairy

¹²⁹ The law stipulated that in July of 1985 the Secretary of Agriculture would do a referendum with dairy farmers to see if they wished to continue the promotion program and assessments. As it turned out, they did.

¹³⁰ Jane Hanousek, "Dairy law rules aren't known: Success of program up to farmers, lawmakers say," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 1983, DROp, box 175, folder 17, WHS.

¹³¹ David Blaska, "Dairy farmers poised on edge of shake-up: Milk industry's cream has suddenly turned sour," *Madison Capital Times*, 28 November 1983, NA.

¹³² Lee Bergquist, "Dairy bill aimed at cutting supply," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 30 November 1983, DROp, box 75, folder 17, WHS,

¹³³ Lee Bergquist, "36% of farmers predicting failure," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 27 March 1984, DROp, box 75, folder 17, WHS.

¹³⁴ "House Ag Committee zeroes in on dairy bill," *The Country Today*, 17 April 1985, NA.

export incentive program that paid individuals on a bid basis for exporting dairy products. This new, five-year farm law had mixed results for dairy, but by and large the buyout program failed. Price supports kept dropping, imports kept increasing, and the economy did not bounce back significantly for the farming community. Milk production remained stagnant or increased, and people felt they had no choice but to add dairy cows to mitigate low milk prices.

Dairy Competition Creeps in from the West, 1971-1993

While Wisconsin dairy farmers were ill prepared to rapidly increase their milk production in response to the economic shocks of the 1970s and 1980s, their California counterparts had been industrializing and specializing for nearly half a century. Investing greater and greater sums into their West Coast operations, California dairymen centered in Los Angeles County became a model for the system of cheap food and mass production in the industry. Despite the writing on the wall, Wisconsin's dairy experts and industry leaders continued to articulate that California's industrial dairying system could not be mapped onto America's Dairyland. Gale L. VandeBurg, Assistant Chancellor and Director of UW Cooperative Extension, explained that, "They [California] may be the most efficient for the lowest-cost food for consumers, but they are not in the interest of prevalent human, family, and community values...We may need to quit holding up cheap food as the idol to worship, in favor of other values in the quality of life in the decades ahead."¹³⁵ VandeBurg's sentiments revealed a moral and cultural superiority that many of their fellow Wisconsinites shared. It was not a question of how to produce the highest quality product, but how to maintain the traditions, hierarchies, and life qualities that European-descent farmers had enjoyed since the golden age of farming in the 1910s. While Wisconsin farmers struggled to overcome cultural, geographic, and economic obstacles, California's large-scale model began to

¹³⁵ Robert C. Bjorklund, "Where will all the surplus milk go?," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 18 May 1980, NA.

spread across the country as a viable solution to the economic issues facing American dairy farmers.

The Golden State began its ascent in the 1960s and 1970s as consumer demand for milk and cheese shifted. During the period, milk's share of the beverage market receded, and American shoppers adopted a growing interest in European cheeses. More so than ever before, dairymen faced greater competition from imports, imitation products, and soft drinks.¹³⁶ The transition away from milk delivery situated consumers in a grocery where milk was one of many choices rather than a single service.¹³⁷ At those same stores, imitation cheese became a more common sight.¹³⁸ After the Nixon Administration called on Congress to repeal old laws that prohibited the use of imitation cheese in processed foods in 1969, these faux products grew rapidly and fed a growing pizza industry that could save nearly 50% on their most significant ingredient with the change.¹³⁹ Substitutes were attractive to consumers that preferred vegetable to animal fat.¹⁴⁰ While products like imitation milk did not taste good or similar to the real thing in 1979, they would catch up in the next two decades. Responding to these changes, California dairymen established two major initiatives: collective advertising and investment in cheese processing.¹⁴¹

In response to decreased consumer demand for milk, California established a Milk Producers Advisory Board in 1973 that devised marketing campaigns to promote dairy products. Dairy producers paid 1% of the price received for milk to finance the institution. While the Board became a unique force for California dairymen, they struggled to start operations in the

¹³⁶ Dennis McCann, "Graf's Crystal Ball Shows Major Dairy Changes Ahead," *Janesville Gazette*, 1 Nov. 1977, NA.

¹³⁷ Robert J. Bjorklund, "Dairies keep nation moving," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 Jun. 1977, NA.

¹³⁸ David Blaska, "Imitation is not flattery to cheese makers," *Madison Capital Times*, 13 Feb. 1979, NA.

¹³⁹ Robert C. Bjorkland, "Milk shortage aids imitations," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 Sep. 1979, NA.

¹⁴⁰ Ken Bemkstein, "Promotion Can Help Dairymen Fight Imitations," *The Janesville Gazette*, 20 Feb. 1979, NA.

¹⁴¹ Martin Rossman, "Ads Aid California Milk Sales," *Madison Capital Times*, 21 Dec. 1972, NA.

early years. The state's first campaign, entitled "Every body needs milk," featured celebrities like Mark Spitz, Dear Abby (Abigail Van Buren), Pat Boone, and Ray Bolger endorsing the product.¹⁴² Shortly after its launch, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a complaint against the Board, indicating that its slogan was "unfair, false, misleading, and deceptive."¹⁴³ A spokesman for California and the advertising agency, Cunningham and Welsh, responded publicly contending that the ads were truthful and that the FTC has no jurisdiction over their state government.¹⁴⁴ The FTC maintained that the ads deceived consumers by supporting the notion that milk was indispensable to all individuals, regardless of their condition, that milk consumption was beneficial to everyone, and that unlimited quantities of milk could be drunk with no adverse effects.¹⁴⁵ Since the Board was a state-run, semi-public agency, it maintained a legal distance from the FTC's authority, and successfully secured a permanent injunction against the FTC's proceedings on the grounds that Congress has not granted the FTC jurisdiction over states, state agencies, state instrumentalities, or state officers acting in their official capacity.¹⁴⁶ Although California discontinued the campaign shortly thereafter, it set a precedent for state-based marketing programs and their autonomy.

Halfway across the country, Wisconsin's industry leaders continued to rally farmers behind the necessity for collectively financed, state-run milk and cheese advertising. As the 1970s wore on, soft drinks gained greater market share in the beverage sector, creating demand issues for milk.¹⁴⁷ As of April 1976, Wisconsin was the only major milk producing state without

¹⁴² "Mid-Am Meets at Menomonie," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 15 Jan. 1973, NA.

¹⁴³ "FTC Claims Milk Ads False," *Madison Capital Times*, 16 August 1974, NA.

¹⁴⁴ "Every Body Does 'Not' Need Milk, FTC Says," *Madison Capital Times*, 12 April 1974, NA.

¹⁴⁵ "Milk Ads Strike a Sour Note," *La Crosse Tribune*, 18 April 1974, NA.

¹⁴⁶ "Milk Ads Trigger Dispute," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 27 August 1974, NA; and Dorothy Cohen, et al, "Legal Developments in Marketing," edited by Ray O. Werner, *Journal of Marketing* (April 1975): 88.

¹⁴⁷ James Hansen, "Carl Laveck heads dairy promo committee," *Manitowoc Herald Times*, 25 Mar. 1977, NA.

a state promotion program.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, when given the chance to enact such a system on three separate occasions, Wisconsin dairy farmers vetoed it.¹⁴⁹ As states like New York, Oregon, and California promoted their products to boost consumer purchasing, Wisconsin lagged behind, unable to come to a consensus.¹⁵⁰ Wisconsin Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Art Kurtz, explained to farmers in 1977 that the dairy industry must “always be catering to consumer concerns” and there is no better way to do that than by “promoting our product directly to consumers.”¹⁵¹ Other experts predicted that without an effective promotional institution, the dairy industry would crumble in the next fifteen years.¹⁵² President of the Dairy and Services Division of Borden, Inc. (multinational food giant), Marvin Herb, provided an outsider’s perspective of the Wisconsin industry, arguing that “farmers are too complacent because of the high price they are getting now for milk.”¹⁵³ While producers in America’s Dairyland complained that Herb’s view of the situation was warped by his position in a giant multinational corporation hundreds of miles away. Nonetheless, it was clear that despite active support for more dairy product promotion, some Wisconsin dairymen resisted change and kept the state from adapting to a rapidly changing marketplace.¹⁵⁴

Amid the push for promotions, California dairymen made a giant leap in their cheese production sector by investing in modern equipment that transformed their specialization in milk production into a competitive advantage in the scale and pace of dairy processing. As early as the 1940s, California’s LA County had become a distant leader in milk production per cow; far

¹⁴⁸ “Dairy farmers to express Pro-Milk views,” *Kenosha News*, 5 April 1976, NA.

¹⁴⁹ David Blaska, “Imitation is not flattery to cheese makers,” *Madison Capital Times*, 13 Feb. 1979, NA.

¹⁵⁰ “Delegates back Pro-Milk,” *Fond du Lac Reporter*, 3 September 1976, NA; and “Carl Laveck heads dairy promo committee,” *Manitowoc Herald Times*, 25 March 1977, NA.

¹⁵¹ “Dairymen hear promotion plea,” *Country Today*, 22 June 1977, NA.

¹⁵² Tom Lowin, “Promotion is essential: Loss of fluid milk market possible,” *The Country Today*, 7 Feb. 1979, NA.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ “Farm milk bases (quotas) appear to be gaining steam,” *The Country Today*, 31 March 1982, NA.

surpassing the average rates in Wisconsin counties.¹⁵⁵ By the late 1960s, industrial dairying equipment manufacturers started advertising nationwide. In Wisconsin, the *Madison Capital Times* published quarter-page posters for the Dairy Equipment Company.¹⁵⁶ While the tools to industrialize were available for Wisconsin dairy farmers, they declined and justified minimal herd growth for many reasons: the climate and terrain were not conducive to mass-production, smaller herds were more efficient, new technology was an unnecessary risk, and an overarching cultural belief that Wisconsin dairying practices were superior and incomparable to California or the American Southwest. Consequently, LA County dairymen consistently out produced all other counties in the US, and annually added distance between themselves and Wisconsin's milk per cow rates.¹⁵⁷ For example, in 1976 California dairy cows averaged an annual output of 14,272 pounds (lbs.) of milk compared to 11,232 lbs. per cow in Wisconsin.¹⁵⁸ As consumer demand shifted during the period and California dairymen turned their focus to cheese production, they were primed to grow at an astronomical rate.¹⁵⁹ From 1970 to 1978, the state's cheese output climbed from 17.5 million lbs. to 137 million lbs. By 1985, California's cheese production grew to nearly a half-billion lbs. At the time, UW Extension agricultural economist Ed Jesse opined that Wisconsin "will never again compete for California cheese consumers," because the Golden State's dairymen had been so successful in accelerating cheese production and dairy marketing.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Jess Gilbert and Kevin Wehr, "Dairy Industrialization in the First Place: Urbanization, Immigration, and Political Economy in Los Angeles County, 1920-1970," *Rural Sociology* 68, no. 4 (2003): 476.

¹⁵⁶ Dairy Equipment Company, advertisement, *Madison Capital Times*, 15 January 1971.

¹⁵⁷ Wisconsin State Department of Agriculture, *Wisconsin Rural Resources: Marathon County*, Walter H. Ebling. Madison: 1956, 39.

¹⁵⁸ Area counties among state's dairy leaders," *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, 2 Sep. 1977, NA.

¹⁵⁹ Truman Graf, "\$10 milk ruled out by state observer," *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, 18 Apr. 1974, NA.

¹⁶⁰ "Major changes in dairy industry likely in next 3-5 years," *The Country Today*, 16 Jan. 1985, NA.

While its dairy farmers had a long history of using the drylot farming techniques in building an industrial model for dairying, the advent of advertising and cheese production empowered California dairymen to take their businesses to new heights in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike Wisconsin, where producers maintained unwritten standards that, at most, dairy farms should house around 25 to 50 cows and milk them twice a day, LA County did not have a reputation or cultural history of dairying that defined and shaped it.¹⁶¹ In this regard, California dairy farmers dealt with less resistance from preconceived notions regarding best practices as they developed a new industrial model. Instead they embraced ideas of 1000-cow herds, labor efficiency, economies of scale, and high-volume production, as they learned ways to increase milk production and lower expenses on the way to sustaining more profitable businesses. Writing in the 1980s, Ed Jesse estimated that production costs in California were nearly 66% lower due to better weather and forages, which enabled producers to use excess funds to hire specialists.¹⁶² While Wisconsin's diversified farmers labored on crops used as cow feed, California dairymen purchased theirs, as cheap transportation costs and a climate conducive to alfalfa growth reduced prices on the vegetation. Simultaneously, improvements in science and farm technology enabled remaining dairy farmers to increase their annual milk production per cow to unprecedented highs, which accelerated the industry's consolidation.¹⁶³ As their milk production soared, more and more of that milk was going into cheese and California started to encroach on Wisconsin's cheese market.

As the process unfolded, LA dairies purchased and developed state of the art milking parlors that allowed for greater scale and sparked a need to expand their preexisting labor

¹⁶¹ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019.

¹⁶² "Major changes in dairy industry likely in next 3-5 years," *The Country Today*, 16 Jan. 1985, NA.

¹⁶³ Ed Jesse, "Growth and Transition in Wisconsin Dairying," Marketing and Policy Briefing Paper, Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, UW-Madison Cooperative Extension, 1998, 2.

system. Structurally, California CAFOs often had elevated milk parlors that increased efficiency and created factory-style labor needs. In other words, to milk cows in a parlor, a worker needed to stay in a rectangular space where hundreds or thousands of cows would rotate through to be milked three times per day. While there is still much to be learned about how California dairymen hired workers, it is clear that some employed union milkers, while others hired laborers off book. Not surprisingly, a critical component of California's ascension in industrial dairying was the incorporation of cheap workers from Mexico and Latin America to do the breakneck work of milking and barn cleaning. Despite increased scrutiny against the employment of undocumented immigrants following the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, California's mega dairies continued to benefit from their presence and labor. With greater proximity to the southern border came greater access, but it also meant a competitive edge that operations in the Southwest had over their Midwest and Northeastern peers. These conditions were magnified in 1994 by the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which accelerated industrial trends by reducing barriers to trade that made American dairy products more marketable in Canada and Mexico, destroying Mexican small farmers through price shocks, and compelling millions to migrate north where the majority landed in places like California in which dairy work was becoming more and more plentiful.

The introduction of new dairy science and mechanical technology only hastened economic, social, and cultural changes in California and Wisconsin. In speaking to farmers and industry analysts active in the 1970s and 1980s, many observed that new technologies produced an "agricultural treadmill"—a concept originated in 1958 by famed agricultural economist Willard Cochrane.¹⁶⁴ Writing in terms of agriculture broadly, Cochrane asserted that for all but

¹⁶⁴ Ed Jesse & Robert Cropp, interviewed by author, 5 December 2019; Mark Stephenson, interviewed by author, 5 December 2019; and Trisha Wagner, interviewed by author, 10 February 2020.

the early adopters, transitions to new technology did not increase farmers' profits, rather it forced them onto a treadmill, a self-perpetuating cycle of technology and debt that compelled farmers to run "faster and faster in the quest for high incomes growing out of the adoption of new and more productive techniques."¹⁶⁵ The need to keep up with new scientific and machine technologies, grow herd sizes, and keep abreast of newly-developed methods inspired to take more risks and incur greater debt. As new science and machines increased labor efficiencies for some, others heard the good news and jumped on the bandwagon, which further accelerated the process of consolidation. While some farmers took good risks and oversaw growth on their farms efficiently, others failed to manage their new responsibilities and encountered bankruptcy. Despite the potential for herd expansion to increase economies of scale and produce wealth, it did not guarantee success or the inevitable consolidation of the dairy industry into a handful of corporate entities.

Meanwhile, dairy scientists introduced new methods for artificial insemination and disease control, which combined with newly minted electronic feeding systems to create larger, better nourished livestock. As its cows became genetically modified, physically stronger, and less susceptible to illness, dairy farms became more and more efficient. In his 1983 book, economist Alden C. Manchester estimated that on average dairy farmers in the 1970s produced a hundredweight (cwt) of milk ten times quicker than they did in the 1930s.¹⁶⁶ While this statistic owes a lot to human efficiency, improvements in animal breeding were critical to creating larger cows that gained more weight and produced more milk. These changes only became more acute from the 1970s through the 2000s. Wisconsin dairy farmer James Earle recalls, "In the 1980s?

¹⁶⁵ Willard W. Cochrane, *Farm Prices: Myth and Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 105.

¹⁶⁶ In the 1930s it would take 3.4 hours per cwt. By the 1970s the average was down to 0.4 hour/cwt. Manchester, Alden C., *The Public Role in the Dairy Economy: Why and How Governments Intervene in the Milk Business*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983.

Yea. Our average cow size, production per cow, life cycle, everything shot up! Our cows were healthier and getting fed consistently with TMR [total mixed rations] machines; that really did it.”¹⁶⁷ On the Earle’s farm, and thousands of dairies across Wisconsin, milk production and cow health grew despite persistent economic pressures working against them. Whether in northern Wisconsin or Southern California, overall milk production numbers continued to climb annually as the number of dairy farms dwindled. For those that stayed in business, the forces of science and technology were unavoidable and an absolute necessity for future sustainability. By 2005, farms with less than 100 cows produced a hundredweight of milk in 21 minutes while farms with more than 500 cows did the same work in less than 2 minutes.¹⁶⁸ Over time, increased breeding and operational efficiency on dairy farms helped dairy farmers produce more milk, faster, with less labor. For large-scale producers in California, advances in cow health and science magnified their advantages over Wisconsin, widening the production gap steadily throughout the period.

One of the most significant scientific and technological additions to the dairy industry was the feeding concept of total mixed rations (TMR) and later computerized machines that automated mixing, feeding, and tracking cows.¹⁶⁹ For centuries, farmers exclusively used pasture-feeding methods, allowing cows to graze the land and forage grass for their diet. In the 1950s, TMR emerged as an alternative method that blends critical ingredients---forages, grains, protein, minerals, vitamins, and feed additives---into a single feed mix formulated for a specific nutrient content. The first significant group to adopt the new practice were LA County dairymen

¹⁶⁷ James Earle, interviewed by the author, 27 April 2020.

¹⁶⁸ James M. MacDonald, Erik J. O’Donoghue, William D. McBride, Richard F. Nehring, Carmen L. Sandretto, and Roberto Mosheim, “Changes in the Size and Location of U.S. Dairy Farms,” in *Profits, Costs, and the Changing Structure of Dairy Farming*, USDA, Economic Research Service, Report Number 47, September 2007, 14, accessed 7 March 2020, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45868/11138_err47_1_.pdf?v=1614.9.

¹⁶⁹ All of the dairy farmers I interviewed who were active during the 1980s and 1990s, identified TMR as a significant factor in increasing milk production. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; and James Earle, interviewed by the author, 27 April 2020.

during the 1970s. Since many operated industrial style dairies that included high-level milk production, large herds, and milking parlors, the TMR concept was simpler to integrate, because parlor milking centralized and directed cows to be milked and fed in succession. About a decade later, Wisconsin dairy farmer Dick Anderson remembers TMR being a gamechanger for his family farm. “While I was in college I learned about TMR, instead of individual rations,” Anderson says. “So, I brought it to my dad’s attention...We did very well because of it. It was things like that my dad was always on...the front side of adopting different technologies.”¹⁷⁰ These new computerized devices tracked both a cow’s consumption and its milk production, which allowed farmers to pinpoint animals that had either health or feed related problems.¹⁷¹ If a cow had been undereating, for example, it may be a sign of any number of health conditions that when treated swiftly could mean a significant difference in milk production. By identifying potential problems early, these systems empowered farmers like the Andersons to take better care of their herds and eliminated some human error. Additionally, these systems reduced dairy farmers’ workloads by self-regulating amounts of various feed concentrates.¹⁷² In tandem, advanced dairy science and computerized feeding systems promoted good animal health, helped increase bovine size and production, and created economic savings for farmers all while reducing labor hours.

As advances in dairy science and technology revolutionized farmers’ ability to grow large and productive milk cows, the small, but growing number of Wisconsin’s large-scale dairies in the late 1980s and 1990s gained a competitive edge and accelerated consolidation by taking

¹⁷⁰ Dick Anderson, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020.

¹⁷¹ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019.

¹⁷² J.A. Bines, “Feeding systems and food intake by housed dairy cows,” *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 44 (1985):355-362; K.A. Beauchemin, S. Zelin, D. Genner, J.G. Buchanan-Smith, “An Automatic System for Quantification of Eating and Ruminating Activities of Dairy Cattle Housed in Stalls,” *Journal of Dairy Science* 72, no. 10 (October 1989): 2746-2759; and Thomas A. Shultz, “Computerized corral feed stations for dairy cows,” *California Agriculture* 43, no. 5 (September-October 1989): 26-27.

advantage of volume premiums offered by milk hauling companies and dairy cooperatives. Part of milk producers' expenses were transportation costs from their farm to a milk processor. Simply put, if a dairy farmer supplied over a fixed volume of milk at pickup, they earned a premium, or a savings on their hauling expenses.¹⁷³ The practice expanded in the late 1980s, and most Wisconsin milk buyers partook by the 1990s.¹⁷⁴ To a great extent, only medium and large CAFOs could meet these high-volume standards. Responding to the growth of industrialized livestock across the country in 1976, the Environmental Protection Administration established the designation of concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFO, for large industrial animal farms. As expected, the first dairy farms to earn the moniker were located in LA County. Unlike smaller operations, CAFOs could justify purchasing cost-saving technology like a bulk tank, which is a milk storage container that allows the producer to cool and hold liquid that can be directly transferred to a hauler.¹⁷⁵ Industry expert Will Hughes explains that volume premiums accrued were,

enough to pay off about a billion dollars of reinvestment in dairy farming and it was all concentrated among the big guys. What did that do? It put pressure on the little guys...so things were even more concentrated than we'd thought it would be. And I don't think there's any turning back. I used to reluctantly think the CAFO wasn't going to ruin the dairy industry. I was concerned about it, but now I believe they have ruined the dairy industry.¹⁷⁶

While CAFOs bought bulk tanks, earned premiums, and increased efficiency for the hauler and the cooperative, those who could not make the jump suffered from insurmountable competition and sometimes became victims of industry consolidation.¹⁷⁷ For CAFOs and their truck hauling

¹⁷³ Mark Stephenson, "Comparing Your Milk Checks," Department of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University, November 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Ed Jesse, interviewed by the author, 5 December 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Jim Winn, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020.

¹⁷⁶ William Hughes, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Mark Stephenson, interviewed by author, 5 December 2019.

companies, making a single pickup was quicker and far more efficient.¹⁷⁸ In this instance, through their sheer size CAFOs gained a competitive advantage that further chipped away at the viability of small dairy farming in Wisconsin. Paying proportionally more for their milk to be hauled, small farmers worked on thinning profit margins and their businesses fell into jeopardy of bankruptcy.

Even when it cost them in the short term, dairy cooperatives and milk haulers continued to offer volume premiums, which inspired some farmers to grow their herds and helped drive industry consolidation. Active during the period, agricultural economist Ed Jesse explains that as the cost of milk pickup went down, cooperatives and haulers offered premiums to large farms that may have been even less profitable than picking up from multiple small farmers.¹⁷⁹ In their effort to court larger dairies, cooperatives and haulers incurred a greater expense relative to obtaining milk from smaller producers. To put it another way, there was a non-monetary incentive to encourage dairy farm growth and consolidation. In 1981, Wisconsin lawmakers had penned legislation to prohibit volume premiums that could not be cost-justified.¹⁸⁰ Despite its intention to stop milk haulers, dairy cooperatives, and other milk purchasers from creating unfair competition, enforcement has been rare. In the 1990s, DATCP took the largest offender, Dean Foods, to court and won. Nevertheless, dairy farmers and cooperatives challenged the ruling, arguing that its milk purchases in Wisconsin were made by out of state entities.¹⁸¹ Unable to hold even the largest offenders fully accountable, the law became little more than window dressing.

¹⁷⁸ William Hughes, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2019.

¹⁷⁹ Ed Jesse, interviewed by the author, 5 December 2019.

¹⁸⁰ “1981 Assembly Bill 132,” Wis. Stat. § 100.22 (1981 & Supp. 1991).

¹⁸¹ *Crave v. Tracy*, 955 F. Supp. 1047 (E.D. Wis., 1996); *Dean Foods Co. v. Tracy*, 990 F. Supp. 646, 649-56 (W.D. Wis., 1997); *Dean Foods Co. v. Brancel*, 22 F. Supp. 2d 931, 938, 941 (W.D. Wis., 1998); *Dean Foods Co. v. Brancel*, No. 98-3797, (U.S. Court of Appeals, 7th Cir., 1999).

Ultimately, as profit margins grew thinner, CAFOs were able to take advantage of trucking premiums as small farms fell prey to milk price fluctuations and overall decline.

In March of 1993, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, Allen Tracy, responded to journalists' questions about the state's waning dominance in the dairy industry by warning, "I can't guarantee that California won't overtake Wisconsin as the number one milk producer."¹⁸² Sitting next to Tracy at the press conference, Governor Tommy Thompson joked, "You better. Or you'll be out of a job."¹⁸³ By the fall, California had officially become the country's top milk producing state. Nonetheless, Tracy kept his position until 1997. As price volatility, scientific and technological, and industrial consolidation pushed dairy farmers to grow in the upper Midwest, California overthrew Wisconsin as the new king of milk. Reflecting on the transition, Will Hughes explains,

...dairy farmers had California-style dairies with pretty cheap water. They had a dry climate, they did not have quite the manure issues [that Wisconsin did], and they got scale quickly. So, you'd start to see farms, first it was 750 cows, then 1,000 thousand cows, and then 3,000 cows. That started to put pressure on the system here [in Wisconsin], because they started to take market share away both in cheese and milk.¹⁸⁴

As Hughes illustrates, some of the climate and terrain-related advantages that California's CAFOs enjoyed could not be reproduced in the upper Midwest. Still, this transition in power was shocking in that Wisconsin had roughly 350,000 more cows than California, but it produced less milk. In the years before and after the 1993 transition, Wisconsin dairy farmers recognized the growing advantages of West Coast dairy operations and traveled west to investigate how California's farms had effectively created scale and expedited dairy production.¹⁸⁵ Responding to

¹⁸² Mike Flaherty, "Thompson pushes dairy effort: Proposals aim to stem losses in industry," *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, 11 March 1993, NA.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ William Hughes, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Jim Ostrum, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020; and Todd Willer, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020.

fears that Wisconsin was losing its grasp on the dairy industry, Governor Tommy Thompson reminded the public that California had only taken over “one small category.”¹⁸⁶ Despite his intention, the governor’s message revealed a defensiveness felt by many dairy farmers. “I don't like it,” Thompson said, “but it's the type of thing you have to accept... We're still America's Dairyland.”¹⁸⁷ Seeing their culture and economic might slipping through their hands, dairy farmers were determined to save their farms and began to take expansion into serious consideration.

Starting in the mid-1990s, dairy farmers felt the full effects of increased competition and industry consolidation alongside insufficient government support pricing, volatile milk prices, and thinning margins that created an overwhelming pressure to increase their herd size or transition their farm away from milking cows. From 1995 to 2010, while many retired or left the industry by choice, others confronted bankruptcy and made the heart-wrenching decision of liquidating their farms and selling their herds off. By contrast, other dairy farmers made the difficult decision to break family and cultural tradition and expand their herds to the point where they needed a full-time staff to milk cows and clean barns twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This happened unevenly. Some increased their herds steadily, while others doubled or tripled overnight.¹⁸⁸ As one farm closed its doors, another bought its herd. While some farmers kept their herds under 200 cows and survived, most did not. The choice to grow and exploit economies of scale was by no means an easy decision. Since the mid-nineteenth century, dairy farmers had refined a traditional 25-50 cow model that sustained a Wisconsin-style of dairying culture. Defying those cultural traditions meant breaking with family history and the “way

¹⁸⁶ Rogers Worthington, “Wisconsin’s Answer to California’s Milk Coup: Don’t Have A Cow, Man,” Chicago Tribune, 27 Oct. 1993, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-10-27-9310270142-story.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 Aug 2019; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 Feb 2020.

grandpa did things.”¹⁸⁹ Additionally, taking chances and choosing growth did not guarantee success or increased profit. There were high stakes. Nevertheless, as more and more farms grew or closed, the industry became increasingly specialized and vertically integrated among the stages of production.¹⁹⁰

Exemplifying these changes in production, most Wisconsin farmers eventually shifted from milking twice to three times a day, which expanded their labor needs and changed their dairying culture. Thinking back on this monumental adjustment, multigenerational dairy farmer and fifty-year veteran of the industry Gel Stephens recalls,

...we morphed into this, more of a larger facility and still a family farm and all that, but a lot more using employees and running more hours. The typical type of thing was always about two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon and evening. And we went [in 1990] to milking five hours in the morning and five hours in the afternoon and five hours in the night. Then, later we built our second barn in 1997 and switched to milking all the time, and have been doing so since...We work around the clock, and the only time that we're not milking is when the power goes off until we get our generator running.¹⁹¹

The traditional dairy farm had selected hours for milking twice a day that structured farmers' working hours and their focus on cows during particular times. As Stephens made the hard choice to expand operations, he grappled with an identity crisis. It seemed that by becoming a larger, industrialized farm he would lose his identity as a family farmer, which had defined three previous generations of Stephens men dating back to his German-Swiss ancestors that originally settled land in western Wisconsin. In an effort to stay connected to the legacies of his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, Stephens always referred to his business as a family farm that

¹⁸⁹ This was a common refrain among many dairy farmers who grew up learning how to farm from their fathers and grandfathers. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; and Anna Marsh, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020.

¹⁹⁰ James M. MacDonald and William D. McBride, “The Transformation of U.S. Livestock Agriculture: Scale, Efficiency, and Risks,” USDA, Economic Research Service, Electronic Information Bulletin Number 43, January 2009, 1, accessed on 12 July 2020, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/44292/10992_eib43.pdf?v=0.

¹⁹¹ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 21 November 2019.

upheld the same values as Wisconsin's model of small dairying. This was not unique to Stephens. Many of the state's milk producers had similarly grown up in a family-centered system of dairy farming that defined who they were, and caused them great pains to part with in expanding their herds. Additionally, herd growth forced Stephens and others to milk more often, and eventually, to do so constantly. At these production levels, farms needed full time, year-round workers to milk cows at all hours. By increasing herd sizes and shifting their daily milking schedules from two to three times, CAFO owners altered multi-generational cultures of dairying and started a new chapter in America's Dairyland.

Conclusion

Answering questions at the 2019 World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin, US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue opined, "In America, the big get bigger and the small go out. I don't think in America, we, for any small business, have a guaranteed income or guaranteed profitability."¹⁹² Reminiscent of former-secretary Earl Butz's rhetoric from the 1970s, Perdue told struggling dairy farmers that there would be no government support for them, so they had better grow to survive. Like so many adjacent fields, the dairy industry had become inextricably linked with a global capitalist marketplace that demanded cheap food and ignored the means of production that necessitated cheap, undocumented immigrant labor. "It's very difficult on an economy of scale with the capital needs and all the environmental regulations and everything else today to survive milking 40, 50 or 60 or even 100 cows," Purdue said.

¹⁹² Patrick Marley, "Trump ag secretary Sonny Perdue says dairy farms will survive, but may have to get bigger," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 1 October 2019, accessed 2 Mar. 2020, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/10/01/trump-ag-secretary-says-dairy-farms-have-get-bigger-survive/3829320002/>; and "Sonny Perdue to farmers: Go big or just go: U.S. agriculture secretary isn't interested in finding ways to help small farms survive." *Star Tribune*, 4 Oct. 2019, accessed 2 March 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/sonny-perdue-to-farmers-go-big-or-just-go/562216182/>.

Neglecting the fact that small dairy farming had been a way of life in Wisconsin for over 150 years, Perdue implied what no one else was willing to say, America's Dairyland was dead. In its place a new regime emerged based on cheap food and cheap workers.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the drive for cheap food produced a cacophony of forces that pushed Wisconsin dairy farmers to the brink. Rapidly advancing dairy science and farm technology, inflation, ballooning expenses, unstable and diminishing milk prices, waning government support, and increased competition from California, had rendered the Wisconsin dairy industry a far more consolidated and industrialized sector of US agriculture. Responding to these ruptures, whether through retirement, forced sale, bankruptcy, or expansion, farmers in Wisconsin's staple industry made a historic shift. In the 1990s and 2000s, a growing group of Wisconsin's dairy farmers tried to capture economies of scale by expanding their herd sizes, building modern barns, and increasing milk production while lowering production costs. These transitions dramatically changed farmers' labor needs, creating odd milking hours that could only be handled by a full-time staff. The critical step of reducing operating expenses required that dairy farms find a readily available source of low-wage workers to do the "dirty work" of milking and cleaning barns. When local recruitment sources turned up dismal results, farmers panicked. In the final years of the 1990s, Wisconsin's CAFO farmers confronted a paralyzing labor shortage.

Like an inherited reflex, CAFO owners saw a path to economic success that necessitated a pool of vulnerable, controllable, non-citizen workers. Taking their cues from other US agricultural producers, Wisconsin farmers would soon transition from family labor to cheap workers, which in the 1990s were predominantly Mexican undocumented immigrants. In an industry completely new to the dynamics of hired-labor systems, dairy farmers made a near-

immediate turn toward cheap immigrant workers. Admittedly, most dairy owners had no idea how to recruit or manage hired laborers and had planned to learn while doing. “The early guys had been to California,” James Earle explains. “They told us we had to get big or we were dead in the water. Our guys [Wisconsinites] saw the workers out there, a lot of Latinos, right? No different here. Guys found Mexicans working in Wisconsin and recruited them to the dairy farm.” Incorporating ideas from California-style CAFOs, Wisconsin’s first herd expansionists saw the necessity in finding and maintaining a cheap labor pool. To become specialized, technologically advanced milk producers with large herds and larger revenues, Wisconsin dairy farmers reshaped their business and dairying cultures to better align with industrial demands. In doing so, they laid to rest traditional practices over a century in the making and embarked on a new journey.

CHAPTER 2

Indigenous, Undocumented, and Circular: Mexican Migration in the Post-IRCA Era, 1986-2006

It was August of 1998 in a small town north of Nashville, Tennessee and Ramón Torrejón had just finished his night shift at a poultry factory. After his customary three-mile walk home in the midnight heat, Torrejón received a phone call from his uncle Eugenio Jiménez, who offered him a higher-paying job at a Wisconsin dairy farm that was in desperate need of workers. Three days later, Torrejón was on a commercial bus destined for La Crosse, from which Jiménez had arranged for a friend to drive him another hour to the farm. Over the next two weeks, Jiménez trained his nephew to milk cows and clean barns on a 600-cow farm. Along with ten other undocumented Mexicans, all from Nahua villages in the state of Veracruz, Mexico, Torrejón worked twelve-hour evening and overnight shifts, six days a week. In this atmosphere, he took to learning herd management, animal health, and calving, and within three years he took a lead milker position on a competitor's farm that offered greater responsibility and income. Torrejón reflects,

The work was good...I have always considered myself a learner and a teacher. As I learned about cows, I wanted to teach others like me who wanted to work...farmers needed workers and we had people in Mexico who needed money. They [dairy farmers] couldn't speak Spanish, so they needed people like me to help.¹

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, as more and more dairy farmers grew their operations into large-scale, technology-driven businesses, they began to rely heavily on cheap labor to work around-the-clock hours. Similar to other industries like crop agriculture in the United States, immigrants made up a significant portion of this cheap labor pool, which was

¹ Ramón Torrejón, interviewed and translated by the author, 23 February 2020.

majority undocumented. For the first time in Wisconsin's history, undocumented Mexican workers like Torrejón became a mainstay on its dairy farms.

Opposing global structural forces in the 1980s and 1990s led undocumented Mexican immigrants like Ramón Torrejón to America's Dairyland. On the one hand, the Mexican government struggled to dig its country out of an ongoing economic recession by devaluing the peso. As the value of real incomes shrank, subsistence farmers in Mexico's rural and indigenous communities fell deeper into poverty, unable to purchase raw materials without supplemental earnings. Facing high unemployment and an imminent debt crisis in 1982, Mexican federal officials encouraged destitute citizens to seek jobs across the northern border.² On the other hand, concerns over "illegal" immigration in the US pushed lawmakers to pass the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) to curtail unlawful entrants by militarizing the US-Mexico border. Despite its intentions, the law helped generate a pool of undocumented Mexicans in the US that increased from 2.1 million in 1986 to 7 million in 2006.³ While IRCA increased border control and surveillance, making it more difficult for migrants to cross, it did not address the underlying economic issues that drove Mexicans to migrate in the first place. Furthermore, as the US Border Patrol increased its presence, prospective migrants increasingly used alternative paths further away from traditional crossing points near El Paso, Texas or San Diego, California. Ultimately, the 1986 law changed the geography of undocumented Mexican migration, but it failed to reduce overall immigration rates. Eight years after IRCA, the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA) further devastated Mexican farmers and wage-earners nationwide. In less than a decade, it compelled between 1.5 and 2 million people to migrate north

² Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 15.

³ Ruth Ellen Wasem, "Unauthorized Aliens Residing in the United States: Estimates Since 1986," Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, 13 December 2012, 6.

for work and produced a surplus of labor in the US.⁴ Simultaneously, industrialization in the dairy industry created jobs on large-scale farms that attracted Mexicans to the Midwest. In sum, while the US sought to clamp down on undocumented immigration, the Mexican government, its economy, and NAFTA drove people out of the country to find adequate wages in the north. As these forces collided in the 1990s, Wisconsin dairy farmers welcomed an influx of undocumented Mexicans to fill low-wage farm jobs.

While economic migrations like Ramón Torrejón's were common in the history of twentieth century Mexican immigration to the US, the factors that compelled his movement and his indigenous origins in the west-central mountains of Veracruz were relatively new. In foregrounding the economic and political struggles of the Mexican government, this chapter advances a transnational approach to understanding post-IRCA Mexican immigration to the US. In doing so, I emphasize how the needs of both states affected global capitalist markets, thereby shaping the migration process and influencing who migrated to the US and why. Nevertheless, these larger structural forces are only one piece of a multilayered puzzle. Through the example of undocumented dairy workers in Wisconsin, this chapter reveals the ways that post-1986 Mexican immigration exhibited a transnational and cyclical flow. Defined as a temporary and often repetitive movement to and from one's origin country, usually for the purpose of work, circular migration distinguishes Mexican immigrants from most other foreign-born communities. In part due to their proximity, the history of cyclical movement between the US and Mexico has been both frequent and continual. While many scholars identify a downturn in Mexican return trips

⁴ Monica Campbell and Tyche Hendricks, "NAFTA and Dumping Subsidized Corn on Mexico Has Driven 1.5 Million Farmers off the Land & Forced Millions to Migrate," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 July 2006, accessed 23 March 2020, http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_1371.cfm; and Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (New York: Penguin House, 2007), 48-60.

following IRCA's increased border provisions, this chapter reveals the persistence of circular migration as a significant factor reshaping societies in both countries.

As yet, most historical studies of Mexican immigration concentrate on topics that predate IRCA. However, there is a growing body of work situated in the 1980s and 1990s. Ana Minian's *Undocumented Lives* is foundational to this newer scholarship. Focusing almost exclusively on migrants who landed in Los Angeles, Minian argues that as IRCA fortified the border after 1986, undocumented immigrants became increasingly likely to stay in the US without authorization rather than return to Mexico. In short, they feared never being able to return to the US more than living undocumented lives there. Furthermore, due to their precarious legal status, these migrants were trapped and confined to particular areas of urban Los Angeles, a concept Minian refers to as the "*Jaula de Oro*," or "Cage of Gold."⁵ Unlike the urban stories presented by Minian, this chapter reveals the continuation of circular economic migration into rural areas in the post-IRCA era, which demand further examination as epicenters of agricultural employment for undocumented Mexicans. While Minian maps out the checkpoints that restricted peoples' movements in Southern California, Wisconsin lacked checkpoints and other trappings of border surveillance. Despite their fear of immigration authorities, undocumented dairy workers in rural Wisconsin continued to migrate circularly, carrying on a long tradition that has consistently defined Mexican migration. While scholars often attribute the persistence of Mexican circular migration to the close proximity between Mexico and the American Southwest, Wisconsin dairy workers made journeys thousands of miles away from the border. In addition, scholars of Mexicans in Chicago and the broader Midwest have emphasized how immigrants' distance from

⁵ Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 6.

the U.S.-Mexico border caused most to create settlements rather than return south of the border.⁶ In this regard, the circuitous migration of immigrant dairy workers provides a marked contrast. Bound by the strength of their family and hometown ties, undocumented Mexicans used and improved preexisting border crossing systems to develop a transnational circular migration network that enabled future generations to profit from the dairy industry's casual labor structure without putting down roots in Wisconsin. Although they felt isolated in the countryside, migrant laborers in Dairyland's small towns were highly mobile both transnationally and locally. By expanding the focus beyond urban centers, my work emphasizes the nuances and critical importance of Mexican immigration into the rural Wisconsin, a space not known for its undocumented population and therefore an environment where state power exerted itself differently.

Unlike many stories of undocumented Mexicans which concentrate on the American Southwest, this post-IRCA study zooms in on the Midwest, and Wisconsin in particular. By highlighting undocumented workers on midwestern dairy farms, this chapter reorients Mexican immigration history to new US destinations and non-traditional jobs. Furthermore, while the influence of global forces on Mexican migration are not new to the historiography, this chapter attends to the nuances surrounding the unparalleled growth in indigenous immigration from southern Mexico, especially Veracruz, to the upper Midwest in the 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, I examine how individual people make decisions in the context of macro trends in the global economy and national policies on both sides of the border. Accordingly, this chapter documents

⁶ Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 59-59; Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Community in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 25-26 & 136-42; Michael Innis-Jiménez *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 59-61; and Sujey Vega, *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 4-5.

what post-IRCA circular migration looked like and how indigenous communities from historically isolated Mexican sending regions became a growing portion of the country's annual migrant numbers. Drawing from oral histories, I survey the experiences of undocumented immigrants as they pieced together a transnational migration network to and from a non US-Mexico border state. Through these examples, this chapter reveals how indigenous migrants fostered a new kind of labor force that allowed them to resist the effects of NAFTA and reshape both their hometowns and rural Wisconsin.

History of Immigration to Wisconsin

Despite the presence of Latina/o migrants since the nineteenth century, there has been relatively little work on non-white immigration to Wisconsin or the American Midwest. Instead, scholars have most often discussed aspects of European, or white ethnic, migration and settlement in cities and to a lesser extent rural farm areas.⁷ Surveying Illinois and Wisconsin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historian Lucy Eldersveld Murphy demonstrates how early American, black slave, English, and French migrants met and reached accommodation with a diverse population of American Indians in the century before the US government instituted their removal.⁸ Seeking out farming and lead mining opportunities, white migrants encountered industries that had been successfully developed by Indian and Métis, or mixed race people. By exploring the economic and social relations between migrant and native communities at work in

⁷ Jørn Brøndal, *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Robert Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835–1915* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Joseph Schafer, “The Yankee and the Teuton in Wisconsin,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 6, no. 2 (Dec., 1922):125-45; and Kate Everest Levi, “How Wisconsin came by its large German element,” *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 7 (1892): 299-334, and “Geographical Origin of German Immigration to Wisconsin,” *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 14, (1898): 376-93.

⁸ Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737–1832* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), xvii-xviii and 2-5.

this period, Murphy reveals a non-linear history of US colonization and immigration in Wisconsin. While Dutch, Irish, Norwegian, and Swiss immigrants settled on rural farms, worked in the burgeoning lumber industry, and in growing cities, Germans became the dominant population after statehood in 1848, and not surprisingly the bulk of historical scholarship focuses on their communities.⁹ Kathleen Neils Conzen’s iconic study *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860*, for example, shows how Germans, and to a lesser degree the Irish, developed independent and functional communities that mitigated pressures to assimilate and helped newcomers maintain their cultural identity.¹⁰ Describing Milwaukee as “the most immigrant of antebellum American cities,” Conzen notes how an array of economic opportunities—flour milling, meat packing, leather tanning, and construction—combined with ethnic community strength to enable some immigrants to buy farms or accumulate wealth. By the start of the Civil War, Europeans had transformed the Midwest, and Wisconsin especially, into a multiethnic space where white immigrant communities served as a foundation for later developments in agricultural industries, foundries, and breweries. In the meantime, Wisconsin’s farmland transitioned from being “America’s breadbasket” to its Dairyland. As milk and cheese replaced wheat as the state’s primary exports, New York transplants as well as German and Scandinavian immigrants became the new industry’s torchbearers.¹¹

⁹ Stefan Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora: The ‘Greater German Empire,’ 1871-1914* (London: Routledge, 2014); Joanna Wojdon, “Perspectives on Research on the Post-1939 History of Polish Americans,” *Polish American Studies*, 72, no. 2 (Autumn 2015): 83-101; Joseph A. King, “Genealogy, History, and Irish Immigration,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 10, no. 1 (Jun., 1984): 41-50; Katja Wüstenbecker, translated by Michael Kaelin, *Deutsch-Amerikaner im Ersten Weltkrieg: US-Politik und nationale Identitäten im Mittleren Westen*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007; and Brøndal, *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics*.

¹⁰ Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). In 1900, 31% of Wisconsin’s population was foreign born. David Long and Dan Veroff, “A Brief History of Immigration in Wisconsin,” Presented to Western Wisconsin Rural Immigration Summit, University of Wisconsin Extension & Applied Population Laboratory, 25 Sep. 2007.

¹¹ “Dairy Farming in Wisconsin: How Wisconsin Became the Dairy State,” Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed 2 January 2020, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1744>.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wisconsin's immigrant demographics shifted from majority Northern and Central Europeans to Eastern and Southern groups, led by Poles who tended to be unskilled or machine workers. While early arrivals most often labored in lumber and farming, the first significant wave of Polish immigrants in the 1880s gravitated towards Milwaukee where they found factory jobs in the city's foundries, tanneries, breweries, and flour mills. In her historical study on *Polonia*, Milwaukee's Polish neighborhood, author Suzanne M. Zukowski shows how the immigrant group achieved a high level of home-ownership in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through a combination of ethnic building and loan associations as well as private community-based lending secured through socio-cultural ties.¹² As their demographic footprint grew in the final years of the nineteenth century, Poles emerged as significant land holders in the state's largest and wealthiest city. While Milwaukee's Poles continued to buy homes into the 1930s, their incoming numbers fell following Poland's independence in 1918 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed a national-origins quota system that restricted entry from Eastern and Southern Europe.¹³ As the inflow of European immigrants waned, the "Great Migration" of African Americans to northern cities fed a growing Black working-class in Milwaukee.¹⁴ Historian Joe Trotter traces these developments, noting that Milwaukee's "black industrial proletariat" grew rapidly, and despite a dip in 1930s migration due to the Great Depression, became a key feature of the city's demographics and labor scene.¹⁵

¹² Suzanne M. Zukowski, "From Peasant to Proletarian: Home Ownership in Milwaukee's Polonia," *Polish American Studies* 66, no. 2 (Autumn, 2009): 5-44.

¹³ The Great Depression of the 1930s solidified Wisconsin's falling immigrant numbers. Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 129 and 145-46; and Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 268-69.

¹⁴ Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (1986; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 238.

Nevertheless, by the early 1940s, Wisconsin's new migrant population reached a historic low, punctuated by European emigration issues during the Second World War.

In the ensuing years, as incoming European and African American numbers dwindled, Mexican Americans emerged as Wisconsin's largest migrant population. Decades before, in the late nineteenth century, Mexican nationals had begun migrating to the Midwest to work on farms, in factories, and along railways.¹⁶ While the region's twenty-first century immigrant population has grown to include Central and South Americans, the overwhelming majority of twentieth century Latina/o migrants were either Mexican or Puerto Rican. Tracing the first significant wave of migration in the 1910s and 1920s, historian Zaragoza Vargas shows how predominantly Mexican men moved to the American Midwest and found jobs on sugar beet farms and in auto plants, steel mills, and packing houses.¹⁷ At the time, a majority of these immigrants originated from the Mexican states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas.¹⁸ Driven by violence during the Mexican Revolution, labor demand during the First World War, and migrants' desire for a better life, Mexicans made large cities like Milwaukee, St. Paul, Chicago, and Detroit their homes. There they formed ethnic neighborhoods and mutual aid societies, built relationships with Catholic Churches and labor unions, and ultimately became an "industrial proletariat" that changed Midwestern urban centers and constituted a growing part of the American working class.¹⁹ Following the economically robust 1920s, however, Vargas

¹⁶ For further information on late nineteenth and early twentieth century migratory labor networks from Mexico and Texas to the American Midwest, see Dennis Nodín Valdés, "Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940," *Great Plains Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 110-123, and *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 25-26; and Omar Valerio-Jimenez, "Racializing Mexican Immigrants in Iowa's Early Mexican Communities," *The Annals of Iowa* 75, no. 1, (Winter 2016): 5.

¹⁷ Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians in the North: Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (1993; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 25-26; and Valdés, *Al Norte*, 3, and *Barrios Norteños*, 25.

¹⁹ Vargas, *Proletarians in the North*, 13-14; Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 22-23; Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 20; and Sergio M. González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), 9 & 12-19.

demonstrates how rising unemployment during the Great Depression fostered anti-Mexican sentiment among working-class whites and inspired federal deportation campaigns.²⁰ As a result, many immigrants returned to Mexico and Mexican communities in Midwestern cities shrank considerably. Despite this migrant outflow in the 1930s, nearly two decades of community building and labor organizing had transformed the Midwest into an epicenter of Mexican and Mexican American life.

By the late 1930s and 1940s, renewed labor demand in the sugar beet industry again drew tens of thousands of Latina/o migrants into rural Midwest farm towns. In his path-breaking study *Al Norte*, historian Dennis Valdés shows how during this period Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans overtook Europeans as the backbone of the Midwest's agricultural industries.²¹ Valdés demonstrates how Americans of Mexican descent from south Texas, or Tejana/os, became the region's dominant labor force by developing a "migrant stream" that connected people from Texas's Rio Grande Valley to a cycle of seasonal and temporary work based on crop seasons in the US and Canada.²² Systematically denied economic opportunities in Texas, Tejana/o migrants experienced racialized poverty on the periphery of white Americans' visibility. Despite their US citizenship, Tejana/o migrants lacked national belonging, political representation, and the legal protections afforded to white Texans.²³ As seasons ebbed and flowed, migrant workers traveling as crews and family units developed and maintained the

²⁰ Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 169-72.

²¹ Valdés, *Al Norte*; While Valdés's is the most comprehensive, there are a handful of other texts that examine Latina/o migration and agricultural workers in the Midwest, including, Marc S. Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism & Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and W.K. Barger and Ernesto M. Reza, *The Farm Labor Movement in the Midwest: Social Change and Adaptation among Migrant Farmworkers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

²² Valdés, *Al Norte*, 87. Since Valdés, only a few scholars have examined the Midwest migrant stream. The best examples are Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora*, 4-7; and John Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation: The Exploitation of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century*. (2015; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 58-70.

²³ On Mexican American "political representation and legal protection," see Valdés, *Al Norte*, 143-44 & 150; Rodríguez, *The Tejano Diaspora*, 60-61.

stream through kinship networks. In 1942, shortly after the US entered the Second World War, thousands of Mexican Americans exited the migrant cycle to pursue industrial wages in cities. To counteract the loss of workers and keep wages stagnant, Midwest agribusiness brought in Mexican braceros and stoked divisions in the labor force, thereby obstructing organizing efforts. As the country leaned on the region to produce unprecedented levels of food for the war, places like Wisconsin expanded their agricultural operations, creating a perpetual need for farmworkers and bolstering the migrant stream.

Despite persistent issues with migrant housing and working conditions throughout the 1950s and 1960s, roughly 15,000 seasonal workers and families continued to enter rural Wisconsin annually. In addition to Valdés, historian Sergio M. González has also shed light on the adverse conditions endured by migrant families in this period.²⁴ Surveying the long history of Mexicans in Wisconsin, González shows how families and migrant crews arrived in Wisconsin during early summer and took seasonal jobs picking berries or apples, harvesting cucumbers and potatoes, cutting lettuce, or canning. Children as young as four or five routinely worked in the fields and contributed to their family's farming effort. While some workers had access to dwellings with running water and electricity, many ended up in makeshift tin shacks without adequate sanitation. As migrants endured, anti-immigrant sentiment grew and Wisconsinites publicly supported President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Operation Wetback" in 1953 and 1954. Despite the overwhelming majority of the state's migrants being American citizens, Wisconsin residents conflated their brown skin and accents with foreignness, rendering Tejana/os prime targets for discrimination and exclusion. Foregrounding the pervasive use of child labor and housing "unfit for human occupancy," González illustrates how Wisconsin state politician failed

²⁴ González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*.

to enact labor reforms in the 1950s and 1960s while corporate employers sustained inhumane management practices, decrepit on-site migrant camps, limited hygienic resources, and an unapologetic exploitation of children.²⁵ Devoid of many civil and labor rights, Mexican and Tejana/o migrants continued to cycle through Wisconsin as the job stream dried up.

Both Valdés and González clarify that while the migrant stream continued to send workers into Wisconsin during the 1950s and 1960s, this phase of Mexican and Mexican American migration came to a close in the mid-1970s. Intent on streamlining their operations, Wisconsin's growers rapidly mechanized or moved field operations, eliminated thousands of jobs, magnified the oversupply of migrant workers, and forced migrants to find work in cities or leave the state.²⁶ Across the Midwest, vegetable processing corporations like Libby, McNeil & Libby and Stokely-Van Camp, Inc. contracted with industrial cucumber and potato farmers to replace jobs with mechanical equipment and install irrigation hardware to streamline the cultivation process.²⁷ As seasonal labor demand diminished throughout the decade, Wisconsin's migrant population shrank in kind. Those who landed long-term positions in industries like meat packing and metal casting created new communities and layers to ethnic neighborhoods in places like Milwaukee, Appleton, and Kenosha. What many scholars did not foresee was that while changes in agribusiness reduced labor needs in seasonal industries like cucumbers, they created a new niche in Wisconsin's dairy industry. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, Wisconsin's incoming migrant demographics shifted from majority Tejana/o to undocumented Mexican, a transition directly influenced by both changes in America's Dairyland and a series of economic crises in Mexico.

²⁵ González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 49-56.

²⁶ Valdés, *Al Norte*, 201-02; and González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 71-72

²⁷ Associated Press, "Co-op Vows to Shut Out Union Labor," *Sunday Post-Crescent*, 10 September 1967, accessed 2 February 2018, NA; Valdés, *Al Norte*, 187-198; and Rodríguez, *Tejano Diaspora*, 75-95.

The Mexican Economic Recession and New Immigrant Sending Regions

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, Mexico's destructive fiscal policies sparked the northern migration of historically new and indigenous sending communities from the states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas. As this study notes, many people who became dairy workers in Wisconsin came from mountain villages in Veracruz, where they experienced firsthand the tumultuous effects of Mexico's fallen economy. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Mexican economy began to falter as it lost international investors, became highly vulnerable to external forces, and endured numerous peso devaluations. During the presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976), government borrowing and overspending led to inflation, growing unemployment, and increased indebtedness that put Mexico at risk of bankruptcy. In 1976, fearing that the economic default of their southern neighbor would cripple international banks and cause a global financial crisis, the US pushed Mexico to accept a deal with the International Monetary Fund that provided temporary support.²⁸ A few months later, as foreign investors pulled assets out of the country, the economic recession spiraled, pushing the Mexican government to devalue the peso on August 31, 1976.²⁹ For the rest of the decade, the country's industrial sector slid further into decline alongside declining exports, while newly-uncovered oil reserves and overborrowing in high-interest US loans served to postpone Mexico's economic reckoning. By 1982, falling oil prices as well as government waste and mismanagement exhausted most of Mexico's new wealth, and the country defaulted on billions owed to

²⁸ Paul V. Kershaw, "Averting a global financial crisis: the US, the IMF, and the Mexican debt crisis of 1976," *The International History Review* 40, no. 2 (16 May 2017): 292-314.

²⁹ Alan Riding, "Mexico Devalues Peso 30%," Special to the *New York Times*, 19 February 1982, accessed 10 March 2021, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

international banks, which were primarily located in the US.³⁰ As a result, inflation surged, remaining foreign investments withdrew, and the value of the peso plummeted, impelling the Mexican government to depreciate its currency again. From 1981 to 1982, Mexico devalued the peso four times by an aggregate of 266%, which devastated real wages alongside rising unemployment.³¹ The economic ruin was so extraordinary that it seeped into historically insulated and isolated mountain communities, where indigenous groups had sustained subsistence farming economies for centuries. Together inadequate earnings and limited economic opportunities compelled native peoples in Mexico's southernmost states to make some of their community's first migrations to large cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey.³²

High in the *Sierra de Zongolica* (Zongolica Mountains) of west-central Veracruz, Mexico, pre-Hispanic Nahua communities had existed in relative isolation for over a millennium before the economic crash of the 1980s.³³ Famously, anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán identified the locality as a “region of refuge,” a marginalized place that was difficult to access, which helped give indigenous peoples the space to preserve a large part of their native dialect

³⁰ While the bungling of the oil reserves was a primary issue, the government also expanded its spending on education, health care, and various financial investments. From 1978 to 1981, total government spending increased from 31% of GDP to 41%, and a majority of this was not oil-industry related.

³¹ Felipe Mesa, “The Case of Mexico: The Monetary and Fiscal History of Mexico, 1960-2017,” working paper, Centro de Análisis e Investigación Económica and Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, January 2019, 12.

³² Luis Alejandro Martínez Canales, “La dinámica comunitaria vista desde la migración en la sierra nahua de Zongolica, Veracruz: análisis y perspectivas de estudio,” *Migraciones Internacionales* 5, (2010): 14-15.

³³ The *Sierra de Zongolica* is part of the broader Sierra Madre Oriental Mountain range. Luz del Carmen Navarro Pérez and Sergio Avendaño Reyes, “Flora Útil Del Municipio De Astacinga, Veracruz, México,” *Polibotánica* 14 (2002):67-84; and María Teresa Rodríguez López, “Prácticas territoriales y dinámicas migratorias en la sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz,” *Ulúa* 25 (2015): 69-91, DOI: 10.25009/uthsc.2015.25.1952. Notably, many scholars point to the foundational work of anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán in the *Sierra de Zongolica*. Much of the scholarship since the 1970s has relied on his firsthand accounts and data collections. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Zongolica: encuentro de Dioses y Santos Patronos*, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, 1986; and *Cuatro nobles titulados en contienda por la tierra*, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, México, 1995.

and culture.³⁴ Defined by their pre-colonial history, Nahuatl language, unique culture, and strong ties to an ancestral homeland and its resources, scholars have long identified these Nahua *pueblos*, or villages, as indigenous.³⁵ In the high mountains of Veracruz, and across Mexico, these socially defined communities were the building blocks of indigenous society and later became politically defined *municipios*, or municipalities, under Spanish colonialism. While the Nahua are Mexico's most numerous native group, regional dynamics and dialectic differences also make it the most diverse. Commonly mistaken for having *Aztec* or *Mexica* origins, the Nahua in the *Sierra de Zongolica* draw their roots to the Gulf Coast *Olmeca-Xicalanca* civilization in the fifth century. As *pueblos* matured over centuries, the language spoken by people therein evolved through long and frequent interactions among Nonoalco, Tlaxcaltec, and Guerrero Nahuatl speakers.³⁶ During the pre-Hispanic period, Nahua grew up using this dialect as it evolved alongside cultural and regional dynamics that stretched across the modern day states of Veracruz, Puebla and Oaxaca.³⁷ Scholars further classified Nahua regionality through elevation and climate by identifying three zones—cold, temperate, and warm—among the fourteen *municipios* in the Veracruz portion of the *Sierra de Zongolica*.³⁸ Most of the people

³⁴ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Regiones de Refugio: El Desarrollo de la Comunidad y el Proceso Dominical en Mestizo América*. Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, Ediciones Especiales, 46 (1967; Mexico: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1973).

³⁵ Beltrán, *Zongolica*, 3.

³⁶ Carlos O. Sandoval Arenas, "Displacement and revitalization of the Nahuatl language in the High Mountains of Veracruz, Mexico," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 1 (2017): 68.

³⁷ María Teresa Rodríguez López and Pablo Valderrama Rouy "The Gulf Coast Nahua," in *Native Peoples of the Gulf Coast of México*, edited by Alan R. Sandstrom and E. Hugo García Valencia (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 158.

³⁸ Citlalli López Binnqüist, Rosalinda Hidalgo Ledesma, and Fortunata Panzo Panzo, "'Keeping our Milpa': Maize Production and Management of Trees by Nahuas of the Sierra de Zongolica, Mexico," in *Indigenous Knowledge: Enhancing its Contribution to Natural Resources Management*, edited by Paul Sillitoe (Boston: CAB International, 2017), 42.

referenced in this chapter originated from municipalities in the cold and temperate zone, namely Astacinga, Texhuacán, and Tlaquilpa.³⁹

As mountain *pueblos* evolved in pre and post Hispanic times, Nahua families developed a geographically and socially specific agricultural method that brought together a broader indigenous community living in the *Sierra de Zongolica*. Known as a *milpa*, or a “maize-centered polyculture system,” this subsistence farming model fed the family while also providing fodder for animals, herbs for ritual and medicinal purposes, and flowers.⁴⁰ In the areas surrounding their *pueblos*, Nahua harvested spruce timber for carving and home construction, a custom that lasted well into the twenty-first century. In both the fields and the forests, elders passed down refined cultivation practices and made the *milpa* subsistence farming model the center of their family units and village lifestyles. During the colonial period (1521-1821) and the century following Mexican Independence, the introduction of commercial agriculture transformed groups like the Nahua into sugarcane, coffee, and tobacco workers, thereby threatening their *milpa* system and situating them into the lowest rung of the modern socio-economic hierarchy.⁴¹ While these encounters with global capitalism did not deter Nahua from maintaining the *milpa* as the heart of their productive and cultural lives, they created a tradition of day laboring and supplemental income that steadily undermined indigenous agricultural traditions as well as the social and labor systems structured around them.⁴²

³⁹ Altogether, the Veracruz portion of the *Sierra de Zongolica* includes fourteen municipalities, including Astacinga, Atlahuilco, Los Reyes, Magdalena, Mixtla de Altamirano, San Andrés Tenejapa, Soledad Atzompa, Tehuipango, Tequila, Texhuacán, Tlaquilpa, Tlilapan, Xoxocotla, Zongolica.

⁴⁰ López Binnqüist, et al., “Keeping our Milpa,” 40-41.

⁴¹ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuatro nobles titulados en contienda por la tierra*, 21-29; and Paula López Caballero with Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo, “Introduction: Why Beyond Alterity?,” in *Beyond Alterity: Destabilizing the Indigenous Other in Mexico*, edited by Paula López Caballero and Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2018), 4.

⁴² Luis Alejandro Martínez Canales, “Cultura y economía para la sobrevivencia: procesos y relatos desde el etnoterritorio nahua de Tehuipango, en la sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz,” *Anales de Antropología* 47 (2013): 73–108; and María Teresa Rodríguez López, *Ritual, identidad y procesos étnicos en la sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz*. Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2013).

During the twentieth century, the revolutionary politics of land reform, Mexican national identity, and agricultural industrialization further challenged Nahua society. First, the Agrarian Law of 1915, and later Agrarian Code of 1934, redistributed land as *ejidos*, or collectives, and private property, which created class divisions in rural Mexico. Unlike other parts of the country, people in the high mountains of Veracruz who claimed legal right to their homeland more often received individual landholdings. Problems arose, though, when the state redistributed Nahua indigenous land to only a fraction of the region's families and forced the remainder to lease space.⁴³ This segmented the native population by creating economic disparities and class stratifications. For those who became property owners, the cultural practice was to pass ownership from parents to multiple children, which fragmented landholdings over time leading to smaller average farm space per family.⁴⁴ Thus, as time passed local populations grew and family plots thinned, creating more layers of socioeconomic division in indigenous communities. Furthermore, the transition to land ownership coerced indigenous people further into a capitalist marketplace that devalued their subsistence farming traditions.

Second, in an effort to create an ethnic national community following the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s, the new Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) government launched policies known as *políticas indigenistas* that venerated the *mestizo*, or fusion of European and Native American, as the ideal synthesis of racial diversity on which Mexico's identity rested.⁴⁵ Emphasizing *mestizaje*, or the process of interracial or intercultural mixing, post-revolutionary

⁴³ In the Sierra de Zongolica, "cold zone" residents with a legitimate claim of affiliation could turn their ancestral mountain homes into private property, while those in the "temperate zone" received *ejido* status. Binnqüist, et. al, "Keeping our Milpa," 42.

⁴⁴ For the Nahua in the Sierra de Zongolica, families of five to eight children were common. Therefore, when someone died and passed down their land as an inheritance to their children, the land would be divided several times. López Binnqüist, et al., "Keeping our Milpa," 42-43.

⁴⁵ Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5.

leaders aimed to assimilate native populations into mainstream Mexican society by incorporating images of a distant and glorious indigenous past that needed modernization.⁴⁶ Through the ideological construction of a new Mexican man, the PRI camouflaged the nature of relations between ethnic groups and the nation, hiding the basic assumptions and practices that marked indigenous people as culturally and racially inferior.⁴⁷ For example, the postrevolutionary government instituted a “bilingual education” program aimed at transitioning school-age natives into Spanish-speaking citizens. Despite branding it as multiple language learning, state-run schools in the high mountains of Veracruz became spaces for assimilation education where teachers forbid the use of indigenous languages and encouraged young Nahua students to embrace national unity by shedding their own cultures and identities. Furthermore, by identifying a singular racial notion of Mexican-ness, postrevolutionary policies excluded ethnic minorities—Black, Asian, and resistant indigenous communities—from the national image.⁴⁸ As the century progressed and Nahua refused to abandon their customs and culture, state policies categorized them as uncivilized and excludable from modern Mexican society. Highly susceptible to the march of capitalism and PRI nationalism throughout the twentieth century, perceptions of Nahua communities evolved alongside Mexicans’ notions of race and class that situated indigenous subsistence farmers at the bottom of Mexico’s socio-economic ladder.

⁴⁶ Examples of this can be seen in the cultural development program of José Vasconcelos appointed under the presidency of Álvaro Obregón from 1920 to 1924. Vasconcelos commissioned artists to create national artwork supported by the revolutionary government, specifically focused on large public works that were visible and accessible to the people in order to solidify the national identity. Olivia Gall, “Estado federal y grupos de poder regionales frente el indigenismo, el mestizaje y el discurso multiculturalista: pasado y presente del racismo en México,” *Debate Feminista* 24 (Oct. 2001): 94-96.

⁴⁷ Alicia Castellanos Guerrero, “Asimilación Y Diferenciación De Los Indios En México,” *Estudios Sociológicos* 12, no. 34 (1994): 102.

⁴⁸ Alicia Castellanos Guerrero, “Notas para estudiar el racismo hacia los indios de México,” *Papeles de población* 7, no.28 (Jun. 2001): versión On-line ISSN 2448-7147.

Third, from the 1940s to the 1980s, while Nahua toiled to keep the *milpa* system alive, the Mexican government instituted a plan to promote agricultural industrialization later known as the “Green Revolution.”⁴⁹ Using science and technology, Mexican industrialists partnered with large landholders and American experts to increase crop yields, agricultural productivity, and reduce food prices. As commercial agriculture expanded and captured economies of scale, Mexican small farmers suffered, and rural poor—*mestizo* and indigenous—became reliant on meager farmworker wages. While it modernized Mexico’s agricultural sector, the Green Revolution favored industrial expansion at the expense of small and collective farmers who endured reduced income and state support. By the 1970s and 1980s, the new policies stumbled, and Mexico entered a food self-sufficiency crisis. In that period, indigenous groups like the Nahua reached a point where they owned limited land, if any, to maintain their subsistence farms and their agricultural products became increasingly less valuable, thus making it virtually impossible to keep up the *milpa* without outside income.

As indigenous farmers reeled from the economic shocks of the 1970s and 1980s, the Mexican government instituted policies to reduce government spending and open the economy up to global markets, which magnified social and financial issues for Nahua families trying to preserve their traditional *milpas*. Initially, cutbacks in government food subsidies drove prices up on staple products like tortillas.⁵⁰ In addition, the state made exchange rate adjustments to court outside investors, but continued fears of economic instability left Mexico without foreign investment and wavering from perpetual inflation and unemployment. To confront its economic issues the Mexican government reversed its policy from an inward-oriented development model

⁴⁹ David A. Sonnenfeld, “Mexico’s ‘Green Revolution,’ 1940-1980: Towards an Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 16, no. 4 (Winter, 1992): 32.

⁵⁰ Kirsten Appendini, “Tracing the Maize-Tortilla Chain,” *UN Chronicle* 45, no. 3 (Dec., 2009): 7, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/tracing-maize-tortilla-chain>.

to a neoliberal one that reduced barriers to world markets and trade, later punctuated by Mexico's signing of the multinational General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986.⁵¹ From 1982 to 1990, as neoliberal processes accelerated, the economy continued to stall, joblessness grew, real wages fell over 50%, and the state made significant cuts to its social spending budget.⁵² As a result, Nahua that had become reliant on auxiliary wages could no longer sustain their subsistence farms without sending one or more family members to large Mexican cities or the US for supplemental income. In doing so, they changed the social dynamics of their traditional *pueblos*, leaving older parents, elders, and young children to maintain farming and family responsibilities. When the first wave of migrants left the mountains in the 1980s and 1990s, they left behind traditional villages where families still lived in one or two-room wood huts without electricity, plumbing, or telephones. Elevated 5,000 feet above sea level, miles of cliff-front dirt paths connected *pueblos* of 2,000 to 10,000 people that most often traveled by foot. While the Mexican economy opened itself to global markets and sought to modernize, Nahua villages in the *Sierra de Zongolica* remained inaccessible to automobiles. When Nahua migrants left their villages in the 1980s and 1990s, they rode mules down a rocky mountain side path.

Whereas rural Mexicans had conducted labor migrations like this before, many of these migrants originated from central states like Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas, while indigenous areas in the southern states of Veracruz, Chiapas, and Oaxaca remained local to their regions.⁵³ These initial waves set a foundation for twentieth century Mexican migration to

⁵¹ Before 1986, the Mexican government's liberalizing policies consisted of adjustments to tariffs, import licenses, and import reference prices, which prepared the country to join GATT.

⁵² Alejandro Álvarez Béjar, Garbiel Mendoza Pichardo, John F. Uggen, "Mexico 1988-1991: A Successful Economic Adjustment Program?" *Latin American Perspectives* 20, no. 3 (Summer, 1993): 35; and María Cristina Bayón, "Persistence of an exclusionary model: Inequality and segmentation in Mexican society," *International Labour Review* 148, no. 3 (2009): 301-315.

⁵³ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-*

the US through the 1970s, which meant that Mexican American communities most often had roots in the historic sending states of Mexico's central plateau.⁵⁴ In the 1910s, for instance, the First World War drove production in the American Midwest sugar beet industry compelling farmers to enlist the US Department of Labor to recruit Mexican workers. In the ensuing decade, as German Americans left field work for factory jobs, the industry made a near-complete transition from a European labor force to one dominated by Mexican immigrants from the historic sending region.⁵⁵ Similarly, during the Bracero Program from 1942 to 1964, a majority of the Mexican guest workers originated from states like Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán.⁵⁶ In the years following the Mexican economic crash of 1982, however, indigenous people from new sending regions in the country's southernmost states began migrating to the Midwest.

Post-IRCA Mexican Immigration

Post-IRCA immigration from the high mountains of Veracruz to Wisconsin came in two waves. From 1986 to 1996, most Nahua immigrants to the US ended up in popular destinations

1945 (1993; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 39. In the late nineteenth century, Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz stripped rural farmers of their land, forcing many to migrate to cities in the country's rapidly developing northern states. Simultaneously, commerce and manufacturing in Mexican cities as well as American agriculture, mining, and railroad industries encouraged migration to northern Mexico, California, Texas and later the Midwest to serve as a source of cheap labor. Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation*, 12; Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3 and 24; and Camille Guérin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and the American Dream: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (1994; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 11-24.

⁵⁴ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 42-48; John H. Flores, *The Mexican Revolution in Chicago: Immigration Politics from the Early Twentieth Century to the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 48-50.

⁵⁵ Kathleen Mapes, *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 129-33.

⁵⁶ Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 1-3 and 26-27; Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 10-11; Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 68-70; and Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, "Mexican Migration to the United States: A Critical Review," *Latin American Research Review* 27, no. 2 (1992):14-21.

in the American Southwest, Southeast, and Midwest. The mid-1990s marked a transition. Running parallel to an era of industrialization and consolidation in America's Dairyland, migrants from the *Sierra de Zongolica* began a second wave of immigration directly to Wisconsin's dairy farms, and then played a central role in recruiting more of their own people. In 1996, there were roughly 26,000 farms with milk cows statewide, and while many maintained herds small enough for a family to work, a rapidly increasing number expanded their operations to achieve economies of scale, which created significant demand for cheap workers. From the state's western counties of Buffalo, Trempleau, and Pepin that border Minnesota, to the northeast region surrounding Green Bay, and down south to the Manitowoc and Sheboygan areas, Nahua found year-round jobs on Wisconsin's growing farms and established themselves as the industry's primary labor source. From 1996 to 2011 the state's many dairylands transformed with the circular flow of approximately 95,000 undocumented workers, 30 to 35% of whom were indigenous Nahua.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Due to the secretive nature of dairy workers' immigration status, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of undocumented Mexicans in America's Dairyland at any one time. Due to the employer sanctions instituted by IRCA, dairy farmers were reluctant to disclose the race and identities of their workers. In February 2009, University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologists Jill Harrison, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane produced a 5-part series called "Changing Hands: Hired Labor on Wisconsin Dairy Farms" that examined the state's dairy farm workers. From 2006 to 2008, Harrison's team surveyed 373 workers (both immigrants and U.S.-born citizens) and 83 farmers. According to their findings and a contemporary study conducted by sociologist Paul Dyk at UW-Fond du Lac, we have a general sense of the industry's changing demographics. Pulling from surveys at a few dozen farms, these researchers found that between 40 to 45% of dairy employees were immigrants, 90% of which were from Mexico and a majority of whom they believed to be undocumented. Extrapolated out, their survey estimated that in 2008 there were approximately 12,551 hired workers in the state's dairy industry, which meant roughly 4,518 to 5,083 immigrants. While these statistics provide a sense of the demographic shifts in Wisconsin's historic industry, UW sociologists surveyed less than 10% of farms with hired labor and admit that their statistics should only serve as a "conservative estimate." Furthermore, these researchers only reviewed 70 of the over 1,000 farms in the state with hired labor at the time (roughly speaking farms with 200 or more milk cows require some form of hired labor). In 2008, Wisconsin had approximately 1,000 farms with 200+ cows accounting for a total of 442,000 heads of cattle. Jill Harrison, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane, "Briefing No. 1: Overview of Immigrant Workers on Wisconsin Dairy Farms." *Changing Hands: Hired Labor on Wisconsin Dairy Farms*, Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension, February 2009, 1; Dyk, Paul, "Dairy Employee Survey-2007," UW-Extension Fond du Lac County; and Ed Jesse, "Growth and Transition in Wisconsin Dairying," Marketing and Policy Briefing Paper #96, Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, University of Wisconsin Madison, UW-Extension, November 2008, 16.

Due to language and cultural barriers, plus legal fears, dairy farmers struggled to make inroads with their undocumented workers. Instead they relied on long-tenured Mexican employees, many of whom were first wave Nahua migrants, to serve as transnational recruiters. Since IRCA had established employer sanctions penalizing companies that employed undocumented immigrants, it served dairy farmers' best interests to enable Nahua to recruit themselves. Without a paper trail linking farm owners to unlawful border-crossings, they aimed to evade prosecution. Steering clear of these clandestine affairs, dairy farmers gave Nahua discretionary power to decide who they brought in and how. Seizing the chance to become recruiters, undocumented immigrants from the high mountains of Veracruz situated themselves as transnational agents, providing unprecedented economic opportunities to their communities and ushering in a second Nahua migration wave to Wisconsin. Unlike post-1986 undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles and other urban areas, the most distinctive aspect of the Nahua experience in the rural Midwest was the persistence of their circular migration. Through the examples of Ramón Torrejón and Diego López, this section traces these two migration waves. López, in particular, presents a classic case of a first-generation Nahua who became a recruiter and leader of a transnational labor network. As the embodiment of a wider phenomenon, López's story reveals how undocumented indigenous immigrants from Mexico reshaped both their hometowns and America's Dairyland.

First Migration Wave

Fewer in number, the first generation of transnational Nahua in the 1980s and early 1990s did not go directly to Wisconsin's dairy farms. Ramón Torrejón, for example, departed his mountain *pueblo* of Tlaquilpa for Mexico City in 1986 when his mother's and aunt's wages

could no longer supplement the family's subsistence farming. A Nahua born in 1968, Torrejón recalls,

My grandparents worked in the fields for all of their days and had nothing for us. My mother and aunt got jobs in town, but it was little...So he [grandfather] taught me how to build with wood, wood from the forest and the pines and we worked every day before and after school. I stopped going to school at twelve [1980], because they needed my help and I started working all the time...When I was eighteen [1986] I went down the mountain on a mule and found a bus to Mexico City...I worked with wood, so a construction boss hired me.⁵⁸

From the age of seven, he worked in the fields and learned traditional farming techniques from his grandfather. With the knowledge to cultivate the *milpa* and source wood from trees in the *Sierra de Zongolica*, Torrejón started selling homemade products in local markets at twelve years old. By 1986, the family's wages had lost considerable value and they decided that someone needed to find a better job outside the region. Since his siblings were all younger, his father was out of the picture, and his grandparents had slowed down considerably, Torrejón migrated and sent remittances from the capital city while his mother, aunt, uncle, and siblings stayed back to maintain the *milpa*. After two years, his construction wages had only made small improvements to their economic standing, compelling Torrejón to consider the US as his next destination. While people in Tlaquilpa and other mountain *pueblos* already lived in poverty, the 1980s economic crisis put whole communities on the verge of starvation. Unlike previous generations, Ramón Torrejón and subsistence farmers across rural Mexico found themselves leaving familiar settings for large cities where they worked non-traditional jobs.⁵⁹ Moreover, the Torrejón family's changing needs reflect broader transitions in Mexico's indigenous communities from new migratory sending regions like Veracruz. As the 1980s progressed and

⁵⁸ Ramón Torrejón, interviewed and translated by the author, 23 February 2020.

⁵⁹ Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, "New World Orders: Continuities and Changes in Latin American Migration," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 630, no. 1 (July 2010): 27.

the Mexican economy opened to foreign trade and investments, Nahua in the *Sierra de Zongolica* and indigenous communities across the nation's southern states became deeply entrenched in the global economy as their wages stagnated and families entered extreme poverty.

While it was common for Nahua to make initial migrations to Mexican cities, the ongoing economic recession rendered their supplemental wages insufficient and forced migrants to turn to the US and attempt to maneuver the treacherous post-IRCA border. Some of those who crossed successfully ended up as West Coast farmworkers, while others landed in non-traditional regions like the American Southeast and Midwest.⁶⁰ On the advice of an older friend, Miguel Guzmán left his Nahua *pueblo* in 1990 and migrated to Atlanta, Georgia where he found work manicuring greens at a golf course. Guzmán laments,

We were very poor, so I borrowed a little from my parents and grandparents...When I left, I knew the spot to find the bus and two places that hired Mexicans in Georgia...We [Nahua] were three and we found someone [*coyote*] in the north to bring us across...The desert, it was very hot in the day and we lost our water running from *la migra*, but they didn't come after us...I barely made it to the final spot...he [*coyote*] said to wait until the truck came and we piled one on top [of the other]. They took us to a warehouse or a garage to wait for a day before we got another ride.⁶¹

In this first wave of Nahua migrations to the US, Guzmán and others like him often left their hometowns without much knowledge of how to cross the border or get to their final destinations. Thanks to limited advice from a fellow migrant, Guzmán knew that he needed a *coyote*, or smuggler, to sneak him into the country undetected.⁶² In addition, he heard that “it was better to go away from the border, because *la migra* was everywhere.”⁶³ While the border militarization and magnified immigration enforcement under IRCA pushed people like Guzmán to find

⁶⁰ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 26 February 2020; Eduardo Xocopil; interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020; Enrique Pérez-Alarcón, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020; and Hector Santiago, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 March 2020.

⁶¹ Miguel Guzmán, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

clandestine ways across the US-Mexico boundary, it did not stop them from trying and succeeding. Additionally, Guzmán's decision to continue to Georgia benefited him and served as an example to future Nahua migrants. Finding back-of-the-house service jobs and landscaping positions in the Southeast and Midwest, first wave Nahua migrants like Guzmán established a foundation for future generations that directed them away from the popular receiving states in the American Southwest. As this first generation built connections with employers and fellow migrants in the US, sent home life-changing remittances, and created new lives for themselves and their families in Mexico, they inspired others to do the same.

Growing up in Miguel Guzmán's hometown of Tehuipango, Veracruz, Ramón Torrejón had seen fellow Nahua leave for work, and from an early age he dreamed of becoming a migrant. Driven by love, Torrejón had no money to buy his girlfriend a rose and heard that he could get a job and earn more money near Mexico City.⁶⁴ In 1991, he left for the capital and found work on an assembly line at a small clothing manufacturer. After six months, though, conflicts between Torrejón and his co-workers pushed him to quit. "This guy said I could make three times as much in the U.S," Torrejón remembers, "so I took all of my money and found a *coyote*."⁶⁵ On his first border crossing after walking for an hour through the evening dark, he recalls, "the lights turned on and we were caught."⁶⁶ Despite having been rounded up by the US Border Patrol in less than six hours, the experience changed him. "Before this," Torrejón observes, "I was an asshole with money...I wasn't serious."⁶⁷ After losing all of the money he had worked so hard to

⁶⁴ Ramón Torrejón, interviewed and translated by the author, 23 February 2020. Vendors selling roses to couples is a common tradition in Mexico, so much so that UW-Madison sociologists uncovered a very similar story in their research on Wisconsin's dairy workers. In their case, a young man decided to migrate to the US, because he could not afford a rose for his girlfriend. The commonality of this story informs the level of poverty experienced by indigenous communities in the *Sierra de Zongolica*. Jill Harrison, et al., "Briefing no. 2: A Look Into the Lives of Wisconsin's Immigrant Dairy Workers," *Changing Hands*, 2.

⁶⁵ Ramón Torrejón, interviewed and translated by the author, 23 February 2020.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

earn, Torrejón blamed himself for not crossing the border and figured it was his bad judgment in selecting the wrong *coyote*. With renewed resolve, Torrejón found his way to the city of Monterrey where he landed one job as a carpenter and another cleaning buses. Living in a big city and trying to send money home, it was difficult to save for migration. Nonetheless, within fifteen months he had put aside enough money to try crossing again. Returning to Tehuipango before his journey to the US, Torrejón shared his experience with the community and set an example for future Nahua migrants by teaching the importance of selecting the right *coyote*. In the post-IRCA era, it was not enough to simply find a willing party, migrants had to find a skilled *coyote* that knew the mechanics of the militarized border.

Responding to the increased border surveillance in the post-IRCA era, Ramón Torrejón was keen on finding a new area to cross on his second attempt. He explains, “This time [1993] I went to Agua Prieta [Sonora] and there was nothing.”⁶⁸ In total, he spent eight days looking for a proper *coyote*, whittling his savings below 1,900 pesos. “Shit!” Torrejón exclaims, “I thought I spent the money [that] I needed [to pay the *coyote*]. I had bad thoughts of returning home.” Understanding his family’s need for money to survive, he walked the streets dejected until he met a boy that “knew someone” and pointed him in the direction of an elderly woman sitting outside a nearby storefront. Thinking it was a gag, “I laughed,” Torrejón says, “but it was no joke.” To his surprise, the woman guided him to a backroom where a man sat reading a newspaper and sipping coffee. “This was the one, I thought he was old, but he agreed.” After maneuvering across the rocky desert terrain for 2 nights, the *coyote* told him and a small group to wait in a secluded area for “a few Indian men” to pick them up.⁶⁹ Fourteen hours later, a tall man wearing a beaded vest arrived in a pickup truck and instructed Torrejón and two others to hide

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

under boxes and stripped carpet squares in the back. After a bumpy ten hours, the trio crawled out of the vehicle's cargo bed and into the Colorado sun. Before departing, the man bought Torrejón's group some McDonald's cheeseburgers and bus tickets to Kansas City. In total, it took almost two years for Ramón Torrejón to make it to the US and start remitting significant earnings to his family. His struggles are indicative of first wave Nahua migrants who had limited knowledge of how post-IRCA border crossing worked and often learned by trial and error. In this era, as it became the norm for immigrants to make multiple attempts at crossing the border, first wave Nahua learned to distinguish between novice and skilled *coyotes*. Not only were failed migrations a financial burden to the migrant, but often their entire family's well-being and basic survival were at stake. As their economic needs reached extremes in the 1980s and 1990s, the broader Nahua community's culture of migration transformed from regional to transnational.

Although a great majority of first wave Nahua migrants were men, some women also crossed the border, either by themselves or in couples like Silvia Ayala and Tirso González.⁷⁰ Finding it impossible to make enough in their *pueblos*, Orizaba, or Mexico City, the duo envisioned a better future for themselves working in the US. In the wake of NAFTA and a December 1994 Mexican currency devaluation, *coyote* prices ballooned to match the US dollar. As a result, Ayala and González had to save and borrow 8,500 pesos to pay smugglers at the border. After three days of bus and train travel from Orizaba, Veracruz to the Mexican border state of Sonora, the couple found a Nogales-based *coyote* recommended to them by a hometown relative. Walking through the desert on a hot evening in August of 1997, the US Border Patrol detected Ayala and González's group and attempted to apprehend them. González remembers,

⁷⁰ While their demographics remained predominantly male through the 2010s, Nahua female numbers on Wisconsin dairy farms did increase somewhat during the decade. María Teresa Rodríguez López, "Prácticas territoriales y dinámicas migratorias en la sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz," *ULÚA Revista de Historia, Sociedad y Cultura* 25, (2016): 80; and Jill Harrison, et al., "Briefing no. 2," *Changing Hands*, 2-3.

We were at the border for three, maybe four days...they [*coyotes*] took us at night. I crossed but she didn't...When I got up there [beyond a dark corridor of mountains] I turned around and she was not with me, but I could hear people yelling, "Run!" Then, I heard her [Ayala]...[*Takes 2 deep breaths*]...So I went on like we said, and I made it.⁷¹

Despite arriving in the border region with a *coyote*'s name, Ayala and González were not lucky enough to both get across. Moving quickly in a group of twenty to thirty, they lost track of each other for a critical moment. In previous discussions, the couple had decided that if one person got caught the other should continue on, but in the heat of the moment, González "turned to ice" and nearly got trampled by his fellow migrants.⁷² Arriving two days later at a preselected point in the desert, the *coyote* and the remaining migrants met a man with a conversion van who drove them three hours in the dead of night without the vehicle's headlights on. From there, they relayed with a three-truck team and crammed into the vehicles among corrugated boxes. Roughly eighteen hours later, the driver stopped and let González's group out in an empty field near Chicago. When he finally got to a phone, González called Ayala's mother and heard that she had arrived safely back in Mexico. While the news was a relief, the trauma of separation from his partner had nearly destroyed him and he remained haunted by the incident for years. Nonetheless, knowing the risks and preplanning solutions had enabled González to overcome his momentary paralysis and endure nearly three days of uncertainty. While there was growing experience of how to secure a skilled *coyote*, Ayala, González, and other Nahua migrants in the 1990s lacked a transnational network to guide them after the border crossing process and into a particular area or industry.

By the mid-to-late 1990s, as Ramón Torrejón, Miguel Guzmán, and Tirso González bounced around temporary and seasonal jobs, changes in the dairy industry started attracting

⁷¹ Tirso González, interviewed and translated by the author, 15 March 2020.

⁷² *Ibid.*

undocumented Nahuas to Wisconsin where large-scale farms confronted unprecedented labor shortages. In 1980, nearly all of Wisconsin's 45,000 dairy farms had less than 100 cows and ran on family labor. By 2000, though, Wisconsin had lost 54% of its dairy farms, in large part due to increased competition from large-scale operations that housed thousands of cows and created an around-the-clock need for cheap hired labor.⁷³ Finding their American-born neighbors unwilling to do the work, dairy farmers turned to immigrants, initially finding undocumented Mexicans through labor recruiters who alleged to operate out of urban locations in Texas.⁷⁴ As a result of IRCA, dairy farmers turned to the formal process of recruiters who informally sent what they claimed to be legal workers to Wisconsin for a small fee.⁷⁵ Using a third party allowed dairy farmers to claim ignorance concerning the legal status of their newly hired hands. Furthermore, this dynamic enabled farm owners to tap cheap labor channels from Mexico without being directly involved in the migration process. While Nahua migrants took all the risks crossing the border, getting to the upper Midwest, and living undocumented lives, dairy farmers only had to put down a few hundred dollars and a worker would show up within a week.

To a large extent, the use of formal recruiters was only a stop gap as Wisconsin dairy farmers quickly learned that they could lean on their new immigrant workers' kinship relations to acquire more workers. It came as no surprise to farm owners that many of their Mexican workers were undocumented and knew more people in economic need from their hometowns, most often family members. To streamline the recruitment process, farmers began going directly to their

⁷³ Ed Jesse, "Growth and Transition in Wisconsin Dairying," 1998.

⁷⁴ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; The practice of using Texas recruiters was not new to Wisconsin business owners. Indeed, midwestern agricultural growers had used the Texas State Employment Service for decades to recruit seasonal workers. Valdés, *Al Norte*, 10-11, 55, and 74.

⁷⁵ Consistent with a description provided by dairy farmer Gel Stephens, Texas-based recruiters advertised in *Hoard's Dairyman*, an industry periodical for over a century. In it, a company with a Dallas-area phone number claimed, "Our legal and hardworking, loyal workers are the solution," presumably to farmers' labor needs. Stephens contends that the workers they sent him were undocumented. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; and Bob Wingfield, "Need Farm Hands?," *Hoard's Dairyman*, 10 April 1996, 298.

workers to see if they knew anyone looking for work. Due to the economic and cultural changes in their Nahua *pueblos*, and Mexico more broadly, migrants routinely had relatives and friends living in poverty and desperate for US wages. Recognizing this, farmers eliminated formal recruiters and created a mechanism for greater control over their workers by making them responsible for bringing prospective employees to the farm. As mentioned in the opening, Ramón Torrejón's uncle Eugenio Jiménez notified him of the job, helped coordinate his travel, and gave him insights on how to be a successful dairy worker. As Nahua began migrating directly from Veracruz to Wisconsin during the second migration wave, dairy farmers continued to use this one-to-one hiring method, forcing their undocumented employees to bear responsibility for organizing cross border logistics with both migrants and *coyotes*, preparing prospective workers psychologically to make the two-thousand-mile clandestine journey, and procuring forged immigration documents. By delegating the transnational recruitment of immigrants to their undocumented staff, farm owners distanced themselves from the unlawful arrangements of bringing unauthorized workers to Wisconsin. Across the state, hundreds of dairy farmers adopted a similar approach that centered on trust (between a dairy farmer and immigrant recruiters) and the familial ties that bound many Nahua communities. Tirso González, for instance, bounced around temporary jobs in northern Illinois from 1997 to 1999 until his cousin contacted him about a dairy job opening in Wisconsin. Both Torrejón and González jumped at the opportunity to work a guaranteed sixty to seventy hours a week for a single employer. As farms grew around America's Dairyland in the late 1990s and early 2000s, undocumented Nahua became a significant portion of the industry's new workforce by recruiting their families and hometown friends.

While some undocumented Mexicans used the one-to-one hiring model, others became transnational recruiters and central figures in the industry's labor system. Although many Nahua helped get jobs for family members, most only did so once or twice. There were, however, a select few that became informal recruiters and operated in both Mexico and the US as pseudo-agents placing thousands of migrants in Wisconsin dairy farm positions. An exemplary case study is Diego López whose experiences reflect both the transitions in Mexican immigration and the dairy farmers' workforces. Born in the *pueblo* of Texhuacán in 1969, López grew up working in the sugarcane and corn fields with his brothers. During his youth in the 1970s and 1980s, López's hometown ranged from 3,100 to 4,500 people, a vast majority of whom were Nahua that endured significant poverty.⁷⁶ By the age of thirteen he dropped out of school to work full time on his family's *milpa* and as a drink vendor in the village market. López says,

We lived in our own *pueblita* away from the center, but all of the people around us had [economic] problems. My family did not struggle like that, but we didn't have much. All of the family worked. I started at seven cleaning the corn...I wanted something more. So, I went to Mexico City [1991] and got a job in a factory, but there was no money in that, and I had no money to send to my parents. "Let's go to the United States," I told myself.⁷⁷

Having become increasingly destitute during his childhood and witnessing suffering in his community, López envisioned a better future for himself and his family through migration and work. Similar to other young men in his *pueblo*, López first made the two-hundred-mile journey to Mexico City, but found the pay to be insufficient. While city wages were higher, the value of the peso had been so diminished by the economic recession that an expanded Mexican income

⁷⁶ Luis Alejandro Martínez Canales, "La dinámica comunitaria vista desde la migración en la sierra nahua de Zongolica, Veracruz," 7, *Movilidades rurales: Cultura, trabajo y conciencia de los migrantes nahuas de la Sierra de Zongolica* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2015), 71-72, and "Población total, por entidad federativa y municipio, según sexo" *X Censo General de Población y Vivienda 1980*, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), <https://en.www.inegi.org.mx/datos/?ps=Programas>.

⁷⁷ A *pueblita* is a smaller sub-community within the broader *pueblo* structure. These areas usually contained between 50 and 100 people divided most often by family units. Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

was not enough to supplement their family's needs. He knew from his parents' and personal experience that life as a subsistence farmer in the *Sierra de Zongolica* was becoming less sustainable. Unwilling to settle for the status quo and determined to help his family make lease payments on their *milpa*, López decided he would go to the US.

Similar to Ramón Torrejón, Miguel Guzmán, Silvia Ayala, and Tirso González, Diego López's plan was simple: earn and borrow money, go north, pay a *coyote*, and travel somewhere away from California. In 1993, López entered the US via the Sonoran Desert. After walking, taking buses, and hopping trains to the border, he sought out a *coyote* who "appeared" trustworthy.⁷⁸ While López had heard many horror stories about crossing the border, he describes his first time as uneventful:

The guy [*coyote*] was ok. I don't know. Who knows with these guys? We got across...I remember walking fast and he was giving us orders like the army. Every night we started walking at dark, maybe seven [pm], and walked until the sun returned and we found a safe spot. Then, we try to rest and do it again...It was Sonora and Arizona, and we didn't see them [Border Patrol] ...I said thank you to God after that!⁷⁹

Following what had to be an emotionally and physically taxing experience, López and his all-male border-crossing group made it safely to the US pick up point. On the one hand, López's crew had been lucky to find someone that could effectively maneuver US Border Patrol surveillance. On the other hand, the migrants endured verbal abuse as the *coyote* frequently referred to them as "*mojados*," or wetbacks. In one instance, López thought he heard the word "*naco*," a derogatory term describing an indigenous person as uneducated and uncouth.⁸⁰ Even as López left Mexico for what he called "the land of freedom," he and his fellow Nahua endured

⁷⁸ Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

racial discrimination from their countrymen.⁸¹ As he and other indigenous migrants refined their notion of the skilled *coyote*, kindness and sensitivity became significant criteria in addition to knowledge of the militarized border. Nevertheless, López's *coyote* followed through on his promise to get the group across and provided them with American dollars. Despite not getting caught, López's journey was filled with perilous moments and an unceasing fear that the US Border Patrol could appear at any moment. Ultimately, it was his commitment to family and the support of his migrant crew that helped him get across the border.

Once in the US, the *coyote* guided Diego López's group to a semi-trailer where they squeezed into a hatch behind a camouflaged door, and began the final leg of their journey to Tennessee. "We made it the old-fashioned way," López recalls, "packed together in a small space in a truck."⁸² After what seemed like a day, the truck stopped, and someone let them out in a Kmart parking lot at night. After the truck sped away, a fellow migrant recognized the Las Vegas strip in the distance and the group started walking to a bus terminal. López remembers,

They said, "We're going to California." It wasn't far and of course people there spoke Spanish, but I knew someone in Nashville...I understand maps, so I looked at one on the wall in the terminal. To get to Nashville, the bus went to El Paso first. That was no good...I knew to stay away from the border...So, I went to Denver and to Nashville...my friend picked me up and I got a job the next morning.⁸³

It would have been much simpler for López to go along with his border-crossing crew and take the six-hour ride from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, but the pull of Nahua kinship sent him on a three-day excursion across the American heartland. What he lacked in formal education, López more than made up for in common sense and intuition. Gathering what he had from friends and fellow migrants, López understood that the further he stayed from the border line the better.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

Resolved to make the necessary journey, López took the limited funds he received from the *coyote* and bought a loaf of bread and a 2-liter of Coca-Cola that he rationed over the next seventy-two hours. All told, his journey from Veracruz to Nashville, Tennessee took eleven days, and yet he became gainfully employed in less than twenty-four hours. This dichotomy points to a common paradox in US history: capital's demand for cheap immigrant labor and American citizens' clamoring for more restrictive immigration policies and border control.⁸⁴ Despite IRCA's response to the latter, Nahua like Diego López continued to take extensive measures to keep coming and commercial industries kept hiring low-wage undocumented workers.

From 1993 to 1997, López moved around to different temporary jobs in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest until he found a full-time position on a dairy farm in northern Wisconsin, which quickly produced financial dividends for his family in Veracruz. Like earlier generations of transient Mexican and Mexican American workers, López cycled through seasonal agriculture industries in a migrant stream. He rotated annually between an Oregon pine tree farm in winter, to Illinois corn and soybean fields in the spring, followed by Wisconsin berry patches and apple orchards during the summer and early fall months, and finished the cycle with South Dakota corn harvests in the fall. In early September 1997, he returned to a previous job with an apple grower in the Fox River Valley of central Wisconsin. When he arrived, the farm had been sold and the new owner had only part-time work for López. There was little economic incentive to stick

⁸⁴ For more examples of this incongruity see Gunther Peck's discussion on padrones, contract labor law, and early twentieth century border enforcement or Geraldo Cadava's examination of political and business interests in promoting open borders and the formation of the American Sunbelt region. Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83-112; and Geraldo L. Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 15, 207.

around rural Wisconsin, until a fellow migrant approached him to discuss working on a dairy farm. Lopez recollects,

I was doing the work and getting by, you know. I had plans to go to either Kentucky or Tennessee, we had people there and because we could not stay in one place for too long without good work. The money went fast...Back then it was hard to pay my debts and send money home...Then, things changed when we found dairy farms...I didn't know [but] they [had] found me too.⁸⁵

Tired by a life in motion, López saw the value in stable work at a 700-cow dairy farm, but he also recognized that since his boss could not speak Spanish, he relied on Diego to help manage Mexican workers. While López only knew a little English, it was his talent with cows that inspired his boss to depend on him. After a few months, López started sending bi-weekly money transfers to his mother in Veracruz. Once he had a foundation to live on in Wisconsin, it was simpler to remit regularly and build savings. In Mexico, what started off as small installments soon grew into significant deposits for lease payments, land purchases, and building materials on a new, concrete home.

Within eighteen months, as his boss added cows to the herd and hired more Mexican workers, López took it upon himself to teach new employees and became the farm's de facto trainer and mid-level supervisor. "I got good at it," López says, and "the boss started having me work with everyone."⁸⁶ Recognizing López as his best worker and a natural leader, dairy farmer Gel Stephens asked if his employee knew anyone in need of a job. By the spring of 1999, López had helped connect dozens of migrants in his Nahua network with dairy farm jobs in the upper Midwest. As mentioned above, the transition from hiring through formal recruiters to tapping existing employees' social networks was not unique to Stephens's farm. Farmers and industry analysts suggest that this practice quickly became commonplace on most, if not all, large-scale

⁸⁵ Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

dairies by the early 2000s.⁸⁷ This shift situated tenured Mexican workers like López at the center of a rapidly changing industry where they proceeded to shape both the demographics of Wisconsin's farms and a new transnational labor system. By becoming a leader, López served both as a critical element of daily operations and a transformative human resources agent who kept the dairy farm staffed.

In contrast to the seasonality of the migrant stream, Diego López and other undocumented Mexican workers created year-round bonds with American dairy owners that caught the industry's attention and compelled other farmers to follow suit. After dairy owner Gel Stephens had begun hiring employees like Diego López, farmers from around the Midwest called him, and by proxy López, to find out how it went and where they could find more. López recalls,

Bosses on other farms started calling. They're calling looking for help with immigrants, Mexicans...They'd ask, and the boss would say, "I'll talk to [López]." This happened hundreds of times, I don't know, maybe more...every time he asked, I knew people that wanted the work.⁸⁸

Despite being on remote farms in the rural Midwest, regional dairy owners were acutely aware of how their competitors operated and took notice of the uptick in Mexican workers. As some made the decision to expand their operations, they assumed an immediate demand for people to work day, evening, and overnight shifts. By calling Stephens for help, farmers gave Diego López opportunities to fill midwestern dairy farms with Nahua from the high mountains of Veracruz and build a grassroots labor network in both the US and Mexico. The opposing forces of Mexico's stagnant economy, IRCA, and NAFTA that had created a growing stream of

⁸⁷ Trisha Wagner, interviewed by the author, 10 February 2020; Jorge Delgado, interviewed by the author, 13 April 2020; Carolina Pinzon-Sánchez, interviewed by the author, 30 March 2020; Oumar Samake, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; and Ricardo Grande, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020.

⁸⁸ Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

undocumented Mexicans in the US played directly into the hands of dairy's expanding industry and made López's connections that much more valuable.

Second Migration Wave

The process of becoming a transnational recruiter and sparking a second wave of Nahua migration started off simply. Beginning in 1998, López made nightly phone calls to his family in Mexico, keeping abreast of new developments in their community and probing for information on possible recruits. Simultaneously, his brother and mother answered the calls in their mountain *pueblita*, a smaller sub community in the broader *pueblo*, where roughly seventy-five people lived and shared two to three phone lines. López remarks,

In the beginning, no pocket telephones. It was harder! [*laughs*]...We had some [telephone] lines in the village [in Veracruz]...and I had one in the trailer [in Wisconsin] or sometimes I used the phone in the office [at the dairy farm]...My [wife] had the kids, so [my brother] and mother talked to me on the phone, and most of the time we had nothing to talk about...but when the jobs started going people hear...people see that my wife has no work, but has money. Had to be from somewhere, right?...So, you know, someone wanted to go and make the big journey, so, you know, they would come by the phone and talk to me.⁸⁹

With only two phones available for over fifteen families in their *pueblita*, people started to notice the López family's nightly phone calls and they became public entertainment for curious youth. Every day after his twelve-hour shift, López returned to his single-wide trailer, showered, and called the family. By sharing information about Nahua that were eager to migrate and others in the US, the family created a valuable network of information for both prospective migrants and employers. In their tight-knit communities, the Lópezes gained status through their prominence as immigration experts and Diego's access to lucrative dairy farm jobs in the Midwest. While many of Diego López's contacts were local to Texhuacán, his brother and mother made

⁸⁹ Ibid.

economic and social relationships with people from around the *Sierra de Zongolica*. As phone calls materialized into full-time US jobs, the family gained special knowledge that they translated into power in the community. Additionally, by choosing not to work and buying things that most people could not afford, López's wife demonstrated the legitimacy of Diego's dairy farm jobs. In the 1990s and 2000s, as Nahua across the region reeled from Mexico's deteriorating economy, the material benefits of López's and other dairy workers' success motivated many to make migrations to the US.⁹⁰ Due to their growing stature, the López family became a primary contact for people in their community, and Nahua in the *Sierra de Zongolica* more broadly, to organize transnational movements. The combination of poverty and an expanding culture of migration made the Lópezes' connections invaluable to the family's status, the wider community's access to work in the US, and dairy farmers' labor force in the Midwest.

For many Nahua growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, the migrant experience began before any plans to cross the border. As the practice of migration became normalized and transformed their *pueblo* cultures, children grew up more aware of their potential future as undocumented workers in the US.⁹¹ When someone decided to go, Diego López explains, "You started with the money, because no money you no go far...Then we talked about the path and the people." By emphasizing the necessity of securing loans for transportation, food, the *coyote*, and papers, López set migrants' expectations. Border crossing in the post-IRCA era was expensive, but with the likelihood of landing a farm job quickly, Nahua could take out short-term loans from family and friends and pay them back with interest in a few weeks. Once they had enough money, Nahua followed a pre-mapped route via bus and car from their *pueblos* to Nogales,

⁹⁰ Alicia Lilano, interviewed and translated by the author, 9 January 2020; Lupe Morales, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020; Orvilio Mendez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

⁹¹ Luis Alejandro Martínez Canales, "La dinámica comunitaria vista desde la migración en la sierra nahua de Zongolica, Veracruz," 28-29.

Sonora. While López refused to share details about how they guided people to *coyotes*, he did say that the family “had a few people [*coyotes*]...sometimes they make it and sometimes no.”⁹² Shrugging his shoulders, López implies that because of the dangerous nature of the job, *coyotes* sometimes disappeared without a trace. As IRCA increased US Border Patrol presence and surveillance progressively in the late 1980s and 1990s, the use of *coyotes* increased significantly.⁹³ Despite hearing newspaper and media portrayals of *coyotes* as the sinister and violent underbelly of undocumented immigration, López argues that “there were a lot of good ones.”⁹⁴ Knowing who those people were had become one of the López family’s key assets and helped thousands get across the border unharmed. With the knowledge of how to secure loans, travel through Mexico, and find a *coyote*, as well as influence from the growing culture of migration, Nahua in their mid-to-late teens and twenties most often chose the Mexican border state of Sonora to make their undocumented crossings into the US.

In the final months of 1998, Diego López started arranging for Nahua to migrate from within the US and their indigenous *pueblos* in the *Sierra de Zongolica* to the Midwest for work on dairy farms. For those crossing the US-Mexico border, López informally developed a method for people to locate “trustworthy” *coyotes* in Nogales, Sonora.⁹⁵ While smugglers and their relay teams each functioned differently, those that guided people to the upper Midwest were not as numerous as those bringing people into the American Southwest. Thus, Nahua tended to have similar experiences following *coyotes* across the desert and riding tightly in automobiles to

⁹² Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

⁹³ Jeremy Slack and Daniel E. Martínez, “What Makes a Good Human Smuggler? The Differences Between Satisfaction with and Recommendation of Coyotes on the US-Mexico Border,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 676 (March 2018): 153, DOI: 10.1177/0002716217750562; Audrey Singer and Douglas S. Massey, “The Social Process of Undocumented Border Crossing Among Mexican Migrants,” *International Migration Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 576.

⁹⁴ Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

unknown pick up and drop off points. As López's network expanded, he recalls creating professional bonds with *coyotes* based on repeated business that benefited both parties and Nahua migrants,

It was not perfect...We only knew a few [*coyotes*], but they [migrants] helped and then we had a whole list...They [*coyotes*] start to get money from us [Nahua], and then the communication flew fast...They [*coyotes*] not stupid, you know. Fuck man, when the money came in, they did the work and kept getting it.⁹⁶

In effect, López describes a business relationship in which *coyotes* began to view Nahua migrants headed to the upper Midwest as customers providing them consistent revenues. While he refuses to disclose the exact nature of their dealings, López reveals that there were several willing parties on both sides of the border that did routine business. Like salespeople, *coyotes* treated López as a growth account, feeding him important information from the Arizona-Sonora borderlands that profited his transnational labor network and prospective Nahua migrants. As those numbers added up, *coyotes* started to make special arrangements for Nahua to get to remote areas in Wisconsin. By the mid-2000s, López's network evolved into a full-scale business that linked reputable *coyotes* with second wave Nahua migrants, making their journeys from Veracruz to Wisconsin safer and simpler.

In 1999, one of the first people Diego López recruited was Fermin León, a man he grew up with who had been working in the US since 1997. By first contacting his father in Mexico, López tracked León down, calling him directly and offering him a job. In previous months, through conversations with his parents and sister, León had heard about López's recruitment to US dairy farms and how the material benefits had enabled him to start building a concrete house in their *pueblo*. Understanding the economic value of this opportunity, León made quick plans to travel to Wisconsin. León explains,

⁹⁶ Ibid.

I had one picture ID from Arizona, so I got on the airplane to Chicago. He [López] loaned me money to pay and told me how I ride buses to the farms in Wisconsin. I had no English...so my friend wrote the plan for me in [Arizona] and helped with plane tickets. I was nervous to go, but nobody looked at me...In Chicago, the bus guy spoke Spanish, for real!...I gave him [López] the money back, very quick, and sent home thousands in my years there...Now we have a house and bakery that my sister does.⁹⁷

Since he had already crossed the border, León's migration to Wisconsin was less cumbersome, but still involved many steps and uncertainties. He was fortunate that López could afford to lend him money, since León did not have funds for migration. While López had a larger financial base than León, he did not have disposable income and all indications are that the loan money came from the dairy farmer looking to hire León. Despite his fears of not being able to communicate with people at the airport, on the plane, or at the bus station, León arrived in Wisconsin with relative ease and even had the luck of running into people who spoke Spanish. Upon his arrival, León met one of López's confidants who drove the travel weary Nahua man to his new dairy farm job. Finding the work hard but rewarding, León stayed with his employer for five years before returning to Veracruz. In that time, he sent remittances home to pay their family's farmland lease, start construction on a concrete home, and start a bakery business that they built into their new home. Like Diego López, Fermin León had changed the course of his family's lives by becoming a dairy worker and pulling his dependents out of poverty.

In October 2001, Diego López helped organize a border crossing for five Nahua from the *Sierra de Zongolica* including Alicia Lilano, a seventeen-year-old traveling with her older cousin, Chico. Earlier that year, the two had heard from their uncle Eufemio that there was work available in the Midwest and he had a contact named Diego López who could assist them migrating north. After a couple of phone calls and several loans from family members, the

⁹⁷ Fermin León, interviewed and translated by the author, 6 April 2020.

Lilanos negotiated a deal: they would pay 9,200 pesos and López would get the pair from their *pueblo* to Wisconsin. Alicia Lilano observes,

When I came it was pretty calm. People told us to expect the worst, but it only took one crossing...I don't remember exactly the place...I believe Nogales and then to Arizona. You know that's right on the border. After that, I have no idea. We were crossing with a group of people who helped us get to Las Vegas. They [*coyotes*] put us on a plane there and that brought us to Minneapolis, but now you can't do that.⁹⁸

After working out the details with López, the Lilano cousins followed an itinerary of buses and trains from Orizaba, Veracruz to the border. From there, they met *coyotes* at a specific location and time, and proceeded to cross into the US with a fifteen-person group. After nearly three nights walking through mountains and desert, the smugglers reached a meeting spot where the group waited for six hours until two vehicles appeared. *Coyotes* instructed the Lilanos to get in the back of a green SUV that took them to McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, where they boarded a plane to Minneapolis, Minnesota. By the end of the day, they arrived in Wisconsin. Representative of the second wave Nahua migrants, the Lilanos made a direct trip from Veracruz to America's Dairyland. Whereas a few years earlier Nahua migrants had minimal experience with border crossing, the ease of Lilano's 2001 journey reflects the development and sophistication of Diego López's network.

Despite the increased dangers of crossing the US-Mexico border imposed by IRCA, the credibility of López's information and contacts helped mitigate migrants' pre-crossing anxiety and encouraged young women like Alicia Lilano to make undocumented migrations. Although Nahua immigrants remained predominantly male, persistent economic pressure compelled greater numbers of women like Lilano to migrate north in the twenty-first century. Growing up in the 1990s, it had become common for Lilano to see people from the same family migrate away

⁹⁸ Alicia Lilano, interviewed and translated by the author, 9 January 2020.

from their *pueblo*. As she heard migration stories and gathered border crossing information from community members, Lilano grew more comfortable with the idea. With knowledge of López's network, the Lilanos had faith that their *coyotes* would not rob them or leave them for dead in the desert. While it could be argued that Diego López had a vested interest in making the *coyotes* sound humane, the Lilanos did not have to rely on his word. Growing up in a community increasingly defined by transnational migration, Alicia and Chico Lilano learned of innumerable border crossings through family and community stories, and her positive impression of *coyotes* reflects the growth of Nahua transnational labor networks. "The people that we paid to bring us here," Alicia Lilano declares, "they do what we need and help us get here, and we help them by paying them. A lot of people say that they're bad people, but when I crossed everything was fine."⁹⁹ Contrary to conventional media portrayals of border smugglers as dangerous and deceptive, Alicia Lilano describes her *coyotes* as honest people working for money to survive, just like her. In her view, their guides were average Mexican men trying to make a living in what had become a thriving smuggling industry. In short, the Lilanos approached the border knowing they could trust their *coyotes* and Diego López to negotiate fair prices.

Within a few years, Diego López became one of the Midwest's premier agricultural recruiters with unique access to workers from his home region in the *Sierra de Zongolica*. Part of what enabled López to succeed was the fact that most dairy farmers knew little to nothing about hiring and managing people. In López's case, his boss Gel Stephens admits that he "had no formal hiring process," and "didn't know anything about human resources."¹⁰⁰ Historically, dairy farms relied on a family-based labor system where the head of household maintained most of the responsibilities. In the 1990s and 2000s, though, as farmers started to grow their herds beyond

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019.

two hundred cows, the added work necessitated hired labor and forced dairy owners to recreate their businesses and professional roles. Many struggled to complete this transition, but those who succeeded often relied on other dairy farmers for advice on how to hire workers and run a complex business. Since he was an industry leader, farmers across the Midwest turned to Gel Stephens who depended on his relationship with Diego López to help staff his colleagues' farms. By 2000, Stephens's farm comprised roughly 1,200 cows with 30 to 35 employees, over 80% of whom were Mexican immigrants. At that time, there were over 15,000 dairy farms in Wisconsin and thousands more in the Midwest. When farms expanded, their labor needs did too. As a result, it was common for López to coordinate migrations and jobs for more than one person at a time, sometimes up to eight people. From 1999 to 2009, López had a hand in bringing nearly 2,000 Nahua to Wisconsin. "It was then," López remarks, "that people from my village...and the surrounding [*pueblos*] of Astacinga, Tlaquilpa, and Tehuipango started to come."¹⁰¹ According to the Mexican National Census, the fourteen municipalities of the *Sierra de Zongolica* had grown from a total population of 85,344 in 1980 to 140,926 in 2000.¹⁰² Hence, as the labor network expanded to include broader parts of the region, it linked hundreds of thousands of Nahua together in a transnational enterprise administered by Diego López's family and other Nahua in the US and Mexico.

Return Journeys

In the 1990s and 2000s, as Nahua populations grew in both Wisconsin's dairy industry and the *Sierra de Zongolica*, undocumented workers also made thousands of return journeys to

¹⁰¹ Diego López, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 March 2020.

¹⁰² "Población total, por entidad federativa y municipio, según sexo," Censo General de Población y Vivienda 1980 and 2000, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), <https://en.www.inegi.org.mx/datos/?ps=Programas>.

and from their mountain *pueblos*. “Our lives are there,” Fermin León remarks, “and we are illegal here, so we go back.”¹⁰³ For León and other Nahua on Wisconsin dairy farms, it was not a question of if they would return to Veracruz, but a matter of when. As unlawful entrants to the country, earning money without state authorization, post-1986 migrants became permanently undocumented and criminals in the eyes of the law. In this regard, IRCA rendered Nahua dairy workers as virtually rightless, which in combination with the militarization of the border dissuaded most from bringing their families. Without hope for a temporary workers’ visa or a path to US naturalization, Nahua continued to return to their *pueblos* in circular migrations of three to five years. Just as important, indigenous people from the high mountains of Veracruz had strong ties to their native history, culture, and land. With wives, children, and aging parents still in Mexico, people like Fermin León, Diego López, Alicia and Chico Lilano, and thousands of other undocumented Nahua dairy workers maintained a tradition of circular movement that characterized both the first and second migration waves. Echoing the observations made by many undocumented Mexicans that worked in Wisconsin at the time, León recalls,

Oh, you mean going back! [*Laughs*] Well there was nothing to it, I mean I bought a plane ticket to Orizaba, you know this is maybe two or three hours north of my *pueblo*. Home in less than one day. No joke!...My friend drove to Minneapolis, and yes we had our Mexican passports, of course, so no problems...They [US Border Patrol] do not care who goes back [to Mexico], they only care about who comes in [to the US].¹⁰⁴

The excitement in León’s voice underlined the drastic differences between migration to and from the US. Without the need for a *coyote*, days of walking through a desert, or an elaborate relay plan, Nahua, like León, returned to Mexico in less than twenty-four hours. After sending remittances back to his family for five years, León bought a plane ticket in 2004, flew to

¹⁰³ Fermin León, interviewed and translated by the author, 6 April 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Veracruz in broad daylight, and paid hundreds of dollars less to go to Mexico than enter the US with a *coyote*. After spending thirteen months with his family in Veracruz, León contacted Diego López and made another undocumented migration across the Sonoran Desert. While his first five-year stint in America's Dairyland had paid significant dividends for his Nahua family, León's concrete house remained unfinished, his plans for a small business had fallen through, and his family remained in need. Understanding the importance of Wisconsin farm wages to his family and trusting the transnational network managed by López, León began another cycle as a dairy worker with plans to go back to Mexico in three years.

Following a similar path in 2002, Tirso González and Silvia Ayala flew home to get married in their Nahua *pueblo*.¹⁰⁵ Their intention was to return four weeks later, but their stay extended over fourteen months, during which time Ayala became pregnant. With a family on the way, and nearly all their savings spent in the brief return, the couple decided that González would make another migration to Wisconsin. González avows,

I did not want to go, she [Sylvia] persuaded me...and, of course, I knew we had nothing left and I had the path to the dairy farms...She comes from a family with many children and they take care of each other...I did not get to meet my son until he was three...and I could not wait anymore, so I went back [in 2006] and stayed for 7, maybe 8 months...I saw them and it changed my heart. I wanted for him [González's son] ...a house, a good school...So, I returned to Wisconsin.¹⁰⁶

Knowing the power of dairy farm wages, Ayala convinced her husband that making good money in the present would create a better future for their family in Veracruz. Although he would miss the birth of his first child, González knew that his wife's large family would help Ayala care for their newborn. After three years, though, both González and Ayala could no longer stand the distance. Unwilling to bring their young child across the border, González had no choice but to

¹⁰⁵ After getting split up during their first border crossing in 1997, Silvia Ayala migrated successfully a year later and met Tirso González in the US.

¹⁰⁶ Tirso González, interviewed and translated by the author, 15 March 2020.

return to Veracruz to reunite with his soulmate and his son. Although he hoped to stay longer, González recognized that he could not satisfy his family's economic needs in Mexico. With the goals of building a concrete house and sending his son to private school, González went back to Wisconsin for a third time in 2007. While not all Nahua went to and from the upper Midwest as frequently as Tirso González, the forces which compelled his movements were common among other migrants from his community. The feeble Mexican economy, negative effects of NAFTA, and a growing culture of circular migration pressured thousands of Nahua to find better economic opportunities in the US. While IRCA's provisions militarized the border and made crossings riskier and more expensive, the expansive network maintained by the López family empowered people like Fermin León and Tirso González to make several three-to-five-year circular migrations. Neither able nor interested in moving their families to the US, León, González, and thousands of other Nahua defied IRCA's restrictive policies by not only crossing the border, but by building better lives for their families in Mexico with hard-earned US dollars.

While Diego López filled a critical void in the teetering dairy industry, he also helped staff adjacent businesses and reoriented the power dynamics of agricultural recruiting in the Midwest. As regional farmers felt the same pressure to grow their operations to take advantage of economies of scale, mitigate thin margins, and stave off bankruptcy, López modeled a hiring system that took over the industry. Noting the rapid increase of undocumented Mexicans on Midwest farms López's boss Gel Stephens remembers the metamorphosis,

The area became populated [through López's connections]. It wasn't just this area. It was Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio. I'm probably forgetting some. At one point or another, somebody from those villages through [Diego López] went to those farms. That's where most of the people in this area [Wisconsin] now are from, and a lot of those people are sons and daughters of the original guys that were here.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 November 2019.

From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, Diego López helped make undocumented Mexicans from Nahua *pueblos* in the *Sierra de Zongolica* a fixture in the Midwest's rural landscape. At the same time, he also played a large part in creating and maintaining a transnational labor network that funneled people into dairy farm jobs and economic opportunities into Veracruz. Growing out of the process, the *Zongolica* culture of migration evolved to the point where children expected to become undocumented immigrants in the US and American dairy farmers anticipated employing multiple generations of the same extended Mexican families. With the ability to shape the industry's workforce, Nahua presence on regional dairy farms swelled. Representing the failure of IRCA to restrict undocumented immigration and the pressure imposed by Mexico's failing economy, López linked Nahua to America's Dairyland and helped shift the demographics of labor in the Midwest.

In the 2000s, while Diego López maintained his network from Wisconsin, other Mexican dairy workers around the region performed similar tasks, helping recruit undocumented Mexicans, many of whom were also Nahua from the *Sierra de Zongolica*. As changes in the dairy industry compelled Midwest dairy farmers to expand their herds, their labor needs surged, making people like López invaluable. More broadly, industry experts and farmers confirm that the informal recruiting procedures employed by Gel Stephens and Diego López were common across Wisconsin and Minnesota.¹⁰⁸ Another exemplar is Fritz Gainey who expanded his family dairy farm from two hundred to 1,200 cows between 1998 and 2002.¹⁰⁹ At the time, he took out millions in debt from the bank to build modern barn structures with state-of-the-art milking parlor technology. As Gainey explains, it was much harder to find workers than bank loans,

¹⁰⁸ Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; Rick Chaeli, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Christy Pinzur, interviewed by the author, 30 March 2020; Jorge Delgado, interviewed by the author, 13 April 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020.

We got loans from the bank, lickety-split, right, but we had to hunt for people that would work as full-time milkers or shit pushers. Those are tough jobs... [a fellow dairy owner] told my partner that a couple Mexican guys were looking for work...and they knew other people too, so it filled up pretty fast...Then, it happens that one Mexican guy would leave and they'd already have someone there to fill the position the next day.¹¹⁰

Like other dairy farmers around the state, Gainey found his first long-term Mexican employees by word of mouth. Through an undisclosed colleague, he unknowingly tapped a transnational Nahua labor network that resulted in his farm becoming 75% staffed by undocumented Mexicans from the *Sierra de Zongolica*. Circumventing the issue of immigration status, Gainey praises all Mexican dairy workers for taking on "tough jobs" and self-recruiting. Similar and different to the method used by Diego López, several of Gainey's undocumented workers brought people in. When one person decided to leave, they filled the position with help from a group of well-networked co-workers. Consequently, many relatives and friends worked together on the same farm or shared the same jobs over multiple decades. While people like Diego López were responsible for bringing thousands to Wisconsin, others recruited on a smaller scale with the similar effect of transforming the dairy industry into a highly concentrated Nahua space.

Conclusion

From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, Nahua from the *Sierra de Zongolica* developed a transnational labor network that enabled multiple generations of indigenous Mexicans to participate in circular migration in the post-IRCA era. Whereas the history of immigration from Mexico to the US has most often featured people from the north and central plateau states of Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas, this study reveals the increased presence of indigenous and undocumented migrants from Veracruz, which reflects a broader

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

movement of previously isolated communities in Mexico's southernmost states. As migrants responded to Mexican economic crises, the emergence of a new industry in need of cheap labor drew Nahua to Wisconsin's expanding dairy farms. Despite the social stigma of employing undocumented immigrants, the demand for low-wage workers was unmitigated. While employer sanctions existed under IRCA, they were rarely enforced and posed no real threat to owners. Along with the depressed economy in Mexico, changing needs in the dairy industry became a conduit for the needs of cheap undocumented labor. While immigration restrictions made things difficult, farmers needed these workers and sought them out through various means. With the help of many first wave Nahua migrants, dairy farmers around the state fostered a new labor force buoyed by a circular migrant network.

Since the mid-1990s, the confluence of migration from the high mountains of Veracruz and the rapidly industrializing dairy industry led to an unprecedented expansion in the state's undocumented population and helped the Latina/o community become the number one minority in Wisconsin in the mid-2010s.¹¹¹ To do so, unauthorized immigrants traveled thousands of miles by car, bus, train, and foot, making their ways through rocky terrain and hot climates with the constant threat of arrest and deportation. Comprehending their journeys and sacrifices are critical for understanding how transnational dairy workers became a significant labor force in the upper Midwest. By tracing migrants' experiences circularly, we can pull back the layers of conflict and trauma that compelled people to take extreme measures to cross an increasingly hazardous U.S.-Mexico border. In getting at the social fabric of Mexican migration, this study advances a conversation about the landscape of post-IRCA immigration to the US and the

¹¹¹ "The State of Working Wisconsin," COWS, University of Wisconsin-Madison, (2018), 7.

physical toll endured by prospective migrants as they bolstered both their family's income and the well-being of the American economy.

CHAPTER 3

Undocumented in the Heartland: Immigrant Diversity, Reception, and Interethnic Community in Wisconsin, 1986-2006

On a spring morning in 1998, Jesús Rivera clutched a bag as he ran to his car and sped down a country road in a small town near Green Bay, Wisconsin. Hurrying to a 6:00 am shift at his new dairy farm job, the sunrise blinded Rivera just before he darted past the local gas station. Moments later, he saw blue and red police lights approaching in the rear-view mirror. “My heart went,” Rivera explains, “and all I could see was my wife, my family, and God.”¹ As an undocumented worker in rural Wisconsin, Rivera lived in isolation and constant fear of arrest, detention, and deportation by United States immigration officials. In an instant, his life could have been upended. Instead, the deputy warned him, “They told me about you and I don’t care, but you Mexicans need to learn to drive! We’re watching you.”² Having worked in the US during the 1990s, Rivera was familiar with the ways that police stereotyped and treated Latina/o people. It was new, however, that the officer admitted his knowledge of Rivera’s undocumented status with a willingness to turn the other cheek, despite threatening him. In the coming months, trepidation compelled Rivera to become an obedient worker who unflinchingly committed to long hours in arduous conditions, stayed close to the dairy farm, and rarely left his trailer. On his trips to the town center, Rivera noticed that his interactions with white Wisconsinites fit a pattern. While some treated him with kindness, most were either silent or hostile.

¹ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

² Ibid.

Prior to his arrival in the Midwest, he had entered the US through the H-2A guest worker program.³ Recognizing that it was nearly impossible for him or any poor Mexican to obtain legal long-term entry into the country, he overstayed his visa and assumed an undocumented life because there was no alternative. Rivera spent the next few years working in Texas and South Carolina where he noticed the ubiquitous presence of undocumented Mexicans. “I just had to ask next door,” Rivera remarks, “and I could find people. But up here [in Wisconsin] it was a different world. A new place to figure out.”⁴ After migrating to Texas from Tlaquilpa, Veracruz, Mexico, Rivera found it easy to locate fellow indigenous people from his home. Over the next several years, he created and sustained numerous connections as he moved between cities in the American South. Despite the inherent fear of living in the US without authorization, Rivera felt secure knowing that he had a network of people to lean on when he encountered issues with his citizenship status. Buoyed by overlapping Latina/o communities in the region, Rivera lived with minimal interactions with white people. In the villages of America’s Dairyland, however, it was all but inevitable that he would have to depend on the local majority to survive. As he ventured into this new world, Rivera found Wisconsin’s small towns to be desolate and disconcerting.

Like many other immigrants working on dairy farms in the period, Rivera’s interactions with white residents defined his initial experiences in rural Wisconsin. After taking his first dairy farm position in 1997, Rivera’s boss assured him that he had nothing to fear from the locals. Yet, an early experience at the town grocery told him otherwise. “I left the store,” Rivera explains, “and my car window was broken with a brick on the seat...Some guy was mad at me because I am working?! He could have this job, but he didn’t want it.”⁵ According to a witness, a white

³ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 created the H-2 guest worker program and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 revised it to include an “A” category for agricultural workers.

⁴ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

man had tossed a cinder block through Rivera's passenger-side window. Many dairy farmers confirm Rivera's assertion that Wisconsin residents resented Mexicans for taking "American jobs," despite their unwillingness to do the same work.⁶ In this case, the assailant articulated his anger through the destruction of property, signifying a threat of further violence and traumatizing Rivera. Without the support system he had become accustomed to in urban neighborhoods, Rivera felt helpless, learning to endure racism and brush off the menace of white American resentment. Rivera's experience is representative of thousands of undocumented Mexicans working in Wisconsin's dairy industry during the era. In other words, it was common for rural Wisconsinites to racialize undocumented dairy workers as criminals responsible for the declining American working-class job market. In response, farm owners defended their hiring practices by explaining that their workers were "good" immigrants whose only crime was wanting to work hard. While white Wisconsin residents and farmers argued with civility, undocumented dairy workers endured physical and psychological violence as they tried to maneuver their day to day lives.

On the surface, rural Wisconsin seemed like a place where Jesús Rivera would forever be an outsider, but as he broadened his horizons beyond the dairy farm he discovered vibrant ethnic Mexican communities hidden in plain sight.⁷ After suffering through confrontations with rural police and civilians, Rivera learned about Mexican restaurants, bars, and stores in nearby Green Bay. There he met and befriended a range of Mexican-descent people. Unlike his experiences in southern cities, Rivera found the Latina/o community in Wisconsin to be much more interwoven

⁶ The rhetoric of job stealing immigrants emerged in dozens of interviews with dairy farm owners and Wisconsin residents. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; and Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February, 2020.

⁷ The term ethnic Mexicans refers to all people from Mexico, those with ancestral roots in Mexico, or those who self-identify as socially or culturally Mexican.

between citizens and immigrants. While interethnic discrimination existed, undocumented dairy workers' experiences reveal many moments of bonding between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. As Rivera and others made new acquaintances, they gained critical knowledge about local social relations and rural police behavior. "We're not just illegals here," Rivera proclaims, "our people get along."⁸ In his life as an undocumented immigrant in the US, Rivera had become accustomed to conflict between people of Mexican descent. In Wisconsin, though, he experienced more open lines of communication, social interaction, and support. Meeting people at stores and social events, Rivera formed relationships that served as building blocks in a transnational community linking undocumented Mexican dairy workers to Wisconsinites of various backgrounds. Through these expanding networks, they transmitted details about police activities and immigration enforcement agencies. Despite their vulnerability to discrimination, arrest, and deportation, undocumented dairy workers like Jesús Rivera created lives and made place for themselves in the upper Midwest. Moving across multiple borders—geographic, social, and cultural—indigenous Mexicans collaborated with fellow immigrants and Mexican Americans to construct a new multiethnic culture.

The key factor influencing this interethnic cooperation was the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which enabled millions of undocumented Mexicans to become naturalized American citizens. Although people of Mexican descent had been migrating to Wisconsin since the nineteenth century, as citizens they gained greater access to work, which reshaped the region's labor market and interethnic social dynamics. Despite lawmakers' intentions with IRCA, undocumented Mexican immigration expanded in the coming decades alongside a significant naturalized population. In Wisconsin, Latina/o numbers grew from 93,194

⁸ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

people in 1990 to 336,567 in 2010. As a portion of this demographic shift, new Mexican immigrants accounted for over 30%, while 5% to 7% identified as naturalized citizens.⁹ Despite their relatively small numbers, newly-minted US citizens of Mexican descent found better-paying jobs and started businesses that served as critical meeting grounds for immigrant dairy workers. Dissimilar to previous Mexican-descent settlements that formed in urban areas like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Paul, many who became naturalized in the 1980s and 1990s put down roots in smaller cities like Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Madison, Wisconsin. Contrary to conditions in the Southwest where interethnic job competition created tensions, undocumented Mexicans that entered the dairy industry in the 1990s did not fight with Mexican Americans for work.¹⁰ Instead, unauthorized immigrants came to know Wisconsin's ethnic Mexican population under different circumstances—as customers, acquaintances, and friends. Despite their citizenship, many naturalized Mexican Americans empathized with the undocumented experience and actively supported dairy workers by sharing information and welcoming them into their establishments. Through their relationships with Mexican Americans in Wisconsin, undocumented dairy workers gained access to ethnic Mexican spaces and together they created a new interethnic culture that emphasized food and friendship. While some studies highlight immigrants' isolation, immobility, and fear, this chapter shows how unauthorized dairy workers in rural Wisconsin exhibited an exceptional level of connectivity, mobility, and confidence.¹¹ As they became a fixture in America's Dairyland, undocumented Mexicans broke out of rural

⁹ "Census of Population General Population Characteristics Wisconsin" 1990 Census, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics Wisconsin," 2000 Census, U.S. Bureau of the Census; QuickFacts, "Race and Hispanic Origin," 2010 Census, U.S. Census Bureau.

¹⁰ David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 60

¹¹ Studies commonly argue that geographic isolation was debilitating for undocumented workers in rural America. Julie C. Keller, *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 4.

isolation by using their earnings to purchase automobiles, driving to Wisconsin's small cities, visiting Mexican-run businesses, building friendships, and entering new social circles. In this regard, they defied the common tropes of rural immigration and reshaped ethnic Mexican communities in the urban centers near America's Dairyland.

A Contentious Relationship

As undocumented Mexican dairy workers adjusted to life in rural Wisconsin, they learned about interethnic relations among white European-descent and Latina/o people dating to the nineteenth century. Unlike the American Southwest where large Mexican communities had existed for centuries, Midwest immigrants did not establish settlements until the early twentieth century.¹² In the 1880s, economic opportunities drove both elite and working-class Mexicans to the central region.¹³ While white residents accepted the former as a negligible minority, the majority that labored as farmworkers or railroad crew alarmed locals who feared the new arrivals would establish permanent residences. To mollify locals' concerns, labor contractors recruited only single men (or those without families) who they expected to return to Mexico once the harvest season or contract ended.¹⁴ Ultimately, this practice racialized Mexican immigrant men as inferiors who belonged in a class of undesirables with Chinese immigrants and African Americans.¹⁵ For those that moved to cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Paul, their proximity to white Americans and Europeans exposed migrants to the realities of residential segregation, racial hierarchy, and the power of passing as white both in appearance and

¹² Juan R. García, "Introduction," in *Mexicans in the Midwest*, edited by Juan R. García (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1989), ix-x.

¹³ González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 7.

¹⁴ Omar Valerio-Jiménez, "Racializing Mexican Immigrants in Iowa's Early Mexican Communities," *The Annals of Iowa* 74 (Winter 2016): 5.

¹⁵ Jeffery Marcos Garcilazo, *Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States, 1870 to 1930* (Denton: University of Texas Press, 2012), 12.

behavior.¹⁶ These dynamics became clearer as Mexican immigration flows expanded during the First World War to meet labor needs in heavy industries and agriculture. As this population grew alongside African Americans and Europeans, white Americans struggled to fit people of Mexican descent into their black-white binary.¹⁷ Constructed as inferior racial others, Mexican immigrants endured racial epithets, violence, and residential segregation in dilapidated boarding houses or boxcars.¹⁸ Across the country during the period, as anti-Mexican sentiment spread among Americans and Europeans, it evolved into a racial discourse of the “Mexican Problem” that played out in newspapers, labor unions, and public spaces.¹⁹

To combat racial hatred and create spaces of refuge for their people in the 1920s, the predominantly working-class Mexican immigrant population of the Midwest built their first urban communities, known as *colonias* or neighborhoods. As historian Dionicio Valdés explains, ethnic neighborhoods sprouted in Chicago, Detroit, and St. Paul around churches and Mexican-owned businesses that imported goods from Mexico, served as community banks, and enabled locals to continue their cultural traditions through food and homewares.²⁰ Mexican immigrants also created mutual aid organizations, or *mutualistas*, that forged community by organizing cultural and social events, raising funds for new arrivals, forming sports leagues, and publishing Spanish-language newspapers.²¹ Since it was common for Mexicans to encounter verbal slurs or vigilante groups, most stayed in their own neighborhoods and only ventured out for work. Thus,

¹⁶ Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 8-9.

¹⁷ Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (1993; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15.

¹⁸ *Boxcar People*, directed by Luz Schick and Will Schick, WTVP, PBS, 2013.

¹⁹ Gabriela Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*, 82; and Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 9.

²⁰ Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 22-23; For many Mexicans in the Midwest, the church (usually Catholic), street markets, and immigrant run shops served as spaces of ethnic and interethnic coexistence. Deborah E. Kanter, *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 20 & 111-12.

²¹ Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 25; Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 149-55.

these institutions ensured that Mexican immigrants could live their lives without endangering themselves by walking through white American or European neighborhoods. Due to these *colonias*' insulating nature, intra-ethnic Mexican relations evolved differently in the Midwest than it did in places like California and Texas. Unlike the American Southwest where issues over labor competition, politics, and citizenship created tensions among ethnic Mexicans, communities in the Midwest exhibited remarkable cooperation and developed similar world views. For example, while some pursued American citizenship as a way to combat racism, many Mexican immigrants in the Midwest responded to the shared experience of discrimination by rejecting the prospect of naturalization.²² Political accords like these brought ethnic Mexicans together and served as building blocks forming midwestern *colonias*. Although minor interethnic hostilities existed, they were not informed by long-standing social or economic distinctions made in the US.²³ Ultimately, Mexican immigrants endured racial discrimination from white Americans and European immigrants that often-overshadowed interethnic divisions.²⁴

Pressures from the Great Depression bolstered nativist sentiments in the 1930s, which culminated in the forced repatriation of over one million people of Mexican descent and a demographic shift in the Midwest from largely immigrants to Tejano migrants. Believing them incapable of assimilation, many Americans supported campaigns to remove both Mexicans and their Mexican American relatives from the country.²⁵ In midwestern cities and towns, white

²² While Valdés argues that overt discrimination compelled many immigrants to have a “strong emotional resistance” to naturalization in the Midwest, John H. Flores has shown how Mexican politics during the Cristero War (1926-29) also had a strong impact on Mexicans’ desire for US citizenship. Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 85; and John H. Flores, *The Mexican Revolution in Chicago: Immigration Politics from the Early Twentieth Century to the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 8-9.

²³ For more detail on interethnic violence in Chicago see Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 40; and F. Arturo Rosales, *Mexicans, Interethnic Violence, and Crime in the Chicago Area During the 1920’s and 1930’s: The Struggle to Achieve Ethnic Consciousness* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989).

²⁴ Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 29; and González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 15.

²⁵ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94-96.

Americans continued to debate whether Mexicans could blend into the majority and claim whiteness as Spanish descendants, while others racialized them as ignorant, diseased, immoral, and violent.²⁶ Critics argued that Mexicans' brown skin signified their lineage to Indians, and therefore, their undesirability.²⁷ Ultimately, advocates for repatriation succeeded in swaying public opinion. In midwestern cities, government officials coordinated with federal immigration officers to deport thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, thus devastating *colonias*. In Milwaukee, the ethnic Mexican community shrank from 7,000 to just below 1,500 people by the end of the decade. White Americans' and Europeans' racialized thinking calcified as the repatriation process played out. In wake of the mass exodus, Mexican American migrants from Texas, known as Tejanos, quickly became the region's principal low-wage labor force and assumed a similar position as Mexican immigrants in the racial hierarchy.²⁸ They would remain in that role until the 1980s.

As Tejanos overtook Mexican nationals as the Midwest's majority Latina/o group, the Second World War, the Bracero program, and a growing Mexican American civil rights movement, changed the socio-political dynamics that defined relations within and without ethnic Mexican communities. Between 1941 and 1945 over 350,000 Americans of Mexican descent enlisted in the US military.²⁹ Meanwhile, Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans on the home front supported the war effort by filling positions in the rapidly expanding industrial sectors.³⁰ Concurrently, the US signed an executive order establishing the bracero program,

²⁶ Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (2004; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 203-04.

²⁷ Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 10.

²⁸ Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 34.

²⁹ Lorena Oropeza, "Proving Valor in War Seeking Equality Back Home," in *Latino Heritage Initiatives Fighting on Two Fronts: Latinos in the Military*, US National Park Service, 2015.

³⁰ Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 160.

formally the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, which brought millions of Mexican men into the US as guest workers from 1942 to 1964.³¹ With the war's end in 1945, servicemen returned to the Midwest creating an oversupply of immigrant workers that yielded rising unemployment. The growing pressure for available jobs incited divisions within Mexican-descent communities along citizenship lines and exacerbated racial tensions between white and non-white communities. Having served their country, Mexican American veterans felt emboldened to renounce racial discrimination, challenge local hierarchies, and demand equal citizenship.³² Afraid that immigrants would perpetuate negative stereotypes and undermine their movements, civil rights organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens and the American G.I. Forum actively distinguished themselves from Mexican nationals.³³ In doing so, they transformed ethnic Mexican spaces into sites of contention over assimilation, racial politics, and citizenship.

Next, as Mexican Americans became more determined to fight for their civil rights, they challenged residential covenants and racial segregation, which would pave the way for future Mexican immigrant relations with white Midwesterners. Through the 1940s it was common for small businesses and public facilities to bar people they perceived as non-white. In 1949, a group of Mexican American migrants attempted to enter a country-run pool in Waupun, Wisconsin, but the local supervisor demanded they leave and “lock[ed] up the concession stand before the Mexicans got in.”³⁴ In the ensuing days, the incident received remarkable publicity, compelling

³¹ Deborah Cohen, *Braceros : Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 23-24.

³² Richard Griswold del Castillo, “Civil Rights on the Home Front: Leaders and Organizations,” in *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, edited by Richard Griswold del Castillo (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 74.

³³ Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed : The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 7.

³⁴ Peter John Huber, “Migratory Agricultural Workers in Wisconsin,” MA thesis, (University of Wisconsin Madison, 1967), 71.

the local county board to make a public statement condemning discrimination and forcing the pool supervisor to resign.³⁵ With support from the League of Women Voters, local activists created an aid program and brought statewide attention to the presence of migrant workers in their region as well as the pervasive issues with racial prejudice. As similar conflicts erupted across Wisconsin, state representatives felt compelled to establish commissions on migrant labor.³⁶ Recurring several times during the 1950s and 1960s, these governor-sponsored committees uncovered discrimination that farmworkers experienced from labor issues like wage theft to the decrepit conditions in employer-provided housing. Despite revealing human and labor rights violations, these commissions had no authority to create or enforce policies. Thus, public institutions and private businesses continued to practice segregation, homogenizing Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans as categorically excludable. This seeded further intraethnic division within Mexican descent spaces, as the political discourse of invading “wetbacks” and uncontrolled immigration along the US-Mexico border inspired Mexican American civil rights leaders to redouble their anti-immigrant stance. While a majority of the Midwest’s migrant workers were American Tejanos, many white Americans and middle-class Mexican Americans projected nativist stereotypes that undergirded prolonged segregation in public places like pools and bars.

While Mexican-descent communities continued to struggle with human rights and racial prejudice, the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 highlighted interethnic tensions. By setting the nation’s first quota for immigration from countries in the Western hemisphere, the

³⁵ Sergio M. González, “Always on the Move – Mexican Migrant Workers in Mid-Twentieth Century Wisconsin,” (lecture, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, 17 October 2017).

³⁶ Marc. S. Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism and Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 61; and Elizabeth Brandeis Raushenbush, “The migrant labor problem in Wisconsin,” (Madison: Governor's Commission on Human Rights, 1962), online facsimile at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1342>.

law made evident high levels of unauthorized migration from Mexico and transformed the label of undocumented into an increasingly racialized and criminalized designation. From 1965 to 1986 an estimated 1.3 million Mexicans entered the US with proper documentation, compared to the 28 million that crossed the border without.³⁷ As unauthorized immigration became an increasingly divisive political issue in the 1960s and 1970s, many Mexican Americans tried to avoid being associated with Mexican immigrants for fear of the negative light it would shed on them. Within the Chicano Movement, activists drew similar lines, largely excluding immigrants. It was not until the late 1970s that Mexican American leaders began embracing immigration issues as their own.³⁸ In Wisconsin, for example, the Latin American Union for Civil Rights in Milwaukee and La Raza, Inc. in Appleton created programs to help unauthorized immigrants find health care, legal representation, and financial support.³⁹ Nevertheless, as historian David G. Gutiérrez argues, these Mexican American organizations were not always representative of their broader constituencies.⁴⁰ In other words, while Chicano Movement and Mexican American civil rights leaders transitioned to support undocumented immigrants, everyday people of Mexican descent were not as quick to follow suit.

The key shift in interethnic Mexican relations in the Midwest came with Congress' passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. While the law enabled thousands of undocumented people to apply for naturalization, it also excluded millions of future immigrants, thereby reshaping Wisconsin's ethnic Mexican communities into the haves and

³⁷ Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 4-5.

³⁸ Jimmy Patiño, *Raza Sí, Migra No: Chicano Movement Struggles for Immigrant Rights in San Diego* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 14.

³⁹ Patricia Torres Nájera "'We Were the Outsiders and Treated as Such:' Community Activism and the Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender, Class, and Race Among Latinas in Milwaukee, PhD Diss., Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin, 2018, 184; and Dustin Cohan, "Deconstructing Migration: Chicanax Advocacy, Racial Marking, and the Fight for Liberation in Wisconsin, 1971-1977," M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin Madison, 2018, 15.

⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 190.

have-nots of citizenship.⁴¹ All told, 2.3 million unauthorized Mexicans applied for and obtained US citizenship under IRCA.⁴² While most of these newly-minted Americans settled in the Southwest, a significant percentage migrated permanently to the Midwest alongside an expanding undocumented immigrant population.⁴³ Between 1980 and 2000, Wisconsin's Latina/o population grew from 67,972 to 192,921.⁴⁴ While most landed in urban spaces like Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul, some also made the suburbs and rural villages their new homes. It was in these lesser known spaces like Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Madison, Wisconsin where Mexican-descent communities evolved as people used their citizenship to take better-paying jobs, accumulate wealth, and open ethnic businesses.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, economics drove heavy industries out of the major midwestern cities.⁴⁶ Seeking cheaper land and tax responsibilities, companies left expensive urban rents and took thousands of low-wage jobs with them. In pursuit of work at these new facilities, undocumented Mexicans became increasingly likely to migrate to the margins of big cities, to smaller urban centers, or into rural areas. In these shifting spaces naturalized Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants converged and forged interethnic connections. Complicated by IRCA's amnesty provisions and industrial realignments in the Midwest, Wisconsin's ethnic Mexican population became less urban and more entrenched in mid-sized centers through the power of naturalized citizenship.

⁴¹ The law also transformed the nature of Mexicans' movement through family migration, inspiring future generations with naturalized relatives to go north with the promise of legal entry and American citizenship. Unlike previous cycles of Mexican migration, the post-IRCA phase was important for women who could use trusted family networks to migrate rather than the community networks on which men had previously relied.

⁴² Harriet D. Romo, *Mexican Migration to the United States: Perspectives from Both Sides of the Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 4.

⁴³ Marcelo Cruz, "Latino Migration to Green Bay, Wisconsin in the 1990s," University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Department of Urban and Regional Studies (Jan. 1998), 87.

⁴⁴ Census of Population and Housing, U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 & 2000.

⁴⁵ González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 91.

⁴⁶ Jon C. Teaford, "Urban and Suburban Life: Overview" in *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, edited by Andrew R.L. Cayton, Richard Sisson, and Chris Zacher (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 1146.

An illustrative example is Green Bay, Wisconsin where the Latina/o population grew from 1,500 to nearly 18,000 between 1990 and 2010, transforming the city through labor contributions, entrepreneurial endeavors, as well as multi-generational religious and cultural traditions. Initially, as historian Carolina Ortega shows, meatpacking brought Mexicans from the West Coast as well as Michigan and Illinois to plants in Iowa and Wisconsin.⁴⁷ Many newcomers came to appreciate Green Bay as a superior place to raise children where they could find higher wages and well-funded schools, as well as a lower cost of living and permanent family reunification. Like other small cities around Wisconsin, Green Bay was a non-traditional destination where a Spanish-speaking community did not exist. Nonetheless, it attracted Mexican migrants in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily through labor opportunities, where families could settle and start to build a community. With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 (NAFTA), an economic depression hit Mexico, driving more undocumented Mexicans into Wisconsin than ever before.⁴⁸ Two years later, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which instituted penalties for documented and undocumented immigrants who committed crimes in the country, as well as enabled enforcement agencies to use detention, incarceration, and deportation as a proactive strategy against unlawful entrants.⁴⁹ As Green Bay's and Wisconsin's Latina/o communities continued to grow during the decade, they encountered increasingly active US immigration enforcement away from international borders. In the country's interior, where immigration enforcement was less visible, ethnic

⁴⁷ Carolina Ortega, "De Guanajuato to Green Bay: A Generational Story of Labor, Place, and Community, 1926-2010," PhD Diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 179-81.

⁴⁸ González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin*, 91.

⁴⁹ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Angelica Salas, "What Explains the Immigrant Rights Marches of 2006?: Xenophobia and Organizing with Democracy Technology," in *Immigrant Rights in the Shadows of Citizenship*, edited by Rachel Ida Buff (New York University Press, 2008), 212.

Mexicans endured disproportionate targeting, which both rattled their communities and encouraged anti-Latina/o racism.

Undocumented Reception in Wisconsin

The increasing presence of Mexican workers on dairy farms during the period was a little-known secret outside of rural Wisconsin. Farmers refused to discuss it and often acted as if it was untrue.⁵⁰ As they arrived in Wisconsin with rapid frequency, rural Wisconsinites reacted with varying degrees of uncertainty, disdain, and compassion. Historically, migrants of Mexican descent flowed through Wisconsin in the summer and left after harvest season. Dairy workers were some of the first migrants to take up long-term residence in the state's highly concentrated dairy regions since Europeans had in the nineteenth century. A significant force shaping the reception of Mexican dairy workers in Wisconsin was the concurrent out-migration of white Americans from the state's small towns.⁵¹ Together, these counterflows transformed demographics and made undocumented immigrants' racial difference all the more visible at rural schools, groceries, and gas stations. As such, Mexican workers also became the targets for racial slurs and blame for the economically and socially declining white American-born countryside. Since the 1980s American farm crisis, farmers' children had increasingly left their hometowns and sought job opportunities near cities like Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago.⁵² Noticing the dwindling numbers of white Wisconsinites, some declared there was a causal relationship

⁵⁰ Dairy farmers, long time dairy workers, and industry experts all confirmed the secretive nature of undocumented employment. Oumar Samake, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; Gil Travers, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Sandra Deegan, interviewed by the author 27 August 2019; and Christy Pinzur, 30 March 2020.

⁵¹ This out-migration was not isolated to Wisconsin, many small towns across the US dealt with similar phenomena during the period. Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (New York: Beacon Press, 2009), 2.

⁵² *The Farm Crisis*, directed by Laurel Burgmaier (Johnston, Iowa: Iowa PBS, 2013), DVD.

between changes in their rural communities and the emergence of Mexican workers on nearby dairy farms.⁵³

Dairy Farmers' Defense



As the state's dairy farms and immigrant labor force expanded, Wisconsinites racialized Mexican workers as dangerous criminals and bemoaned dairy farmers' employment of Latina/o immigrants, blaming both parties for the perceived loss of American jobs. Political cartoonist Phil Hands captures the dynamics of Wisconsin's rural backlash with the above image.⁵⁴

Profiling an interaction between Americans and dairy farmers, Hands illustrates a man with an American flag hat protesting a dairy farmer's employment of an immigrant laborer, claiming

⁵³ According to dairy farmers, workers, and industry experts, it was not uncommon for struggling rural Wisconsinites to be resentful of immigrants present in their communities. Despite the fact that immigrants did labor that most white Americans refused to do, those same people still criticized and blamed immigrants for their economic troubles and the changing demographics in rural Wisconsin. Felicio Gallardo, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020; Lupe Morales, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020; Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; and Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020.

⁵⁴ Phil Hands, "Hands On Wisconsin: Immigrant laborers milk cows, not the system," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 4 September 2010, accessed 6 February 2021, https://madison.com/wsj/news/opinion/column/phil_hands/hands-on-wisconsin-immigrant-laborers-milk-cows-not-the-system/article_7339ba60-b795-11df-8a1d-001cc4c03286.html.

that, “He’s milking the system.” In response, the owner argues that no one else was willing to do the work, so he had no choice. While he and the anti-immigrant protester may have held similar opinions about immigration policy and likely voted for identical state and federal representatives, the dairy farmer contradicted his politics for the sake of economic success. In other words, while many dairy owners supported political campaigns that labeled undocumented Mexicans as undeserving of citizenship and equal rights, they simultaneously helped make unauthorized immigrants central to Wisconsin’s staple industry. Milking in the foreground, the immigrant worker takes no part in the conversation, remaining quiet and steadfast in his job. Even without a hat labeled, “Immigrant Labor,” readers can identify the Mexican worker by a mustache signifying his difference in contrast to the two clean shaven men in the distance. Altogether, the image depicts undocumented dairy workers’ dilemma as laboring bodies, devoid of basic rights and coerced into silent obedience because of their undocumented status. Supplying a thin wall of resistance, dairy farmers justified hiring immigrants based solely on economics and ignored the politics of xenophobic racism that targeted their Mexican employees.

With long hours spent on the farm, dairy farmers often heard their neighbors’ complaints indirectly. In 1998, dairy farmer Clint Leeker began employing Mexican immigrants. While he spent most of his days on the farm or at home, Leeker’s wife was active in the local community and caught word that their neighbors had criticized them and other dairy farmers for employing “illegal outsiders.”⁵⁵ Leeker recounts,

There were people bad mouthing us about the Mexican employees. They said we were giving away American jobs to illegals. Really? Find me an American willing to do the work. Believe me, I tried for years and they’re not coming. There’s no one...people are out there making shit up about these guys (Mexicans) being bad people. Don’t do nobody good. These people [Mexican dairy workers] just want to

⁵⁵ Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020.

work. They come here to work, not make trouble. They're good ones, but you know why it happens.⁵⁶

Growing up in rural Wisconsin, it was impossible to escape dominant conservative political values that demonized non-white immigrants and valued the sanctity of American made products. Therefore, Leeker and other dairy farmers like him initially tried to fill new positions with white Americans from their communities, but found few applicants and even fewer that kept with the job over 12 months.⁵⁷ As dairy owners turned to Mexican immigrants, rural Wisconsinites identified them as “illegals” stealing jobs from native-born citizens.⁵⁸ In response, Leeker pointed to the unwillingness of Americans to take jobs on dairy farms to underline how his fellow white citizens let him down. Foregrounding this made it easier to explain how undocumented Mexicans had become indispensable not only to his farm, but to the whole industry. For Leeker, though, whether they were undocumented or not was irrelevant, because they were the “good ones” that had saved his business, not the bad ones vilified by his neighbors. Leeker’s language reveals his view of acceptance of the binary interpretation of Mexican immigrants as either productive workers or undeserving criminals. His belief in the former inspired Leeker to encourage his immigrant workers to use their family and community ties to recruit for job openings. Leeker’s experiences and beliefs reflect those of many large-scale dairy owners in Wisconsin. Routinely, farmers who employed Mexicans highlighted the unwillingness of white Americans as the primary issue without considering the validity of their undocumented labor forces and their legitimate claim to work. Time and again, dairy farmers emphasized their

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Anna Marsh, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020; Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020; Dave Pepperoncini, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; and Ted Wahlstrom, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020.

⁵⁸ “Hope Leads Hispanics,” *The Janesville Gazette*, 3 June 2001, NA..

reluctance to hire immigrants and claimed there was no alternative.⁵⁹ The charge of “good” immigrants, then, was not a declaration of undocumented dairy workers’ rights as people, it was farmers’ justification for working outside the political status quo for the benefit of their businesses and begrudging those who identified their workers’ race and immigration status as reasons to condemn them.

Fellow dairy farmer Bill Gadsen encountered similar criticism of his Mexican workers and while he responded by first mentioning the reluctance of Americans, he also emphasized the reliable, uncomplaining, and hardworking nature of his new undocumented employees. “We’re not idiots,” Gadsen exclaims. “We knew that out here [in rural Wisconsin] people would have us for it [sic], but they’re not in here [dairy farm]...I’ve never seen them or their kids apply for a job here.”⁶⁰ Echoing Clint Leeker’s sentiments, Gadsen was incredulous that non-dairy farmers had the gall to question his business practices. Furthermore, Leeker explains, “It wasn’t on me to do an investigation. They provided some ID...social security, they’re paper you know.”⁶¹ While IRCA penalized people for employing undocumented immigrants, Leeker and other dairy owners knew that as long as workers had identification and they documented it, there was no real legal danger. Pointing to the fact that social security cards were made of paper and therefore easily forged, Leeker felt he could ignore evidence of falsified identification and let his undocumented employees take the brunt of US immigration law’s punishments. Given farmers’ cheap labor needs and the eagerness of Mexican immigrants to fill dairy positions, farm owners received this

⁵⁹ Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; and Bill Gadsen, interviewed by the author, 18 February 2020.

⁶⁰ Bill Gadsen, interviewed by the author, 18 February 2020.

⁶¹ Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020.

new pool of largely undocumented workers with open arms and checked their paperwork with closed eyes.

While his rural neighbors continued to grumble about undocumented Mexicans in their communities, Bill Gadsen learned to value them as people who he needed to run a successful business. Gadsen explains,

I love these guys [Mexicans]! We've never had any trouble in twenty years, and most of our guys are coming in here with nothing, no work experience, no sensitivity training [*mocking tone*]...they're always on time and showed up. Now that right there is so important for us. We can't keep things going if people don't show...They're here to work, no complaints, willing to do whatever, reliable, you know, the good immigrants...they're pretty secluded so they stay close by...We would have lost this farm without them and they keep coming.⁶²

As he celebrated the overwhelming dependability of Mexicans compared to the unreliability of American-born workers, Gadsen constructed an image of the perfect dairy worker that was obedient and efficient. Accordingly, since they lived in rural Wisconsin, Mexican immigrants remained fairly close to the farm and isolated from the outside world. Within those confines, the undocumented workers on Gadsen's farm could be both "reliable" and "good." Just like Clint Leeker, Bill Gadsen affirms the notion that not only did bad immigrants exist, but they were likely more vocal and less compliant. Immigrants had to demonstrate their worthiness by adhering to the paradigm of the quiet and acquiescent dairy worker. In this regard, Gadsen shaped his employees' behaviors by maintaining an unwritten code of conduct based on a racially defined and inflexible archetype. Since their transnational labor networks prepared prospective Mexican immigrants, they showed up to work with an awareness of how dairy farmers expected them to act.

⁶² Bill Gadsen, interviewed by the author, 18 February 2020.

In Wisconsin's small cities and rural towns, dairy farmers' decisions to hire undocumented Mexicans were not well received by their local communities.⁶³ Lamenting the absence of American-born workers, dairy owners claimed that had they been given the choice, they would have hired white locals, but so few applied. Furthermore, Wisconsin farmers like Clint Leeker and Bill Gadsen routinely described their immigrant employees as "good" and "reliable."⁶⁴ Pointing to their lack of complaints, near-silent obedience, and strong work ethic, dairy farmers used these words to explain how Mexicans had become the industry's ideal workers. By endorsing this paradigm, dairy farmers overlooked undocumented workers' vulnerabilities, circumscribing their identities, and forcing them to be either "good" or undesirable. Furthermore, when owners identified Mexican workers this way, they aimed to justify simultaneously profiting off of undocumented labor and supporting the politics of immigration restriction.⁶⁵ In other words, the positive language dairy owners used to describe their indispensable immigrant workers was an instrument of internal control and external appeasement. To maintain their jobs, undocumented Mexicans had to become "good" immigrants, which meant obedience. By presenting their workers tractable, dairy farmers hoped to mollify the general public. Nevertheless, Mexican dairy workers took the brunt of Wisconsin's rural backlash against undocumented immigration.

⁶³ Brent Eric Valentine, "Uniting Two Cultures: Latino Immigrants in the Wisconsin Dairy Industry," Working Paper 121, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies CCIS, University of California, San Diego, September 2005, 73-77.

⁶⁴ Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; and Anna Marsh, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020.

⁶⁵ While documented workers could demand higher wages, this was done on a one-on-one basis. In this period, Wisconsin's dairy workers did not organize any collective actions calling for wage hikes.

Undocumented Experiences

While dairy farmers felt social pressure, undocumented Mexican workers confronted anger, violence, and threats to their existence in the US. With little choice but to become undocumented, they endured a constant state of fear, believing that at any moment local police or immigration officers could show up to arrest them. An all-encompassing fear of public space pervaded migrants' lives as they felt constrained from going outside their homes or farms. Perceptions and fears about migration shaped migrants' experience working on farms and living in adjacent towns, especially for those first employed by large-scale dairies in the 1990s. These early arrivals to Wisconsin often migrated from within the US and came to their new dairy jobs from other agricultural or factory positions. Generally, farmers hired Mexican workers without asking them about their immigration status. Provided that prospective workers had the necessary forms of identification, dairy owners brought them on and overlooked any suspicions. As with other community concerns in small town Wisconsin, word traveled fast that dairies had hired undocumented Mexicans without effective measures to verify their immigration status. Especially for those who associated unauthorized immigrants with violence and racial inferiority, this came as a shock. In response, Wisconsinites confronted Mexicans, accusing them of being criminally undocumented and condemning them for ruining their hometowns. In these instances, immigrants learned about rural Wisconsin's social and cultural dynamics through their encounters with locals. In rural Wisconsin, undocumented Mexican dairy workers limited numbers, geographic isolation, and fear of law enforcement caused considerable anxiety, and precipitated unnerving experiences.

Miguel Guzmán began milking cows near Eau Claire, Wisconsin in 1997, and immediately noticed discrimination from the people who rented him a room. Originally from

Tehuipango, Veracruz, Guzmán made his way to the upper Midwest from Atlanta, Georgia, where he had worked as a greenskeeper on a golf course since 1990. Prior to his arrival on the farm, Guzmán's new boss had arranged for him to rent a room from locals Jim and Leslie Peterson, and although they had agreed to board him for a year, the couple barely acknowledged his presence. Guzmán remembers,

I didn't go out very much. When I did I would see them and they wouldn't see me, you know. Of course, they did see me, but they ignored me. [Jim] walked by me in the yard like I wasn't there...maybe other people were looking and he didn't want them to see...[Leslie] would look me in the eye, but she never said anything...If they noticed me coming home, they'd be gone by the time I opened the door...I was scared to be in my own room. What were they thinking about me? I kept thinking I'd wake up to police flashlights.⁶⁶

While it stands to reason that people would be apprehensive about boarding a man from another country that they had never met, in this instance the Petersons never gave Guzmán a chance. While this could be read as just racial discrimination, it seems more likely that the couple dealt with conflicting emotions and had calculated that ignoring their foreign-born boarder was the best way to keep them safe from negative perceptions or trouble with police and immigration enforcement. In their small town of roughly 3,000 people, over 98% of residents were white, and Guzmán's brown skin expressed a clear sign of difference. Despite the presence of Latina/o workers in Wisconsin for over a century, people like the Petersons remained wary of the negative attention housing a Mexican worker could garner from their neighbors. While Jim and Leslie worried about their appearances, Guzmán lived a life of silence off the farm, all the while feeling incessant anxiety about what his landlords thought of him, why they ignored him, and what actions they might take against him if pressured. In order to keep his lucrative new job Guzmán not only endured long hours and fatigue, but constant worry. Since he was new to the

⁶⁶ Miguel Guzmán, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020.

community, did not speak the language, and had little experience with rural isolation in the US, Guzmán felt like an outsider without any way to resist his ostracism. As the uncertainty and anxiety piled on his conscience, Guzmán began to think that his arrest and deportation were inevitable, and the Petersons' silent prejudice all but confirmed it.

Taking cues from his landlords, Miguel Guzmán began to fear his neighbors and the threat of violence, arrest, and deportation. As time passed Guzmán's paranoia mounted, compelling him to alter his behavior, which further disturbed his mental health. Given the size and demographics of the small town, Guzmán knew he would be easily recognizable and had to invent ways to disguise his presence. He recalls,

I was scared of the neighbors and thought, I will hide my car under the tree branches. There was this place behind the house...I stayed out all day and only drove home at night...I stayed at the dairy farm, you know. I worked more and slept in the old tractor. [*Laughs*] And the costumes...I would go to the grocery and wear tools on my belt and put a pencil behind my ear. [*Laughs*] Then, I bought a uniform for a mechanic shop and wore it around. Now that I think, this sounds very foolish. But I had the fear back before and it made me crazy.⁶⁷

The Peterson's behavior spooked Guzmán and convinced him that locals knew he was an undocumented immigrant, which put him at risk of arrest and deportation. Unsure of what to do, he decided to combat his fears by covering his tracks. After a twelve-hour work day, Guzmán would drive home and spend another thirty minutes hiding his car under tree branches and brushing tire tread marks from the dirt driveway. On those days when he clocked out before sunset, he lingered around the farm for up to three hours and often napped in a broken-down tractor hidden behind a barn. On those occasions when he became too tired or scared to go through the stealth routine at the Peterson's house, Guzmán napped at the farm until his next shift. Dreading the consequences of his presence in town, Guzmán mirrored the Peterson's

⁶⁷ Ibid.

behavior and acted as if he was some kind of construction contractor or mechanic to appear legitimate or “normal” to other people in the community.⁶⁸ Although he laughed it off twenty-three years later, Guzmán explains how silence and perception dominated his early existence in Wisconsin and coerced him into taking extreme measures to avoid people and hide himself. Not only did the Petersons treat Guzmán as if he was invisible, but Guzmán also went to great lengths to make himself unseen. As an undocumented immigrant in a Wisconsin small town, Guzmán suffered psychologically from the silence and uncertain perceptions of his neighbors.

Whereas Miguel Guzmán struggled with threats of violence and his invisible existence, other undocumented dairy workers were the recipients of verbal abuse. Following an eighteen-month stint working for a landscaping company in coastal Carolina, Jesús Rivera followed his brother to a dairy farm outside of Green Bay, Wisconsin. In late 1997, a white man cursed at Rivera outside of a nearby gas station. He clarifies,

I learned some [English] working with the boss [in South Carolina]...Of course, the words I knew best were curse words, you know, so I could call the guys ‘little fuckers.’ [*Laughs*] This [in Wisconsin] was different. I heard him [white man] say, ‘asshole’ and ‘dirty Mexican.’ I knew those words, because I heard them all the time...Well, he walks up and puts his finger over his lip and spits at me. I did not expect this up here...I got back to the farm and asked [Felipe]...he said these people think we are stealing from them...but they don’t do a job in a dairy farm.⁶⁹

While he did not comprehend all of the words coming at him, Rivera understood enough to know that he had been identified as an unwelcome, racial outsider. Fearing violence, he stood motionless as the white man screamed and spat at him. Although it was unclear to him at the time, Rivera deduced that by placing his index finger over his upper lip, the man had been mocking him by pretending to have a stereotypical Mexican mustache. As it did for many undocumented Mexican dairy workers, incidents involving verbal discrimination created a

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

greater sense of fear about public spaces and the potential for physical violence.⁷⁰ After talking with his friend and coworker Felipe, Rivera better understood the precarity of his situation. Not only was he easily identifiable in their majority white surroundings, but some locals believed that undocumented Mexicans had taken jobs from native-born white citizens, which forced them to leave home and disrupt their families. Admittedly, Rivera had underestimated the propensity for anti-Mexican hatred in rural Wisconsin, but the experience showed him how some people perceived him. As he became more aware, he avoided potential confrontations by steering clear of certain parts of town, only going out in public during early evening hours, and staying close to his residence or farm.

In addition, while white Wisconsinites identified people like Jesús Rivera as racially out of place, many also assumed that they were undocumented immigrants, drawing a direct correlation between brown bodies and criminality. For example, Orvilio Méndez had a couple of confrontations on routine trips to the small town near his dairy farm job. One fall morning in 1998, Méndez set out for his customary two-block walk from the grocery to the post office when he passed an older man on the sidewalk. Méndez elaborates,

I always go every two weeks...the boss pays me and I go buy food and send it [money] home...Yes, just like a clock...Well, as usual, I walked down the street and this old man walked up to me to say something. I was not afraid. In the past, the people had kind words. So, I said, 'Hello. Have a nice day.' He did not like that. [Laughs] He had a face, very red, and he was very angry. He was yelling that I was illegal and no good and I couldn't understand it all...So, I didn't know anymore.⁷¹

In his initial experiences with locals, Méndez had cordial interactions where people smiled at him and appeared kind. Since he could not understand all of the words his Wisconsin neighbors

⁷⁰ Several other dairy workers I interviewed had encountered verbal threats. Ramón Torrejón, interviewed and translated by the author, 23 February 2020; Carmen Enriquez, interviewed and translated by the author, 11 March 2020; Lupe Morales, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020; and Orvilio Mendez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

⁷¹ Orvilio Méndez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

shared, Méndez remained cautiously optimistic and in most instances communicated through body language in tandem with simple words and phrases. In this encounter, however, the older man's anger forced Méndez to question his previous exchanges with white Wisconsinites. If the only difference between this man and other people around town was the degree of their filter, then, maybe everyone viewed him in similar terms. For the older man, Orvilio Méndez's darker skin tone and facial features were enough for him to make the direct association between racially Mexican and undocumented immigrant. The fact that Méndez did not speak fluent English and had an accent solidified his assumption. While the older man's behavior made his prejudice obvious, Méndez began to question other locals' authenticity. While this kind of confrontation was not an everyday occurrence, other dairy workers have shared similar cases of being racially identified as Mexican and undocumented.⁷² Taken together, they inform an overlap of xenophobia and racism in rural Wisconsin that manifested into broad assumptions about Latina/o workers' immigration status and criminality.

The experience of being undocumented in rural Wisconsin was considerably different for those with immediate family living in the US. Having children that attended Wisconsin schools often meant interacting with the local community and exiting the shadows of their dairy farm jobs or homes. Gregori Arroyo and Lupe Morales had three children attend schools in a rural town near Madison, Wisconsin. He remembers,

It was different for us, we all lived here, the whole family...Most of the guys down there [at the farm] were alone, by themselves and we had a family. When we first got here [Wisconsin] the kids had to enter the country school. Nowhere to hide, here we are...You feel tight in your chest or like there's nothing wrong with you but you feel sick. We spent every day worrying about them, but you get better and learn to push it down...At the beginning, I had nightmares that they'd [children] be

⁷² Several of the undocumented workers interviewed for this study experienced similar interactions with locals that felt obliged to verbally assault them with racial slurs. Alicia Lilano, interviewed and translated by the author, 9 January 2020; Yovani Mata, interviewed and translated by the author 13 January 2020; and Nacho Concha, interviewed and translated by the author, 10 January 2020.

abandoned and no one would help them. Then, I could not sleep at all...I got used to it. Then, I made plans to help them if it happens.⁷³

Before they arrived in Wisconsin 1999, Arroyo and Morales had been working and raising a family in the US for several years. In that time, they resided in larger urban areas with ethnic Mexican neighborhoods. While Arroyo never lived without fear, the protection of Latina/o communities did alleviate some of his stress. Among other Mexican immigrants, he made friends and had plans to take care of his kids if he were to be arrested. The density of urban spaces comforted Arroyo, which made the transition to small town Wisconsin even harder. Without the cover of a dense ethnic canopy, Arroyo knew that he and his family would be identified as undocumented. He struggled with anxiety knowing that his children were out in public, which manifested as physical ailments. When he laid down in bed after a long day of work, Arroyo dreamed of being arrested and deported by the INS. Laboring through dairy barns with stress-induced ulcers and migraines, Arroyo's fear had a firm grip on his mental and physical wellbeing. While this could have been debilitating, Arroyo adjusted to the weight of his responsibilities as a father in tandem with the omnipresent threat of deportation, learning to weather his anxiety, be proactive, and anticipate legal and economic problems.

Unlike her husband Gregori, Lupe Morales knew she could not overcome her fears by simply repressing them. Instead, she faced them head on and developed a confidence about raising her family in the US as an undocumented matron. "He [Arroyo] worried a lot," Morales chortles, "but our sons were born strong."⁷⁴ Like so many Mexican immigrants, the Arroyo-Moraleses were a mixed status family—one with people of varying citizenship and immigration statuses. The undocumented immigrant mother of three US-born boys, Morales says, "Every day

⁷³ Gregori Arroyo, interviewed and translated by the author, 28 February 2020.

⁷⁴ Lupe Morales, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

is a risk, you risked by walking through my doorway. But I would do it again and I thank God they are Americans. Maybe we [Arroyo and Morales] will return to Mexico some day and they will visit.”⁷⁵ Whereas Arroyo was more candid about his fears, Morales showed strength by making peace with the inherent dangers of being undocumented for the sake of her sons and the economic opportunities available to them as US citizens. She refused to let the constant threats to her family unit derail her ultimate goal of raising her sons to be intelligent, moral, and successful Americans. Through her mental fortitude as a parent, Morales built her sons up and assuaged their distress over her and Arroyo’s immigration status.

While Gregori Arroyo dealt with his trepidation at work and home, Lupe Morales interacted with the local white community routinely at their sons’ school. When they began school in a small town near La Crosse, Wisconsin, Morales encountered racial profiling. She explains,

My oldest was in high school and the little boys had primary school here [Wisconsin]. They were the only Mexicans for several years. I remember their class pictures made me cry, you could not see their faces because of the lighting... Everyone there was pretty nice, but no one would talk to me. [My son] told me they’re scared too, but I just thought they see me as the Mexican woman who doesn’t speak English...Some of the mothers gave me looks. I don’t know what they saw...we spoke Spanish and maybe they didn’t like that, maybe they didn’t like me or how I looked.⁷⁶

Situated as the only brown bodies in small Wisconsin towns, dairy workers’ spouses and children often confronted racial discrimination in community environments where they were often alienated or shunned as different. Morales mentions that many people were kind, but distant and uncommunicative. Thus, moments when people gave them dark stares or made insensitive comments stood out and defined their experiences. In many instances, dairy workers

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

and their families did not hear verbal slurs or racial epithets. Instead, most discrimination occurred through nasty glares, social rejection, and insensitive comments about their difference as the source of their deficiencies. Another thing that Morales's story makes clear is that dairy workers' confrontations with xenophobia was as much about race as immigration status. As was the case in the American Southwest, many rural Wisconsin residents assumed that because someone looked Mexican there was a high probability that they were also undocumented. Hence, Mexican dairy workers living in the state's small towns regularly encountered subtle discrimination.

La Migra y La Policía

As they grappled with perceptions, threats, and abuse from the local population, undocumented dairy workers also networked with one another to resist police profiling, deportation violence, and further criminalization. Arriving in Wisconsin in 1997, Miguel Guzmán had spent years working in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Kentucky, but felt differently about being undocumented on dairy farms in the upper Midwest. "I thought they [INS] would show up at any moment," Guzmán recalls. "People talk, you know...They got my cousin in Texas, then he lost everything, so of course we were scared...Out here there's nowhere to run."⁷⁷ Isolated on large dairy farms in rural Wisconsin, undocumented Mexicans routinely heard whispers of *la migra*, or immigration authorities, lying in wait at their apartments or in a nearby town. In the 1990s and 2000s, as anti-immigrant sentiment grew across the US and Congress enacted stiffer criminal penalties for unauthorized entrants, Mexican dairy workers felt like easy

⁷⁷ Miguel Guzmán, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020.

targets for deportation.⁷⁸ As brown bodies in white dominated spaces, they were distinct. Whether on the farm or in town, they were often the recipients of long stares, insensitive jokes, and questions about their immigration status. Miguel Guzmán, like many of his fellow undocumented immigrants, expressed the greatest trepidation about his children in Mexico. “What will happen to them without [income]?...They would have to work and live with nothing.”⁷⁹ Fearing immigration raids and the fate of their families, unauthorized dairy workers did what they could to protect their jobs by living isolated lives. Under sustained threat, both real and perceived, they kept close contact with transnational labor networks to stay one step ahead.

On any given day, undocumented dairy workers could receive one or more reports of immigration raids through several interweaving migrant networks. From 1997 to 2003, Miguel Guzmán held full time milking positions at two Wisconsin dairies where he remembers relaying warning messages by phone to friends and relatives at other farms and places of employment. He insists,

After being in the US for many years I had a big group of people I could call... Friends in Chicago, Madison, Minnesota...Atlanta and Texas too. When you meet people, you hear stories, and we had seen *la migra*...Up here [in Wisconsin], we didn't understand how things worked. Were we safe? Everybody had family and buddies and people always talking...because what else can you do...So people talked, but they were wrong a lot...they [INS] never came.⁸⁰

Hoping to keep out of harm's way, undocumented dairy workers like Guzmán used their breaks to keep in close contact with friends and relatives. Through a web of transnational networks, they stayed abreast of federal and local immigration enforcement activities. During the period, a telephone call was the standard mode of communication. Using their boss's office line, Mexican

⁷⁸ Here I am referring to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, the REAL ID Act of 2005, and the failed Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, or HR4437.

⁷⁹ Miguel Guzmán, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

workers had conversations with their network of fellow immigrants and allies, passing along real and perceived threats, and maintaining social connections. In many cases, Mexican workers passed on information from their two- or three-minute phone calls to other migrants on the farm, who then repeated it to their contacts. As cellular phones became more popular and affordable in the late 2000s, dairy workers used text messages. Therefore, even when there was little law enforcement activity in Wisconsin, undocumented Mexicans were actively following immigration raids and deportation campaigns in other parts of the country. Feeling the effects of their undocumented identity, immigrant dairy workers fed each other details, both good and bad, about potential immigration raids. While often heightening migrants' anxiety, these informal communication networks also kept undocumented Mexicans aware of medical resources, better job opportunities, and social events.

While most undocumented dairy workers like Miguel Guzmán were never arrested by immigration authorities, others were not so lucky. Romina Alayez arrived in Wisconsin in 2000 and began working with her partner, Meni Nocha, on a dairy farm near the city of Madison. Having been employed in other parts of the country, the duo knew to look out for law enforcement and *la migra*. While in New Orleans, Nocha nearly escaped an INS raid at a factory where he worked. In the round up, the INS put his name on a wanted list they pulled from company rosters. Two years later, on a sporadic trip to St. Paul's west side, Nocha had a chance encounter with the INS who arrested him outside of a bodega. "What do you do?" Alayez asks. "I cried for days, but I never stopped working. I had kids to pay for and bills...I had to save money to bring him back."⁸¹ Although it would have been healthy to take time off and recover emotionally from the incident, Alayez did not have that luxury. In a split second, her partner had

⁸¹ Romina Alayez, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 September 2020.

been taken from her and her family's income had been slashed in half, but she carried on unabated. In the coming years, she sent Nocha money in Mexico to build a house for their future and raise their two children. For his safety, Alayez refuses to discuss Nocha's movements since his deportation.

While immigration authorities were not a daily sight in America's Dairyland, local police were, and although they did not have jurisdiction over immigration enforcement, they did racially profile and threaten Mexican dairy workers. On a rainy April morning in 2002, police in northern Wisconsin pulled over undocumented dairy worker Yovani Mata on his way home from the farm. "Everything ran around in my head, man." Mata comments. "I was thinking that was it. Fuck! I'm done now."⁸² Finding him with a valid driver's license, car insurance, and state registration, the officer claimed that Mata had a tail light out, but when he pumped his brakes to check, all of the rear bulbs worked. "He didn't want to let me go, but I did nothing wrong...so he looked at me for a few seconds and told me to 'unda-lay' on home."⁸³ Intending to say *ándale*, or "go along," the officer's brutalized Spanish was a passive aggressive jab at Mata that made him feel hated and scared. Since he had not broken any laws and there was nothing wrong with his vehicle, Mata reasons that the police officer had marked him as illegal and was fishing for a reason to bring him in, but could not find an offense to hold him on. For Mata and other undocumented Mexicans in Wisconsin, every instance of near arrest or confrontation with police magnified their anxieties. Not only did they have to stay attune to the happenings of immigration enforcement, but they also needed to plan around the local police. Understanding that police were just as likely to exhibit racist behavior as small-town locals, Mata began to fear public

⁸² Yovani Mata, interviewed and translated by the author, 13 January 2020.

⁸³ Ibid.

places and stay home more. In less than a year, his mental health had deteriorated to the point where he felt compelled to return to Mexico.

Similar to Yovani Mata, undocumented dairy workers' fear grew as they confronted local police who either insinuated or threatened to arrest them and "call immigration."⁸⁴ On a summer afternoon in 2003, Gregori Arroyo had an exchange with a local officer. He adds,

It happened at the gasoline station [*deep breath*]...He [officer] was on the street, driving up towards me. All the way up the street, here comes *la policía*... 'immigration's coming for you boys,' he tells me. 'You know *la migra*, right son.' And then he drove off...Well, I drove back to work for my hours and told everyone they were coming for us. I didn't know what to do. I refused to leave the barn. I couldn't go out.⁸⁵

Coming face to face with local law enforcement, Arroyo discerned the officer's meaning by his body language, tone, and use of *la migra*. Over his few years on Wisconsin dairy farms, he had heard about imminent INS raids, but the threat of local police was something new to Arroyo. The uncertainty of what rural officers could do drove Mexican migrants' anxiety and in this instance caused Arroyo to have a nervous breakdown. Having assumed that immigration authorities would soon descend from helicopters, he spent the next 36 hours at work until his boss forced him to go home. As Arroyo's experience reflects, threats by local officers against undocumented Mexicans were just as traumatic as those from the INS. Migrants understood that Wisconsin county law enforcement were always around and maintained intimate relationships with their rural constituents, which meant they had the resources to track people down in the community. Not knowing exactly what local law enforcement could and could not do, undocumented dairy workers avoided places that police frequented and became further immobilized and chained to work and home.

⁸⁴ Gregori Arroyo, interviewed and translated by the author, 28 February 2020.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Mexican American Meeting Grounds & Interethnic Community

These trying experiences with the majority white population inspired undocumented dairy workers to seek out allies in Wisconsin's Mexican American communities. From their country farms, undocumented Mexicans made trips to ethnic businesses and neighborhoods in regional cities. Importantly, it was the population of recently naturalized Mexicans under IRCA that had started to transform Wisconsin's demographic make-up and created interethnic meeting grounds in the forms of groceries, restaurants, and sports gatherings. Initially, they helped immigrants by making Mexican-ness more common outside of Milwaukee. Despite immigration law further criminalizing post-IRCA immigrants without documentation and perpetuating the notion of Mexicans as dangerous criminals, American citizens of Mexican descent became and remained allies. Despite being spread across vast rural landscapes unconnected by public transportation or city blocks, new Mexican arrivals integrated themselves and added to the state's growing Latina/o population. While spending their money at Mexican American-owned stores and restaurants, and participating in sports leagues that crisscrossed Wisconsin, dairy workers forged bonds with Mexican American citizens. In places like Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Madison, undocumented Mexicans and Mexican Americans developed friendships and formed romantic entanglements. Together, they set the foundation for a new interethnic culture that persevered because of the constant flow of newly arriving immigrants from Mexico. With the support of this growing and evolving culture, undocumented dairy workers were better able to resist the common feelings of isolation, immobility, and fear that pervaded their lives in rural Wisconsin. In the rural areas surrounding Wisconsin's more moderate cities, undocumented dairy workers connected with Americans of Mexican descent, broadened their social circles, and made clear the persistent linkages between racism and immigration in the US.

Friends and Contacts

After landing on a dairy farm in a small town, Mexicans used their migrant networks to find ethnic Mexican places or neighborhoods in nearby cities. During the 1990s, Green Bay's Mexican American population swelled largely due to the amnesty provisions in IRCA. As their population expanded and the community evolved alongside it, ethnic Mexican businesses emerged across town. Located roughly 20 miles outside the city, Jesús Rivera started making a bi-weekly drive there to visit a Mexican grocery store where he befriended the owners. He elaborates,

Green Bay has people, there are families of Mexicans there...yes, I mean Mexican American citizens. I didn't think about that really, I just needed a good tortilla. But I was only going to the [grocery] store. I saw the same people every time. The owner, José, introduced himself and I told him about working on the dairy...I met a nice woman, Marta, who is José's cousin and she worked at the cheese factory. I was going over there every day...When we split up I kept going to José, of course, he had the good tortilla.⁸⁶

Among Green Bay's growing Latina/o community, Rivera found a place to satisfy his craving for the flavors of Mexico and meet people that enhanced his life. José, like many of Green Bay's Mexican American residents, had gained citizenship in the early 1990s. Once he became a naturalized citizen in the early 1990s, José married Angela and they opened the business. Once he met José and his wife Angela, Rivera's world changed as he gained access to a broad network of Mexican Americans that had settled in the region a decade before. Rivera felt safe in the grocery, as did many other undocumented Mexicans working in Wisconsin, because it was a place that projected Mexicanness and had familiar looking faces. There, he met Marta who he dated periodically for the next three years. Between the Mexican cultural connections and the excitement of a social life, Rivera escaped the loneliness of his dairy farm life. Only being a

⁸⁶ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

twenty-five-minute drive from Green Bay, Rivera branched out rather than passively exist in an isolated environment. While his roommates and coworkers drank and slept away their off days, Rivera tapped into a growing Latina/o space and found common ground at an ethnic Mexican business.

Like Green Bay, Eau Claire, Wisconsin was another place where IRCA's amnesty provisions helped create a surge in the Mexican American population. Living in a small town nearby without public transportation, Miguel Guzmán had no choice but to buy an old truck to get around. When he recognized something wrong with the engine, Guzmán panicked to find a mechanic. He explains,

At first it was just about needing an automobile and someone who would speak Spanish. I had an old Chevy truck and I didn't know if it was all legal...So, I looked around for a Mexican guy to take it to, right?...I find this guy Enrique and we spoke the same language. I'm not referring to Spanish, just life. He understood me, and I understood him...I started working over by Enrique, and we would drink beers on Thursdays. Do what we do...We are friends, yes, I called him yesterday...I sent him a lot of business too. He owes me!⁸⁷

Without proximity to groceries, gas stations, or banks in the rural hills of northern Wisconsin, having a vehicle is essential for most working adults. This was no different for Miguel Guzmán. When his pickup began to rattle, he was alarmed not because he could not afford to fix it, but because it meant he might have to interact with a white local. To avoid that risk, he reached out to numerous fellow undocumented workers in his network and eventually located Enrique's body shop. It was there that the two men forged a bond of trust and friendship that eased Guzmán's fear and gave him hope. For months he had spent most of his free time inside a weathered trailer somewhere in the great unknown of Wisconsin's northern country. After befriending Enrique, Guzmán had a new outlook on life. Through his new companion, Guzmán made numerous other

⁸⁷ Miguel Guzmán, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020.

connections with Mexican Americans living in the same neighborhood that gave him a sense of ethnic community. In time, Guzmán became a bridge: bringing customers to Enrique's shop, introducing citizens of Mexican descent with undocumented immigrants, and making their collective social circles more supportive of one another. In this regard, Enrique and Guzmán's friendship helped create spaces of cultural exchange for Mexicans and Mexican Americans in rural Wisconsin.

While Miguel Guzmán and Jesús Rivera benefited from social connections, other undocumented dairy workers developed full-scale networks that helped them keep in daily communication of news from municipal contacts and rumors of immigration raids. After his time on two dairy farms, Orvilio Méndez rotated through four factory jobs in the upper Midwest before reentering the dairy industry in 2006. During the interim, he had connected with people from Milwaukee's Mexican-descent community. Fortunately for him, a couple of his new acquaintances were tapped into the newly formed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that partially replaced the INS. Méndez comments,

In the countryside, you heard a lot, which maybe means you heard nothing. Oh, this person says there's going to be a problem here, but then you wait and wait and nothing happens. There's no trust... These guys [in Milwaukee] had real information, you could check in the papers... They were citizens, Mexican Americans, and they were helping the illegal folks. We [Méndez's undocumented worker network] trusted them, to carry our fear, because they showed us they had credibility.⁸⁸

As a rural dairy worker, Méndez had information coming at him from all directions without a way to make sense of it. Once in Milwaukee, he used his natural charm to make connections in the Mexican immigrant and Mexican American communities. Soon, as Méndez explains, he met a few people with connections to the "state government" and "immigration."⁸⁹ The information

⁸⁸ Orvilio Méndez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

he learned helped quell his fears about being arrested and detained for unlawful entry, but it was not just for him. He shared his findings with a wide-ranging network of undocumented workers that he remained in contact with through intermediaries so as to conceal the identities of those involved. In this transnational web of people, Méndez relayed information and received knowledge about potential raids and undercover operations. Behind the scenes at neighborhood bars, restaurants, and stores, Méndez socialized and networked with people, drumming up stories and details on INS and ICE operations. While fear played a role in motivating his endless efforts to gain information, he was also affected by the way that US media depicted Mexican immigrants as “drunken banditos.”⁹⁰ For both reasons, Méndez worked overtime to resist immigration enforcement, serving as a critical link in a long chain of undocumented immigrants that worked hard to protect each other.

A New Interethnic Culture

As undocumented dairy workers and Mexican Americans became intertwined in Wisconsin, they created a new interethnic culture that blossomed around food and sports. Although religion seemed to be important to undocumented dairy workers, it rarely came up in conversation.⁹¹ Nearly all of the undocumented workers quoted in this chapter explain how they discovered a new kind of Mexican American culture in Wisconsin. Things that were familiar to them in their hometowns took on a new meaning and significance as they became interwoven with the lives and communities of Americans of Mexican descent. Growing up in the high mountains of Veracruz, as many undocumented dairy workers did, they were familiar with the products farmed locally like beans, chiles, corn, and various herbs. In Wisconsin, though, they

⁹⁰ Orvilio Méndez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

⁹¹ While Catholic, Pentecostal, and Lutheran churches all created Spanish language masses to serve the population in the later 2000s, undocumented dairy workers remained reluctant to go.

confronted a different climate that did not accommodate all of their traditional crops. Still, many cultivated gardens during the spring and summer months, learning to grow items like strawberries, peas, and cucumbers that were common to the region. In small apartment and trailer home kitchens around rural Wisconsin, dairy workers reinvented their traditional dishes by combining the flavors of home with those of the upper Midwest. In addition to gardening, others partook in soccer leagues that served as a space of interethnic exchange and collaboration. While some dairy workers were too isolated to find local soccer leagues made up of Mexican and Mexican American players, those in the highly concentrated dairy regions near Green Bay, Manitowoc, Madison, and Eau Claire had more options.

Gregori Arroyo and Lupe Morales spent their childhoods farming in the high mountains of Veracruz and maintaining home gardens with their favorite fruits, vegetables, and herbs. When they moved to Wisconsin in 1999, they had hoped to replicate these green spaces with the imagery and flavor of Veracruz. Morales contends,

The first season [*scoffs*] I tried to make it the same. I bought art and vegetables and flowers from home and everything died. [*Laughs*]...I drove to Madison and went to flower stores until I found one with a Mexican woman...I was embarrassed that I couldn't speak English. [Marta] didn't care. We spoke different Spanish...So, we figured out a way to order the chiles from Mexico. We both cultivated them and [Marta] loved it. Then, all of her Mexican friends started growing these chiles.⁹²

Wanting to replicate a piece of her home in Wisconsin, Morales did not think about the differing climates, planting seasons, and harvest time. "I'm a farmer," Morales exclaims! "What was I thinking?!"⁹³ With her extensive background in farming, Morales quickly deduced that she had made an error and would need to become more educated on the soil and weather conditions in Dairyland. Unfortunately, none of her or her husband's coworkers gardened and she felt

⁹² Lupe Morales, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

uncomfortable approaching her boss or any of the other white farm managers. Thus, she decided to make the short drive to Madison. Using her Spanish to English dictionary, Morales scoured a payphone phonebook and found several listings for garden businesses. Next, she unfurled a map of the city and pinpointed the locations, marking her driving directions with a pencil. After failing to find a person with “Mexican looks” at the first three places she stopped, Morales noticed a young woman with light brown skin and dark features. As Morales approached, she recognized a *Virgen de Guadalupe* charm on the woman’s wrist and knew this was her woman. Marta took to Morales immediately. Ninety minutes later, the two had shared life stories, ordered Mexican style chiles from a wholesaler in Texas, and exchanged information. Over the next few years, Marta integrated Morales into her Mexican American friend circle and together they started a small gardening collective that experimented with various Mexican chiles. While it was nothing new for Marta and her friends to desire the flavors of Mexico, Morales brought a spark to their group that inspired new growth.

In addition to chiles, beans were also a fundamental crop grown in the high mountains of Veracruz where Jesús Rivera grew up. Following his encounters with anti-Mexican locals and threatening police, Rivera channeled his negative energy into creating a bean garden next to his trailer. He explains,

Marta [Rivera’s girlfriend] asked me why I was angry and I didn’t know. I never think about those things...maybe it was the police, and always being scared and illegal. It made me think of home and my grandmother’s cooking...I missed it a lot. Then, I decided I could cultivate the best black beans. But I could only make good beans, the Wisconsin black beans, and that was okay, people liked them...People remembered me from the beans...My beans made me friends. They started asking José [Rivera’s friend/grocery store owner] ‘When are Rivera’s beans coming? [Laughs]⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

Rivera needed an outlet. His fears and frustrations boiled over into anger that seeped out of him without him knowing. When he finally took the time to think about his state of mind, Rivera recognized that he had been acting out and hurting others unconsciously. He also realized that when he became sad, it was the memory of his grandmother's food that brought him some relief. To address his situation in a positive manner, he decided to recreate the dishes that she had made for him as a child and cultivate the specific vegetables and herbs needed to do so. While he had hoped to maintain the flavors of home, he ended up reinventing them by experimenting with new combinations and incorporating Wisconsin-based crops with the more traditional beans and chiles of his native Veracruz. With access to Mexican foods at his friend José's grocery store in nearby Green Bay, Rivera continued to use traditional ingredients as he expanded his palette. Furthermore, the black beans became a great way to share his culture and endear himself to others. While spending time at José's, Rivera handed out small bags of beans to people and told them the story of his grandmother. As his social circle expanded, Rivera's harvest became a fixture of José's grocery and their friends' summer parties. By making the decision to plant a garden, Rivera had changed outlook on life and redirected his unhappiness into a productive hobby that helped him establish connections with people and make an impact on the local Mexican American community.

Conclusion

While relatively few in number, histories of relations between Americans of Mexican descent and Mexican immigrants have often focused on tensions revolving around the topic of immigration.⁹⁵ In the late 1940s and 1950s, in the aftermath of the Second World War and during

⁹⁵ Arguably the most comprehensive and best of these histories remains David G. Gutiérrez's *Walls and Mirrors*. More recently, a handful of historians have developed a better understanding of how Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants have formed solidarities:

the prolonged Bracero program, the Mexican American civil rights movement blossomed and changed the politics and social dynamics of ethnic Mexican communities. During the global conflict over 350,000 Americans of Mexican descent enlisted in the US military.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, Mexicans and Mexican Americans on the home front supported the war effort by filling positions in the rapidly expanding industrial sectors.⁹⁷ As millions of workers shifted into production jobs or the military, the US signed an executive order establishing the bracero program, formally the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, which brought 300,000 Mexican men into the US as guest workers from 1942 to 1945.⁹⁸ As the war ended, returning Mexican American veterans and their communities felt emboldened to renounce their treatment as second class citizens, challenge the US racial hierarchy, and demand equal citizenship.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the US and Mexico prolonged the bracero program.¹⁰⁰ Since its creation in 1929, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Mexican American civil rights organization, had excluded Mexican nationals fearing that they would perpetuate negative stereotypes and undermine the group's campaigns for legitimacy and respect.¹⁰¹ By the late 1940s and 1950s, as mainstream Americans decried the advances of undocumented "wetbacks," LULAC leaders redoubled their anti-immigration stance and further stratified Mexican Americans as a class above Mexican immigrants.¹⁰² In the American Southwest especially, tensions between Mexican American citizens and Mexican

⁹⁶ Lorena Oropeza, "Proving Valor in War Seeking Equality Back Home," in *Latino Heritage Initiatives Fighting on Two Fronts: Latinos in the Military*, US National Park Service, 2015.

⁹⁷ Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 160.

⁹⁸ Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 23-24.

⁹⁹ Richard Griswold del Castillo, "Civil Rights on the Home Front: Leaders and Organizations," in *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, ed. by Richard Griswold del Castillo (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2008), 74.

¹⁰⁰ Lori Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants. And the California Farmworkers Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 94-95.

¹⁰¹ Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 180.

¹⁰² Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 143 & 165. In 1953-54 the US Immigration and Naturalization Service performed a mass repatriation/deportation movement called Operation Wetback.

immigrants increased as the former fought for equal rights and distanced themselves from the taboo of undocumented status.¹⁰³ LULAC's influence extended to Wisconsin, but since the regional population of Mexican immigrants remained small, interethnic clashes were less frequent and had a smaller impact on relations. In Milwaukee, despite the presence of a LULAC chapter, the Mexican community fostered mutual aid societies that helped immigrants and organized interethnic celebrations like Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day—a practice that grew substantially in the last decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁴

While certain Mexican American rights organizations and activists changed their stances on undocumented immigration in the 1970s and 1980s, ethnic Mexican communities in American cities continued to experience internal conflicts.¹⁰⁵ In her study of the Los Angeles suburb of La Puente, California in the 1990s, scholar Gilda Laura Ochoa explains that these continued tensions must be understood in the context of preexisting beliefs and external influences that affect Mexican Americans' political views on unauthorized immigration and shape their interactions with Mexican immigrants.¹⁰⁶ At the time, La Puente had experienced recent growth in its Mexican-origin population, and can be viewed as representative of some of the shifts that occurred in cities and suburban spaces across the country. Ochoa centers her

¹⁰³ Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23, 158-59, & 172. While the 1940s and 1950s were a critical period of transition, historian Cynthia Orozco pinpoints the 1929 LULAC convention in Harlingen, Texas as the key turning point when ethnic Mexican spaces became sites of contention where the politics of race and citizenship created divisions between Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals. Cynthia Orozco, *Agent of Change: Adela Sloss-Vento, Mexican American Civil Rights Activist and Texas Feminist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 29.

¹⁰⁴ "A short history of Milwaukee's celebration of Mexican culture on the Summerfest grounds," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 19 August 2019, accessed 13 September 2023, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/galleries/entertainment/festivals/2019/08/19/short-history-milwaukees-celebration-mexican-culture-summerfest-grounds/2051164001/>.

¹⁰⁵ For more information on how Mexican American activists and organizations began to fight for the rights of undocumented Mexican immigrants see, Jimmy Patiño, *Raza Sí, Migra No: Chicano Movement Struggles for Immigrant Rights in San Diego* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 15-18.

¹⁰⁶ Gilda Laura Ochoa, "Mexican Americans' Attitudes toward and Interactions with Mexican Immigrants: A Qualitative Analysis of Conflict and Cooperation," *Social Science Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (March 2000), 84-85.

discussion on “English Only” policy debates in local schools that came in response to these demographic changes. Pulling from school records and oral histories, she shows that Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants simultaneously engaged in conflict and cooperation. Discussing their attitudes on undocumented immigration, Mexican Americans acknowledged that their shared identities helped create solidarities behind issues like California Proposition 187 and affirmative action, but that cultural factors like Spanish language tended to be a source of both tension and connection. Although some Mexican Americans united behind their commitment to a common language, others were repulsed when Mexican immigrants did not speak English. Similarly, Mexican American reported being mocked by Mexican immigrants, because their Spanish was inadequate. In these cases, Mexican Americans’ and Mexican immigrants’ feelings on shared identity through language was deeply situated in their personal feelings about assimilation and acculturation. In other words, what brought some people together drove others apart, creating ambivalence in interethnic Mexican relations. While previous instances of interethnic conflict often focused on economic competition, the story of La Puente reveals that Mexican Americans’ disapproval of Mexican immigrants in the 1990s shifted towards language, values, and cultural practices.

The case of undocumented Mexican dairy workers and Mexican Americans in Wisconsin during the 1990s and 2000s, presents a different example of interethnic exchange, emphasizing solidarity. The culture shock of migrating to Wisconsin from rural Mexico came in many forms, but the experience of being racialized as socially and culturally inferior was something that all many people of Mexican descent had encountered. “It doesn’t leave you,” Jesus Rivera explains, “because you see it everywhere. And I’m a good man. I’m not a special guy [*laughs*], but I am

Mexican. So, I guess that means I'm bad? I'm dangerous? I'm a dirty Mexican?"¹⁰⁷ Describing his residual feelings after numerous encounters with bigotry, Rivera highlights its lasting effects. Situated in rural areas with limited populations that were majority white of European descent, racism could seem inescapable. While some immigrants could point to a handful of personal interactions that defined their experience engaging with mainstream Wisconsin, Rivera makes clear that the practice of racialization and racism never subsided. If it had not happened to you, it had happened to your father, uncle, brother, sister, or cousin. In his opinion, Rivera was an average guy whose politeness and agreeable nature made him easy to get along with. There was nothing in his behavior or appearance that he felt warranted harassment. This made it all the more disconcerting that he had been the victim of racial epithets and branded a potential danger to the community, because of his skin tone and cultural background.

These experiences were not reserved for immigrants. When Jesus Rivera interacted with his friends at work, at a local store, or over the phone, he regularly heard about moments of racialization and overt racism. "Sure, my cousin was on the phone with me from Michigan and he's telling me they look at us the same there too. That's what Silvia [Rivera's friend] said to me yesterday. We aren't going to wake up one day and be white, this is our reality. We live it every day."¹⁰⁸ Rivera's good friend Sylvia, an American born woman of Mexican descent, confirms that the experience of being brown in America did not discriminate between people of differing immigration statuses. On the contrary, Rivera uses "we" here to emphasize that shared experiences, language, and mutual cultural appreciation drove Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants together in the small cities and rural villages of Wisconsin. Being brown in rural Wisconsin's predominantly white environment meant racial differences were easy to identify,

¹⁰⁷ Jesús Rivera, interviewed and translated by the author, 17 March 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

but ethnic distinctions among people of Mexican descent were not, especially for those unfamiliar with Latina/o diversity more broadly. Thus, it was common for Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants to be stereotyped and racially profiled in similar ways. Aware of these practices, many people of Mexican descent in Wisconsin could not consciously disassociate themselves from the experience of being constructed as racially Mexican, and therefore categorized as inferior based on generalizations of their culture and social values. As Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrant dairy workers came into greater contact, they communed over their common treatment, shared experiences, and proportionally small representation in the region. Through these connective tissues, ethnic Mexicans of various backgrounds forged a body of relations and built interethnic community across Wisconsin's rural towns and small cities.

CHAPTER 4

Negotiating Power and Workers' Rights in Dairyland, 1996-2009

“The world was quiet,” Eduardo Xocopil recalls, “and bam! The alarm knocked me out of the bed. 3:30. Oh shit, time to go!”¹ Stubbing his toe on a jagged floorboard in the hallway, Xocopil stumbled into a shared bathroom, showered, got dressed, and raced off to start his twelve-hour shift at a dairy farm near Green Bay. This November morning was like any other in rural Wisconsin: quiet, dark, and cold. “When you’re in early it’s all about catching up, getting pace...It’s fast in there and you gotta be running from the start.”² After taking his first dairy job in 1997, Xocopil developed a routine where he not only completed his daily responsibilities, but also shadowed the calf manager. His efforts made a significant impression on his employer, who extended the young dairy worker a \$0.07 per-hour raise in exchange for more responsibilities and a “promotion” to eighty-hour weeks. “That’s what I’m here to do,” Xocopil exclaims. “Learn and make money for my family, so why wouldn’t I learn how to do everything? Complaining about more work? Hah! The more I did the more I am worth ...That’s it. I’m a father, a husband, I work for my family, I provide.”³ Despite entering an industry with low wages and virtually no prospects for the everyday worker, Xocopil bargained for higher wages, worked his way up to middle management, and became one piece of a broader movement that helped reshape power dynamics between undocumented dairy workers and their employers in America’s Dairyland.

Eduardo Xocopil’s efforts to overcome exploitation came at the tail-end of a century in which millions of Mexican and Mexican American workers had fought for their rights in US

¹ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

fields and factories, with varying degrees of success. In 1903, for instance, Japanese and Mexican American sugar-beet workers and contractors formed the Japanese Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) and led a successful strike against growers in Oxnard, California.⁴ Despite their victory, as Frank Barajas explains, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) refused to support the organization because of its Japanese membership. Meanwhile, labor shortages led growers to offer higher wages, attracting an excess of workers and inspiring Japanese and Mexican American contractors to exit the JMLA. Absent their support, the Association withered away. Focused on the 1940s, historian Mario Sifuentes shows that Mexican guest workers (or *braceros*) combatted oppressive management in the fields, canneries, and forests of Oregon.⁵ Using regional labor shortages and employers' legal obligation to finance their trips back to Mexico to their advantage, Mexican laborers challenged the status quo by creating social lives, voicing displeasure with low wages and poor working conditions, and holding strikes.⁶ Nevertheless, their power was only temporary, as short-term contracts and legal vulnerabilities closed off possibilities to any lasting successful struggle. By contrast, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrant experiences on Wisconsin dairy farms near the turn of the twentieth century were distinctive in that they had limited competition with other ethnic groups and worked in a full-time capacity unbound by temporary agreements or harvest periods.⁷ As such, they created job security by taking advantage of labor shortages, building knowledge and skills, sustaining resistance campaigns, and expanding their transnational networks. Their stories are important for

⁴ Frank P. Barajas, *Curious Unions: Mexican American Workers and Resistance in Oxnard, California, 1898-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 138-39.

⁵ Mario Jimenez Sifuentes, *Of Forests and Fields: Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 10-35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ I chose to break out "undocumented Nahua" and "Mexican immigrants" to emphasize that although indigenous Nahua from the high mountains of Veracruz made up a significant portion of the dairy labor force, many others were Mexican origin peoples from other regions.

understanding how undocumented and racialized laborers in the late twentieth century adapted to rapidly industrializing agricultural sectors and exploited tenuous power dynamics to their advantage.

Despite sharing many of the same concerns as citizen workers—wages, health care, and worksite safety—undocumented immigrants have frequently been excluded from the US Labor movement and its history. Throughout the twentieth century, the AFL maintained that foreign-born laborers dragged down wages and most unions excluded them from their ranks.⁸ Even the Mexican American union, the United Farm Workers (UFW), banned immigrants from its membership. While UFW president Cesar Chavez explained their opposition as a struggle against unfair competition, the union was far more concerned with undocumented Mexicans shedding a negative light on their members. Despite their non-violent creed, the UFW actively helped the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) police their membership and the US-Mexico border.⁹ Although the union formally welcomed undocumented immigrants during the 1975 UFW convention, it was not until Chavez's death in 1993 that the UFW stopped assisting the INS.¹⁰ Whether in the mines of Pennsylvania or the fields of California, immigrant workers found themselves excluded from US labor unions regardless of an organization's ethnic makeup. In need of greater representation to protect their economic vulnerabilities, undocumented laborers have often been excluded from the advantages gained by American workers' organizations. Historically, while union labor has been known to increase wages for all, there has

⁸ The AFL-CIO did not formally change its stance on immigration until 2000 under the leadership of John Sweeney. Timothy J. Minchin, "‘Labor is back?’: The AFL-CIO during the presidency of John J. Sweeney, 1995–2009," *Labor History* 54, no. 4 (2013): 400-01.

⁹ Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 137 & 150.

¹⁰ Frank Bardacke, "The UFW and the Undocumented," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (Spring 2013): 168; and Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 293.

also been the perception and reality that employers have recruited unauthorized immigrants as a way of reducing workers' hourly rates by increasing competition for jobs.¹¹ Ultimately, though, unauthorized immigrants created a new landscape outside of organized labor---one which needs deeper engagement and incorporation into the field of labor history.

In this regard, the histories of Mexican American unionism and civil rights legislation directly inform how unauthorized laborers' experienced life on Wisconsin dairy farms. Beginning in the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) broke off from the AFL to expand union organizing to industrial workers, and identified people of Mexican descent as critical to their unionization of the Southwest.¹² Historian Zaragosa Vargas notes that the CIO gained support from Tejana/o participants in the pecan shellers' strike of 1938 in San Antonio, Texas.¹³ Enduring police violence and imprisonment, the strikers pushed the Southern Pecan Shelling Company for a closed shop, higher pay, and a grievance committee. After winning these concessions, the US Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), quashing the shellers' gains by instituting a minimum wage that impelled companies to mechanize and eliminate thousands of jobs.¹⁴ In addition, the law exempted agricultural and domestic workers from "maximum hour(s) or overtime compensation," which scholars rightfully identify as a provision intended to discriminate against African American, Mexican, and Mexican American workers for the benefit of US agribusiness.¹⁵ While labor scholars mark a critical shift with the

¹¹ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 58; and Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 54.

¹² Justin Akers Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio: Magonistas, Socialists, Wobblies, and Communists in the Mexican-American Working Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 118.

¹³ Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 134-43.

¹⁴ Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, 29 U.S.C. § 203.

¹⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Pursuit of Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95-98; and Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-193* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 293-99.

Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited “employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin,” its positive effects did not extend to unauthorized immigrants, and mainstream labor continued to vilify them as a source of unfair competition.¹⁶ Although scholars have shown how some unions embraced Latinx immigrants’ issues as their own beginning in the 1980s, the modern dairy industry remained outside their periphery.¹⁷ Nevertheless, accounts of unauthorized dairy employees are important to our understanding of labor history, because they provide a critical lens into the experiences and organizing efforts of a new group of workers who helped redefine a US industry.

In addition, this study contributes to working-class history by showing how undocumented Nahua and Mexicans employed in America’s Dairyland developed direct action techniques and informal associations akin to the formal US labor movement.¹⁸ As they became experts in milk production, undocumented dairy workers recognized that farmers could not tolerate high employee turnover given the industry’s labor shortages. Unlike a common factory where production machines turned on or off at the flip of a switch, cows had no start or stop button. Knowing this, workers used threats of stoppages, walkouts, and quitting to earn concessions. Unlike mainstream unions that focused on generating power in numbers and pushing US businesses to the negotiating table, undocumented dairy laborers functioned on a much smaller scale, in part due to the limited staff at dairies. For instance, if an operation with

¹⁶ The employment anti-discrimination provisions in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were extended to authorized immigrants under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The quote comes from Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Civil Rights Act of 1964 § 7, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq (1964).

¹⁷ Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers And the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage, 2006); and Leon Fink, *Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁸ As they started jobs on Wisconsin dairy farms in the mid-1990s, the Midwest farm labor movement (represented largely by the Farm Labor Organizing Committee or FLOC) had faded and US labor and immigration law continued to have adverse effects on the country’s predominantly Mexican farmworkers. FLOC, headed out of Ohio, remained active in farmworkers’ issues through the 2010s, but dairy farming has never been their priority. Jorge Durand, Douglass S. Massey, and Karen A. Pren, “Double Disadvantage: Unauthorized Mexicans in the U.S. Labor Market,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 666, no. 1 (summer 2016): 80.

1,200 milk cows employed thirty people, then no more than twelve to fifteen people would be onsite at any given time. Unable to depend on an oversupply of labor to fill voids swiftly, farm owners relied on their tight-knit immigrant crews to cover for their sick and absent coworkers. While this all-hands-on-deck approach provided dairy farmers with a limited safety net, it empowered unauthorized laborers to learn various aspects of the business and assemble critical skill sets. Understanding their bosses' precarious position and the indispensability of their labor, undocumented workers took advantage of these critical moments to gain greater control over the workplace and reshape the dynamics of power across the industry. In this system run by casual labor—one defined by temporary or part-time employment without formal contracts—undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants used their business savvy and labor expertise to bargain for improved wages, schedules, and workplaces.

Foregrounding the ways that dairy farmers transitioned their family-centric, paternalistic management systems to large-scale operations, this chapter shows how undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants challenged and reshaped industry labor structures by negotiating power on a community level. It details how undocumented dairy workers learned from their familial and kinship networks that spanned from the upper Midwest to southern Mexico. Through conversations at immigrants' homes in Wisconsin, international phone calls to Mexico, and barn floor discussions, Mexican dairy employees shared critical knowledge on farmers' needs, job opportunities, and industry pay rates, which they exploited to create micro-power advantages over owners. As examples of hard-working success stories spread, more undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants angled to make themselves indispensable industry experts and seek job offers from other farms, which they used as leverage to gain bargaining advantages.¹⁹ As more

¹⁹ In addition to the workplace, undocumented workers also negotiated their living conditions as housing was commonly included with their wages. Unlike migrant camps where single structures housed dozens of agricultural

earned promotions in Wisconsin, they developed a transnational network of community power. By applying their occupational negotiation skills on an individual basis, undocumented Mexicans compelled owners to not only increase wages, but to take greater account of their employees' needs and make managerial adjustments to satisfy them, thereby creating better conditions throughout the workforce. Surprisingly, despite the ongoing threat of deportation, undocumented workers on Wisconsin dairy farms in the 1990s and 2000s negotiated power in the industry. Following workers' encounters with white farm owners, this chapter examines the power dynamics instituted by employers and the techniques used by laborers to chip away at racial hierarchies, generate the power to change owners' management styles, and develop critical negotiation skills that they transferred into the fight for workers' economic stability and collective rights.

Paternalism and Labor

When undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants started in the dairy industry during the 1990s, they encountered large-scale farming systems situated in a history of industrial paternalism, or welfare capitalism, with roots in British and New England mill towns of the nineteenth century.²⁰ This managerial technique of providing financial and social benefits to

laborers, undocumented dairy workers usually lived in trailer homes with three or four people. Migrant camps were commonplace on large-scale US farms in the twentieth century and served to house seasonal workers and their families. While many remained in these tight spaces throughout their Dairyland tenure, some negotiated private places as the terms of a new position. For a broader analysis of migrant camps and their conditions see Verónica Martínez-Matsuda, *Migrant Citizenship: Race, Rights, and Reform in the U.S. Farm Labor Camp Program* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 4-5; Ismael García-Colón, *Colonial Migrants at the Heart of Empire: Puerto Rican Workers on U.S. Farms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 131-39; and Valdés, *Al Norte*, 64-68.

²⁰ For a broad understanding of welfare capitalism and social welfare in US history, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sanford M. Jacoby, *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

one's employees emerged as a response to organized labor. Industrialists believed that by furnishing some of workers' demands, they could retain employees without having to deal with a union. In his seminal study of steelworkers, David Brody explains how US companies responded to labor organizing in the 1890s and 1900s by fashioning themselves as patriarchs and providing social welfare to their employees.²¹ Like other owners of mass production enterprises, steel executives created management systems by integrating notions of male-dominated family hierarchy and patronage to structure their relationships with workers. To entice prospective employees into accepting the terms of an exploitative workplace, owners offered wage hikes, promotions, bonuses, pensions, and subsidized housing. Under the guise of the benevolent protector, ownership put workers in residences close to the steel plants, which were often isolated from other forms of employment. Ultimately, steel companies created a paternalistic labor system that coerced workers to consent to a relationship of reciprocity and obligation. In a similar vein, scholars have shown how companies in coal, meatpacking, and other US industries adopted their own brands of welfare capitalism around the turn of the twentieth century.²² In contrast to labor relationships in European countries, where the state became responsible for social welfare, in the US business owners felt a sense of stewardship and paternal duty to their employees, which they translated into a distinctly American approach to company-based social welfare.²³ Importantly, this had the added benefits of keeping government small and tempering labor activism.

²¹ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (1960; Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998), 85-91.

²² Elizabeth Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 104; Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 85.

²³ Jacoby, *Modern Manors*, 3-6.

While union activity compelled factory and mining companies to tinker with systems of welfare capitalism, labor shortages during World War I inspired large-scale agriculture to try its hand at paternalism.²⁴ In one such case, historian Devra Weber shows how California cotton growers financed new housing and supported health and educational programs for farmworkers as a tool to retain laborers.²⁵ Although a surge in migration from Mexico to the US during the 1920s inspired a number of agricultural sectors to retreat from paternalistic practices, Weber demonstrates how some cotton farm owners endeared themselves to migrant workers by maintaining housing and relief funds that paid for employee expenses like funeral costs.²⁶ By improving conditions and offering a sense of protection, growers sought to create labor communities that would stabilize a year-round workforce, promote productivity, provide access to family labor, and enhance recruitment through internal, often transnational, networks.²⁷ While migrant laborers' full-time employment reduced labor shortages in the 1920s, the Great Depression and the subsequent bracero program (1942-64) curtailed competition over farmworkers nationwide and convinced most California cotton growers to abandon paternalistic methods. Without the pressure of legal protections or enforcement agencies, and with limited

²⁴ Several agribusiness sectors experimented with paternalistic practices in the 1910s and 1920s, most famously sugar beets and citrus. Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 62; Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 47.

²⁵ Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 37-47.

²⁶ By the 1920s, many sugar-beet growers abandoned plans to expand and improve migrant camps for farmworkers. Surging migration from Mexico into the Southwest assuaged farm owners' fears of labor shortages. Guérin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, 63. By contrast, cotton growers tried to entice farmworkers to stay and work for them for generations by offering above average housing and protecting them from things like debt and violence. Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 46.

²⁷ This approach primarily targeted Mexicans who had supplanted Filipinos as California's primary agricultural labor force in the 1920s. Still, agricultural workers on the West Coast encompassed a myriad of backgrounds: Filipinos, Native Americans, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, African Americans, Italians, and South Asians. Kevin Whalen, *Natives At Work: American Indian Labor and Sherman Institute's Outing Program, 1900-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 58-59; and Carey McWilliams, *Factory in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1935; Santa Barbara: Peregrine Publishers, Inc., 1971), 85 & 104.

union support, undocumented Mexican agricultural laborers in the US stood firmly outside of the system of employer-based social welfare.

While earlier scholars argue that New Deal liberalism was the death knell of industrial paternalism, later studies reveal how it persevered “underground” during the Great Depression, reappeared after World War II, and became a critical space for employer-employee negotiation in later decades.²⁸ In the 1930s, labor unions helped codify aspects of welfare capitalism into law, however, new collective bargaining rights, family aid, as well as unemployment, food, and Social Security benefits excluded agricultural and domestic workers.²⁹ Consequently, scholarship focuses on manufacturing and skilled-trades in relation to the post-New Deal welfare state, overlooking a history of agricultural paternalism shaped by large-scale US growers and farmworkers. While many employers turned to Mexican braceros by the 1950s, others tapped into the migrant stream—a cycle of temporary farm work that sent migrant workers (largely Tejana/o) around the U.S. and Canada following crop seasons.³⁰ Like the California cotton industry in the 1910s and 1920s, growers incorporated paternalism as a mechanism to keep

²⁸ Numerous labor historians have asserted that welfare capitalism died with the Great Depression. Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 475-504; and David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 59-78. More recent works, however, point to the persistence of welfare capitalism. Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence*; Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business, and the Politics of Health Care in the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000); The word “underground” comes from Jacoby, *Modern Manors*, 5.

²⁹ Agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from critical New Deal employment and social welfare legislation. Notably the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (or Wagner Act), the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and the Social Security Act of 1935, which included food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

³⁰ Valdés, *Al Norte*, 87. Since Valdés, only a few scholars have examined the Midwest migrant stream. The best examples are Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora*, 4-7; and John Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation: The Exploitation of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century*. (2015; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 58-70.

Mexican American families coming back to them for the annual harvest.³¹ In Wisconsin, some farm owners tried to make their workers feel like a family by interacting with them one-on-one, establishing credit for them at local stores, and providing housing. Some farmers' financed the construction of migrant camps—living quarters for seasonal farmworkers—but they were often dilapidated and lacked plumbing.³² Considering the arduous and exploitative nature of field labor, however, these small forms of agricultural paternalism and perceived belonging deployed by growers were successful in creating relationships of obligation and loyalty that compelled migrants to return to the same farms every year.³³ With these practices in place from the 1940s to the 1970s, Wisconsin farmers sustained a consistent flow of migrant farmworkers who expected housing and minor benefits included with their wages.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the moderate success of farm labor organizing forced large-scale farming companies to reassess their management practices. Instead of implementing forms of industrial paternalism, as steel and coal companies had done in the wake of nineteenth-century unionism, some Wisconsin growers mechanized to reduce workers, resisted unionism, and transitioned to employing a majority undocumented population by the 1980s.³⁴ For example, the independent union Obreros Unidos (OU) organized Mexican American farm and cannery workers, and achieved collective bargaining and legal successes in the late 1960s.³⁵ Despite these initial triumphs, as historian Marc S. Rodriguez explains, multinational vegetable processing

³¹ Jim Norris, *North For the Harvest*, 105-11; James Provinzano, "Networks and Migration Sets Among Chicano Migrant Farm Workers," 19 November 1971, box 1, folder 8, La Raza Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

³² The state of Wisconsin's legal standards for migrant housing were low and to a large extent unenforced.

³³ While living and working conditions varied, agricultural operations in the Midwest plied comparable tactics to attract seasonal laborers to their fields on a consistent, annual rotation. Valdés, *Al Norte*, 51-60.

³⁴ William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965: History of Wisconsin*, Vol 4 (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2013), 141.

³⁵ Sergio M. González, *Mexicans in Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2017), 68-70; and Valdés, *Al Norte*, 190-92.

corporation Libby, McNeil & Libby used the legal system to impede OU's unionization efforts.³⁶ Responding to several walkouts and marches, the company made investments in mechanical and irrigation equipment that streamlined the cultivation process and eliminated thousands of migrant labor positions. With the support of the Wisconsin AFL-CIO and its legal staff, OU filed a lawsuit against Libby claiming unfair labor practices in the company's decision to mechanize.³⁷ Although they eventually won the case in the Wisconsin Supreme Court, OU dissolved before the final decision due to infighting and lack of support from the California-based farmworkers movement.³⁸ Libby's anti-unionism may have cost them on legal fees and settlements, but ultimately they outlasted farm labor organizers and avoided collective bargaining. While larger corporations like Libby could afford to do this, smaller Wisconsin farmers could not and continued to use paternalistic practices, the most common being housing. Although the benefits offered by growers remained miniscule, the rise of the industrial dairy industry in the 1990s created an opening for different forms of paternalism to enter the state's agricultural sector.

From Family Labor to New Paternalism

As the trailblazers of Wisconsin's modern dairy farms organized their new businesses, they fused a passed-down system of family labor and its inherent paternalism with aspects of industrial and agricultural paternalism. While heavy industries used bonuses, pensions, and schools to attract and construct better workers, agriculturalists applied their real and lived experiences to create a new system of management specific to the dairy barns of Wisconsin. As

³⁶ Marc S. Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism and Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 94-96.

³⁷ Notably, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) provided a majority of the funding for Obreros Unidos. Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora*, 82 & 86-87.

³⁸ *Libby, McNeill & Libby v. Wis. Employment Relations Commission and Obreros Unidos (United Workers)* 42 Wis. 2d. 272 (Oct. 9, 1970).

children in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, they learned paternalistic methods from their fathers as they labored on the family farm.³⁹ Like other farming industries, there were no laws regulating child labor provided the workers were the farm owner's offspring.⁴⁰ According to a 1996 University of Wisconsin-Madison survey, over 65% of children born on a dairy farm in the twentieth century worked at their family's business during the school year.⁴¹ Although there is no universal way of understanding how parents treated their children as laborers, many accounts note the thanklessness of dairying.⁴² Some fathers maintained absolute authority through the threat of violence, while others were verbally and physically abusive when their sons did not complete tasks, "like real men."⁴³ Living and working at home, future dairy farmers imbibed practices of dominant masculine authority and embraced identities as hard-working rural Americans inspired to preserve their multi-generational heritage. As they industrialized dairy operations in the late twentieth century, they incorporated learned practices of family farm paternalism with housing, credit at local stores, and promotions. Like industrialists and growers before them, dairy farmers used these policies to keep laborers indebted and physically close to their businesses. Relying on their social and economic vulnerability to keep them coming back to work, owners shirked more rewarding forms of industrial paternalism and put minimal effort into maintaining their workers' living spaces. Carrying on these traditions, farmers organized their

³⁹ Kathleen Sexsmith, "Decoding worker 'reliability': Modern agrarian values and immigrant labor on New York dairy farms," *Rural Sociology* 84, no.4 (Dec 2019): 713; and N.M. Morosov, William Saupe, Philip Seaberg, and Darrel Acker, "Labor Requirements on Seven Wisconsin Dairy Herds," University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension Program, Resource Report 16, Series 41/00/4 52I10, UW Archives.

⁴⁰ Lydia Zepeda and Jongsoog Kim, "Farm parents' views on their children's labor on family farms: A focus group study of Wisconsin dairy farmers," *Agriculture and Human Values* 23 (Mar 2006): 109, and "When the Work is Never Done: Time Allocation in US Family Farm Households," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 1 (Mar 2004), 116-18.

⁴¹ Lydia Zepeda and Marco Castillo, "The role of husbands and wives in farm technology choice," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 79, no. 2 (1997): 587.

⁴² Stories from farm children suggest that some dairy owners used violence to punish those who did shabby work or failed to complete their tasks. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020; Rick Chaeli, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; and Dave Pepperoncini, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020.

⁴³ Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020.

businesses like a family, and managed workers as if they were children in need of supervision, development, and sometimes firm discipline.

Unlike other agricultural industries where machines eliminated jobs, industrialization in America's Dairyland increased the demand for low-wage workers as it devalued the time-honored system of unpaid family labor and recreated gendered divisions of labor.⁴⁴ Family farming has long been a bastion for patriarchal institutions.⁴⁵ In Wisconsin's history, the majority of dairy farms were owned and operated by a single household, and the business's functional and economic success depended on family members' complimentary work.⁴⁶ At the head of these businesses was customarily a male, usually a father, who did most of the physical work and delegated smaller tasks to his children.⁴⁷ While some men entrusted barn or field duties to their spouses, others forbade their wives from stepping outside the roles of homemaker and caregiver.⁴⁸ In either case, the family model established a gendered division of labor that kept women in the house where their domestic work complemented the overall family unit. As male farmers converted to large-scale operations with employees, they transitioned preexisting

⁴⁴ James M. MacDonald, Jonathan Law, and Roberto Mosheim, "Consolidation in U.S. Dairy Farming," US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, ERR-274 (Jul 2020): 24 & 44.

⁴⁵ Sandra Contzen and Jérémie Forney, "Family farming and gendered division of labour on the move: a typology of farming-family configurations," *Agriculture and Human Values* 34 (2017): 27.

⁴⁶ Depending on the size of one's family and their farm's income diversity, dairy owners milked between 25 and 200 cows without hired labor. Douglas Jackson-Smith and Bradford Barham, "The Changing Face of Wisconsin Dairy Farms: A Summary of PATS' Research on Structural Change in the 1990s," Program on Agricultural Technology Studies Research Report No. 7 (Aug 2000): 2 & 24.

⁴⁷ Since there is limited scholarship on the social relations of family work on dairy farms in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, this section pulls directly from ten oral histories I conducted from August 2019 to April 2020. Each of these individuals grew up dairying in their teens, or younger, and eventually became owners as adults. These sources demonstrate how children of dairy owners experienced laboring on their family's farm. These narrators' names and surnames have been changed to protect their identities. Gel Stephens, interviewed by the author, 27 August 2019; Claire Vonstadt, interviewed by the author, 11 November 2019; Clint Leeker, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Anna Marsh, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020; Kelso Banks, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2020; Rick Chaeli, interviewed by the author, 27 February 2020; Dave Pepperoncini, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020; Ted Wahlstrom, interviewed by the author, 6 April 2020; Fritz Gainey, interviewed by the author, 4 March 2020; and Bill Gadsen, interviewed by the author, 18 February 2020.

⁴⁸ Mary Neth, "Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 3 (Spring, 1994): 564.

familial structures into new management systems that subordinated female workers in classes below ownership and managers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that dairy owners maintained the gendered division of labor by rejecting female applicants or discouraging them from applying for jobs.⁴⁹ Importantly, to ensure that a new industrialized farm could survive, owners minimized expenses through low-cost workers, many of whom were undocumented Mexicans. Unlike their industrial counterparts who fought for and won labor rights in response to the challenges of mass production, dairy workers emerged at the same time that farmers mechanized, and had no union to combat the arduous conditions. Ultimately, the benefits of unpaid family labor diminished as Wisconsin dairy farmers industrialized and fashioned predominantly male workforces.

As Wisconsin dairy owners developed their new businesses, they constructed racialized labor hierarchies according to their notions of the white male-centric family farm. Virtually all undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants who entered the industry in the late twentieth century did so as milkers and pushers. The former worked at high speeds, rotating between 100 and 150 cows through a milk parlor per hour.⁵⁰ The latter scraped excrement off barn floors where hundreds of animals lingered, each producing between 100 to 120 pounds of feces every day.⁵¹ Depending on a farm's size, it may have had one or more managers supervising key areas like calves, animal reproduction, and herd health. As a result, large-scale dairies commonly featured a three-tiered hierarchy in which non-white immigrants held most of the lower-level positions and earned far less than their white coworkers and managers.⁵² In many cases,

⁴⁹ Silvana Reyes, interviewed and translated by the author, 12 March 2020.

⁵⁰ The speed of milking varies depending on the type of milk parlor, the cycling of cows, and human efficiency.

⁵¹ "Using Manure Evaluation to Enhance Dairy Cattle Nutrition," 26 Apr. 2023, Penn State University Extension, accessed 9 May 2023, <https://extension.psu.edu/using-manure-evaluation-to-enhance-dairy-cattle-nutrition#:~:text=Introduction,or%20more%20pounds%20every%20day>.

⁵² Jill Harrison, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane, "Briefing no. 3. Dairy Workers In Wisconsin: Tasks, shifts, wages, and benefits," *Changing Hands: Hired Labor on Wisconsin Dairy Farms*, Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Feb 2009): 1-2.

Wisconsin dairy owners racialized their majority-undocumented workforce as incapable of critical thinking and only qualified for entry-level jobs.⁵³ While dairy farmers' difficulty communicating limited the jobs they felt they could offer, it is also a reflection on their inability to meet their Spanish-speaking employees halfway by learning the language. In this regard, dairy farmers' paternalism can be understood as a mutated manifestation of the older concept of family work, but in this case the undocumented workers were in perpetual arrested development. In other words, because they were non-white unauthorized immigrants, owners constructed them as uneducated, child-like racial others that were unfit to manage or own a farm.⁵⁴ With this justification, Wisconsin dairy owners maintained hierarchies with white, American-born ownership and middle management firmly above undocumented Mexican workers.

Whereas agribusiness coalitions had been common among US sugar beet, sugarcane, and grape farmers, the history of Wisconsin dairying and the learned social dynamics of family work led large-scale dairy owners to view themselves as individuals.⁵⁵ During the Great Depression, California industrial farm owners formed broad alliances to combat increasing unionization.⁵⁶ In 1933, for instance, growers banded together in response to union-led strikes by establishing Associated Farmers, which colluded with local law enforcement and vigilante groups to harass their workers of Mexican descent through acts of violence and legal prosecution.⁵⁷ Whether

⁵³ Lindsey and Lloyd, "New Jobs, New Workers, and New Inequalities," 282-83.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 285.

⁵⁵ For other examples of US growers colluding to control an industry's workers see Christina Salinas, *Managed Migrations: Growers, Farmworkers, and Border Enforcement in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 60-61; Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Organized Agriculture and the Labor Movement Before the UFW: Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, California* (Austin: University of Texas, 2011), 228; Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 69; Garcia, *A World of Its Own*, 53-54.

⁵⁶ Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 140; Dan Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-era California* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 17; Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 238.

⁵⁷ Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 32-33; in other cases, nearer to the US-Mexico border, growers colluded with the Border Patrol to control workers. Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the*

inspired by an increasing presence of unions or the threat of workers' power, US businesses have routinely cooperated to divide and control their labor forces.⁵⁸ By contrast, Wisconsin dairy farmers have historically operated as independent entities. Although they belonged to cooperatives that purchased and processed their milk, these collectivist organizations played no role in managing individual farms.⁵⁹ By the 1990s, as word traveled that Mexican immigrants could solve the industry-wide labor problem, it became common for farm owners to informally discuss hiring and operational practices, and in some cases form collegial groups with regular meetings. Still, these conversations never manifested into collusion to maintain wage ceilings or output quotas.⁶⁰ As a result, this specific brand of Wisconsin dairy farmer individualism created a spectrum of experiences for undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants. Maintaining that it was "in their best interest," dairy farmers commonly excluded their undocumented employees from conversations about immigration raids, labor efficiency, and new technology. With increasing debt and expanding cow herds, owners explained these paternalistic methods as an economic necessity. Adhering to their individualistic notions of masculine ownership, Wisconsin dairy owners remained relatively isolated as they learned to recruit, employ, and retain workers.

Viewing their businesses through this paternalistic and individualistic lens, many dairy owners overlooked hazards on their farms, encouraged workers to endure injuries, and provided limited employment benefits. Undoubtedly, modern dairying was physically demanding and

Postwar United States and Mexico (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 159, 238, & n264; and Salinas, *Managed Migrations*, 7.

⁵⁸ Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 166-68; Geoff Mann, *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 120; and William R. Nester, *A Short History of American Industrial Policies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 135.

⁵⁹ Ryan Miltner, "Dairying's dichotomy: Collectivism and individualism," *Progressive Dairy*, 24 Feb. 2014, accessed 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.progressivedairy.com/blogs/guest-blog/dairying-dichotomy-collectivism-and-individualism>.

⁶⁰ David Genesove and Wallace P. Mullin, "Rules, Communication, and Collusion: Narrative Evidence from the Sugar Institute Case," *The American Economic Review* 91, no. 3 (Jun 2001): 381-82.

dangerous by nature. Within US agriculture, already one of the country's deadliest sectors, the dairy industry ranked second most dangerous.⁶¹ For those working with crops, heavy equipment and tractors caused the most injuries. On livestock farms, large animals like milk cows caused significant harm by kicking, biting, or trampling on workers.⁶² According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 2000 to 2010, there were 498 work-related deaths on US dairy farms, 12% of which occurred in Wisconsin.⁶³ While these numbers help explain the lethal risks of working on a dairy farm, dataset on common injuries—contusions, bone fractures, and ligament sprains—is far less reliable, since undocumented workers feared reprisal from their bosses for divulging injury information to state authorities, there were known issues with underreporting.⁶⁴ Not only was it in farmers' economic interest to keep their employees out of the hospital, it also fit with their macho approach to dairying and management that demanded minimal absences and perseverance through pain.⁶⁵ Unable to afford formal doctors' services, unauthorized dairy workers sought out low-cost clinics and found that federally-funded migrant farmworker health programs had legally excluded laborers with full-time jobs.⁶⁶ While some doctors and nurses worked around the law, fear of immigration enforcement motivated many undocumented

⁶¹ The only industry where workers faced a higher risk of injury was mining. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2000," US Department of Labor (14 Aug 2001): 3, accessed 16 Sep 2021, <http://stats.bls.gov/oshhome.htm>.

⁶² K.J. Hendricks and N. Adekoya, "Non-fatal animal related injuries to youth occurring on farms in the United States, 1998" *Injury Prevention*, no. 7 (2001), 307-08. Division of Safety Research, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, DOI: 10.1136/ip.7.4.307.

⁶³ David I. Douphrate, et. al., "Work-Related Injuries and Fatalities on Dairy Farm Operations—A Global Perspective," *Journal of Agromedicine* 18, no. 3 (Jul 2013): 259, doi: 10.1080/1059924X.2013.796904; and Amy Liebman, et. al., "An overview and impact assessment of OSHA large dairy local emphasis programs in New York and Wisconsin," *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 61 (2018): 660, doi: 10.1002/ajim.22868.

⁶⁴ J. Paul Leigh, Stephen A. McCurdy and Marc B. Schenker, "Costs of Occupational Injuries in Agriculture," *Public Health Reports* 116, no. 3 (Jun 2001): 236; and The Committee on Education and Labor, "Hidden Tragedy: Underreporting of Workplace Injuries and Illnesses," US House of Representatives (Jun 2008): 2-3.

⁶⁵ Amy King Liebman, et. al., "Immigrant Dairy Workers' Perceptions of Health and Safety on the Farm in America's Heartland," *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 59 (2016): 231.

⁶⁶ US law stated that these federally-funded medical facilities could only service people with temporary or seasonal jobs. Julie C. Keller, Margaret Gray, and Jill Lindsey Harrison, "Milking Workers, Breaking Bodies: Health Inequality in the Dairy Industry," *New Labor Forum* 26, no. 1 (2017): 39.

immigrants to avoid migrant farmworker clinics altogether. Ultimately, Wisconsin dairy farmers modernized their facilities and set operational standards to meet their economic ends, knowing that unauthorized Mexican laborers' legal precarity and economic limitations would coerce them to accept jobs that were highly vulnerable to injury without health insurance.⁶⁷ It was in these harrowing conditions that undocumented workers fought back, pushing their employers to offer improved wages, vacation time, retirement plans, and health coverage, thus creating a new dairy paternalism that responded to their needs as workers and human beings.

Negotiating Power in Dairyland

As farmers became dependent on cheap immigrant labor and instituted paternalistic management systems situated in historic notions of individualism, the industry's vastness and disunity opened avenues for undocumented Mexicans to negotiate higher wages, improved working conditions, and a path to economic stability. Unauthorized dairy workers' oral histories reveal the ways that they capitalized on a number of advantages unique to the industry. First, they recognized that they could use the limited labor pool in tandem with employer sanctions enacted by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) to leverage farm owners. While the law is known for increasing border militarization and offering amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants, its employer sanctions (although not thoroughly enforced) were vital to the balance of power in the dairy industry. In short, IRCA prohibited employers from hiring, recruiting, or referring for a fee anyone known to be unauthorized to work in the US. While it was intended to discourage business owners from hiring non-citizens, companies in numerous

⁶⁷ Jill Lindsey Harrison and Sarah E. Lloyd, "New Jobs, New Workers, and New Inequalities: Explaining Employers' Roles in Occupational Segregation by Nativity and Race," *Social Problems* 60, no. 3 (Aug 2013): 293-96; and Rick Barrett, "Dairy farms in hiring crisis," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 9 Nov 1997, accessed 31 Aug 2021, NA.

US industries dependent on unauthorized immigrants, had no choice but to break the law. This empowered undocumented workers to negotiate with confidence knowing that their bosses had a financial obligation to retain employees and keep their immigration status confidential. Second, there was no known collusion among dairy farmers. Individual owners operated in isolation, inventing ways to manage newly fashioned dairy workers and conduct business in a rapidly mechanizing profession. Hence, Wisconsin farmers maintained vastly different standards, which both put workers at risk and enabled them to exploit uneven conditions for their own gain. Taken together, the limited labor pool, pressure from IRCA, and owners' lack of collusion created an atmosphere where undocumented workers could assert bargaining power over their bosses, thereby revealing cracks in the industry's racial hierarchies and systems of labor exploitation.

During his first few years in Wisconsin, Nahua migrant Eduardo Xocopil recognized that not only were dairy farm jobs more profitable, but quality workers were a scarce and prized commodity in the industry. He recalls,

It was better to work on a dairy farm...Not anyone can do this job, you have to learn and some people don't want to. With lettuce and trees, you just go out there and cut it, and they pay you the same, but this is different...people would not go to Wisconsin or Minnesota, because it's very cold up here. Maybe I'm different because I know the cold winds from the [Veracruz] mountains. The thing is, if it was snowing outside on a regular farm, you would not have work, but here you do.⁶⁸

Having worked in other agricultural industries, Xocopil had perspective on working conditions in the fields and outlined key benefits to dairying. First, he learned the skills of milking, feeding calves, and monitoring livestock, which empowered him to eliminate barriers to entry at better paying farms. Next, unlike his previous experiences cultivating pine trees and lettuce, Xocopil's dairy farm role was a year-round position unaffected by seasonal changes. In addition, a

⁶⁸ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

combination of cold weather and a steep industry learning curve compelled some to avoid America's Dairyland. Coincidentally, while bad weather eliminated hours for farmworkers in crop fields, it had little effect on dairy farms whose cows required milking every day, rain, snow, or shine. Ultimately, undocumented workers created greater job security for themselves by entering as it limited the industry workforce and increased pressure on dairy farmers to reduce employee turnover.⁶⁹

Hours and Wages

Moving to dairying after working in other agricultural industries, Eduardo Xocopil and thousands of undocumented Mexicans recognized that wages were inconsistent from farm to farm. Indeed, in 1997 the Wisconsin State Journal reported that the average dairy farm wage was \$6.50 per hour, but there are many examples of people earning the agricultural minimum of \$4.55.⁷⁰ Xocopil took his first dairy job the same year and remembers scraping by:

I was shopping at the Mexican store and started talking to the owner. I was working with the pine trees then. He said that was only seasonal work. He told me look for the cows, there's a lot of dairy industry, and he's the one who encouraged me to look into that...My first one [dairy wage] was less than \$5...It wasn't much after food and the house [utilities]...That was something the boss took out before he paid me my money, so you know, we never knew what was what. This guy was an asshole. Some people just are...After a few months I was out shopping again and met a woman who offered me more money at another farm. I went back to work the next day and quit.⁷¹

Struggling to save money and support his family in Mexico, Xocopil was highly receptive to better wages and found Wisconsin full of milk production businesses that could use his services.

⁶⁹ Alisa Garni, "Crafting Mass Dairy Production: Immigration and Community in Rural America," *Rural Sociology* 83, no. 2 (2018): 248.

⁷⁰ Rick Barrett, "Dairy farms in hiring crisis," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 9 Nov 1997, NA; and "Historical Résumé of Minimum Wage Regulations in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, accessed 18 Sep 2021, <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/er/laborstandards/minwageregs.htm>.

⁷¹ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

After he recognized that his boss was underpaying him and withholding portions of his paycheck without notifying him, Xocopil started looking for a better position by networking with his coworkers and people he met in public. In doing so, he garnered a better understanding of the industry's job market by building a book of contacts and maintaining regular communication. When the right opportunity presented itself, Xocopil took it and measured his success by the growth in his income. As he met more people and his network grew, Xocopil became a valuable source for information and regularly helped fellow undocumented find positions. Like many Nahua working in America's Dairyland, Xocopil transformed his contacts and skills into a way to help others from the high mountains of Veracruz.

Across the industry, twelve-hour days and six-day weeks were the norm, as was the absence of overtime wages and paid vacation.⁷² In addition, undocumented immigrants were overwhelmingly more likely to work evening, overnight, and weekend hours, while their white American coworkers kept daytime and weekday shift schedules.⁷³ Eduardo Xocopil recalls how the sheer inconsistency of his schedule pushed his body to the edge:

I grew up with the dogs, you know, early risers, going from sunup to sundown, so to wake up at 3:30 in the morning, it's nothing...But the thing was I had different shifts everyday...Sometimes 4 am to 4pm, 10 am to 10 pm, 2 pm to 2 am. So, on one day that I'm leaving at 2 am and I'm also going back at 10 am. That was not good, but working 18 hours straight was worse. I was working the night and the morning on the same day...After eighteen hours you are done. You go home. You eat. You sit on the couch and watch TV until you fall asleep. Some guys can't wait to drink a beer and end up with cans in the couch. [*Laughs*] My love is beans and tortillas, I don't drink.⁷⁴

⁷² A 2009 UW-Madison sociological survey found that the average of all fulltime and part-time workers was 57 hours/week. If you remove the part-time from these calculations, however, the weekly hours would go well in excess of 70 hours a week. Cited in Jill Lindsey and Sarah E Lloyd, "Illegality at Work: Deportability and the Production New Era of Immigration Enforcement," *Antipode* 44, no. 2 (2012): 377.

⁷³ Harrison and Lloyd, "New Jobs, New Workers, and New Inequalities," 284-85.

⁷⁴ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

Not only were his shifts long in length, but they were often arranged in a way that made it difficult for him to get more than five or six hours of sleep. Once a week, Xocopil clocked out at two in the morning and had to return eight hours later for another twelve-hour shift. On those occasions Xocopil remembers the experience of complete exhaustion that drove many of his Nahua coworkers to alcoholism, which was a universal issue on large-scale Wisconsin farms. Living in a trailer with three other undocumented workers who were heavy drinkers, he found himself surrounded by a culture of beer consumption and depression that significantly impacted his daily life. Despite his desire for cleanliness, Xocopil usually entered a house littered with beer cans and pizza boxes, and fatigue from the job made it nearly impossible for him to keep a clean house or maintain basic hygiene. In this way, some Wisconsin dairy farmers created oppressive conditions by assigning undocumented immigrants an unhealthy number of hours that they could not decline given their acute need for money. In less than a year, the lack of consistent rest took a toll on Xocopil's body and manifested in the form of a dirty lifestyle that motivated him to find a better job.

As Xocopil's network and dairying knowledge grew, he leveraged his skills to earn higher wages. By the fall of 2000, he had moved on to a second, higher paying position at a dairy near the Wisconsin-Minnesota border. Despite being punctual and thorough, his boss was dissatisfied with his work. He elaborates,

These guys [the Poeschels] were brothers, so I had three bosses. One had a problem with me. He yelled at me when we were alone in the barn...One time he told me that he was paying me a lot and that I was a lazy Mexican and wasn't doing a lot of work. Then, he told me I was a drunk. Hah! First off, I don't drink...So I got mad at him and said, "You know what? You can leave it right there. If you think that what you're paying me is enough for everything that I do, keep it. I don't want any more of it. I don't need this job." So, I left on the 16th of August and by the 18th I started another job.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

Confident in his ability, Xocopil responded to Poeschel's racially-charged attack by rejecting it entirely, leaving the job, and securing better pay in less than forty-eight hours. Notably, in the weeks after his exit, Xocopil continued to receive phone calls from the other two Poeschel brothers who were eager to bring him back. His former employers' behavior reveals the severe consequences of turnover on a dairy farm. In addition, Xocopil found out from his former coworkers that two other undocumented employees had quit the Poeschel's farm following his incident. This was consistent with other Nahua dairy workers' experiences, when frustration with bosses was enough to compel people to leave their jobs because they knew another position could be secured quickly. In doing so, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants demonstrated emphatically that they would not tolerate violence, verbal or physical, and that by quitting they could force their former bosses both to struggle with turnover and reevaluate their managerial techniques. Turnover therefore was not just an early-industrial stage problem for dairy farmers, but a long-term concern as workers' held power over recruiting networks and the ultimate capacity to punish ownership by quitting.⁷⁶ In Xocopil's case, the Poeschel's business struggled so much in his absence that its owners were forced to work eighteen to twenty-hour days just to keep the cows milked. In all, it took their operation several months to get back to a point where the owners could return to their previous routines. Hence, by resisting verbal abuse and leaving his bosses without an essential employee, Xocopil used quitting as a tool to grow his income, combat oppressive managerial practices, and generate collective workers' power to shape dynamics on the barn floor.

⁷⁶ A 2012 economic survey from Texas A&M University confirms that turnover concerns continued to plague dairy farmers in Wisconsin and the Midwest. Rosson, "Regional Views on the Role of Immigrant Labor in the US and Southern Dairies," 273.

Although the vast majority of undocumented dairy workers were men, Nahua women also migrated to America's Dairyland to work in cow barns and milk parlors. Farms routinely assigned these female workers the lowest paying entry-level positions as milkers.⁷⁷ Silvana Reyes, a native of Astacinga, Veracruz, worked on two dairy farms from 1997 to 2001. In a booming voice that belies her small size, Reyes remarks,

When I left home [in Mexico], it was hard to get work, but here it was also difficult. Sometimes people find jobs and sometimes not. When I first arrived, I did not find a job easily. Also, when you are a woman it is more difficult. Employers see that you are a woman and they don't think you can handle the work...that happened a lot, not just for me...I found one job, but it was very few hours and little money...After that, my cousin came up to [Wisconsin] and together, we got milker jobs.⁷⁸

While she did not earn demonstrably less than her male coworkers, it was much harder for Reyes to secure a job because she was a woman. Initially moving to Wisconsin following promises of a meat packing job, Reyes arrived to find out that the position was poorly paid and only guaranteed part-time hours. On numerous occasions, Reyes stopped by dairy farms to see if they needed help and owners repeatedly turned her away, either without explanation or because they had no labor needs. In the past, women on dairy farms had mostly played domestic roles. With one look, many dairy owners dismissed her, assuming that her gender and size disqualified her from the job. After nearly fifteen attempts, a dairy owner offered her a job as a milker at minimum wage for ten-hour days, three days a week. Considering that many farmers grew up

⁷⁷ This claim is substantiated by several sources: Carmen Enriquez, interviewed and translated by the author, 11 March 2020; Gloria Anotéñez, interviewed and translated by the author, 2 April 2020; Jill Lindsey Harrison and Sarah E. Lloyd, "New Jobs, New Workers, and New Inequalities: Explaining Employers' Roles in Occupational Segregation by Nativity and Race," *Social Problems* 60, no. 3 (August 2013), 285; Jill Lindsey Harrison and Christy Getz, "Farm size and job quality: mixed-methods studies of hired farm work in California and Wisconsin," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32 (2015), 621-22; and Bindu Panikkar and Mary-Kate Barrett, "Precarious Essential Work, Immigrant Dairy Farmworkers, and Occupational Health Experiences in Vermont," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 7, (Apr: 2021), 3675; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073675>.

⁷⁸ Silvana Reyes, interviewed and translated by the author, 12 March 2020.

imbibing paternalistic practices on their family farms, it comes as no surprise that prospective female workers encountered repeated rejection, abbreviated schedules, and lower rates of pay. Nevertheless, as their numbers increased in the 2000s, Nahua women like Silvana Reyes chipped away at the Wisconsin dairy industry's patriarchal barriers to entry.

During the same period, Nahua immigrant Joaquín Galarga worked on two farms near Green Bay, later selling his expertise to a third farm owner and securing a significantly improved wage. Like Xocopil, Galarga had accumulated contacts around the state, knew of numerous job openings, and pinpointed the best situation for his skills. "I met there with [Mr. Lobner]," Galarga explains, "he asked what I knew. I said I knew how to inseminate, how to milk, how to handle calves, how to use different machinery. They asked how much I made before. I said \$8.40...So I was given work for one month. He told me that if he liked the way I worked, I could stay on."⁷⁹ Desiring an employee with his abilities, Lobner hired Galarga on the spot. Over three months, Galarga proved himself to be an adept and consistent worker. As was the case with many dairy farmers, Galarga's third boss Mr. Lobner was often absorbed by the business of dairying and rarely chatted with his employees. "Next thing you know, I was there for 3 months!" Galarga chuckles. "So, I finally had to tell him, 'You know, I've been here for 3 months already! Do you like how I work?'" and he said 'Oh yeah, you're right!' So, I said, 'How about \$9.75 an hour then?' And he bumped me up and that's it. That was good."⁸⁰ Knowing that he could easily transfer his expertise to another farm, Galarga approached his boss with confidence and negotiated a 16% wage increase. While his previous employers had failed to appreciate Galarga's positive influence on their businesses, his new boss demonstrated his respect through a significant raise. Perhaps Lobner would have done so without pressure from

⁷⁹ Joaquín Galarga, interviewed and translated by the author, 22 January 2020.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

his employee, but Galarga had clearly learned that if he wished to improve his station in the dairy industry he would have to advocate for himself. Unlike management in more developed, employee-heavy sectors of the US economy, dairy farmers had no formal evaluation process and most were unprepared to offer undocumented Nahua like Galarga advanced opportunities. Having learned from his previous experiences, Galarga did more than just work hard: he spoke up, drew attention to his expert performance, and made another step towards economic stability.

While Eduardo Xocopil and Joaquín Galarga struggled with overwork on relatively stable farms, Hector Jaimes suffered oppressive shift schedules in a dairy business where operations expanded without proportionally growing hired staff. Thinking back to his experience from 1998 to 2000, Jaimes remarks,

On the [Koehl's] dairy farm, I worked more than anywhere. More than the tobacco factory, the golf courses, everything. Then, I get to the [Koehl] farm and they're adding pigs and cows every month, but I'm the only person in there, and I'm taking on the new animals. Another thing is, when you work with calves or piglets, you have different hours from milking...So, sometimes that means a two-in-one, morning and night. So, for one day I would work for 7 hours in the morning and 5 hours in the afternoon. Then, I was working at least 7 hours in the afternoon some days.⁸¹

By the time that Jaimes started this job, he had already shuffled through several industries where the work was difficult, but nowhere near as taxing as dairying. A significant difference was the prevalence of split shifts, which included two stretches of time in the morning and evening. Jaimes felt constant fatigue and mild illness as he struggled to maintain healthy sleep patterns. For example, during a four-month period Jaimes clocked in from four to nine in the morning and four to eleven in the evening. With these hours, he could not get more than six hours of sleep at any one time. Jaimes contends that while these practices were “tolerable” under normal

⁸¹ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 13 February 2020.

circumstances, the dynamics of a growing dairy farm made them hellish.⁸² As the Koehls purchased more livestock, they blindly assigned additional hours to Jaimes and the other Nahua laborers. Like dairy farmers around Wisconsin, the Koehls tried to mitigate expenses as they took out more bank debt to pay for their widening herds. Speaking with Jaimes, the Koehls reasoned that he should “be thankful” for the extended days, asserting that the extra time was “more money in the pocket.”⁸³ Afraid to lose a lucrative job, Jaimes accepted the extra hours without complaint.

As Jaimes suffered inhumane levels of work, he and other undocumented dairy workers like him learned to recognize exploitative bosses, practice forms of micro-resistance, and keep abreast of the fluid job market. During the Koehl farm’s growth period, several Mexicans working split shifts fell ill and quit, which spurred ownership to make significant changes. For example, Jaimes’s roommate contracted pneumonia and struggled for weeks to regain his health:

We [Jaimes and Rico] were working a lot in the morning and the night...Then, one day, at the end of shift [Rico] looked really bad, man, white in the face and empty. So, I drive him to the clinic where they take us and we wait for hours. They tell us he’s got pneumonia and needs to sleep for days. I called our boss and tell him, but he won’t listen...I’m sitting there thinking, “I need to save myself before I end up in here.” So, I called [Rico’s cousin] who got us jobs before and he had us at a new dairy farm in 3 weeks...It must have been in 2000 when we left. Two years later, I heard that [the Koehls] had changed to eight-hour shift limits and double the guys.⁸⁴

Rico’s medical issues were a wakeup call for Jaimes, who was likely headed down the same road to infirmity. Although he appreciated having a job, the fourteen-hour days stretched him too thin. With the skills he forged under these trying conditions, Jaimes networked with a fellow Nahua to secure a better job at a more stable farm for both Rico and himself. Having shared their

⁸² Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 26 February 2020.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

experiences with other undocumented workers, the Koehl's farm became known in certain circles as a "cow's asshole" that prospective dairy employees should avoid.⁸⁵ In steering people away, Jaimes and Rico reshaped power dynamics on the Koehl's farm and impelled ownership to remodel their approach to employing and managing people. All told, Jaimes's experience reveals not only the ways that growing dairy businesses depended on and exploited undocumented workers, but also how those laborers resisted oppressive management practices and forced dairy farmers to change and compete over them.

After returning to Wisconsin in 2001, Hector Jaimes spent the next three years honing his abilities under the tutelage of the Reichman family. While wages were his primary concern, he explains how the process was just as much about learning as earning:

Everything is just a job. Something where you make money. And I had to learn to be better at my job...We worked together, me and [Mr. Reichman]...I worked with his son and with his daughter. The whole family worked on the farm. While I was there I learned to have a job cleaning the farm...I had to feed the cows and the piglets. They had about 500 cows to do too, but you know, it's all a job...But the family ran everything. Nowhere for me to go. So, I moved on.⁸⁶

Resigned to the fact that work was a means to an end, Jaimes nevertheless earned an education in dairying and gained additional experience with pigs and piglets. With management positions reserved for the Reichmans and their relatives, Jaimes knew he had no chance for a promotion and decided to take his skills and management potential on the job market. As Eduardo Xocopil and Joaquín Galarga had done, Jaimes found leads on fresh opportunities by tapping into his transnational Nahua network, and in less than ten days he took a job with more reasonable hours and higher wages. "He [the dairy farmer] offered more because I could do so much for them," Jaimes says, "I did calves and this and that and you don't need as many people."⁸⁷ By selling his

⁸⁵ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 13 February 2020.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

business acumen and his advanced skill set, Jaimes dictated a higher wage as part of his terms for accepting the new position. As Wisconsin's dairy farmers learned to measure their workers' productivity, they recognized that employees like Jaimes, Galarga, and Xocopil created efficiencies that enabled them to better streamline milk production, eliminate waste, and expand operations. Importantly, Jaimes and thousands of other undocumented dairy workers also understood these dynamics and exploited owners' exigencies for better wages. In this way, Jaimes and other Nahua created more opportunities for themselves by building desirable skill sets that attracted prospective employers and using their dairy knowledge to negotiate better compensation.

Working Conditions and Workers' Health

As thousands of undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants worked and negotiated power on Wisconsin dairies, they also endured an arduous job in a dangerous environment. Most Wisconsin farms with hired labor supported between 200 and 2,000 American-bred Holstein cows, massive animals ranging from 1,400 to 2,000 pounds with immense strength, easily able to crush or mangle human limbs.⁸⁸ Hector Jaimes thinks back to his early days in the mid-1990s:

The routine hasn't changed...I get in, I put my clothes and boots on, clock in, and go to work...We wear these...overalls that's right, and the rubber boots because we walk around barns all day with cow shit everywhere...I start by talking to the guys in the milk parlor, see if there are any problems. Whatever my job is—calves, milking, feeding, pushing—I go do that...When you're milking cows you stand in the same room, and I always had the two-sided ones [parallel milk parlors], so you go up and down the line of cows, clean them, milk them with the clusters, and keep it going.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "Holstein Cattle," Department of Animal & Food Sciences, Oklahoma State University, 1 June 2023, accessed 29 September 2023, <https://breeds.okstate.edu/cattle/holstein-cattle.html>.

⁸⁹ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 13 February 2020.

On a large-scale dairy farm, as Jaimes illustrates, workers' daily activities followed a pattern. In the position of milker, he rotated up and down cow stations on a parallel parlor with one other person, as seen in the image below. Due to the linear designs of these spaces, Jaimes and thousands of undocumented milkers like him performed repetitive tasks as if on a cow assembly line. Unlike Fordist auto workers who operated machinery in the same spot throughout a shift, though, dairy workers moved between cows and placed clusters (mechanical suction devices) on cows' udders for milking. Due to the parlor's design and pressure to sustain high production levels, dairy workers performed a strict choreography as they revolved around the rectangular room. As he learned the regimented dynamics of milking, Jaimes developed a routine that enabled him to achieve consistency, and would later help him earn promotions.



Two Mexican milkers cycle through cows on a parallel milk parlor. Dave Zapotosky, *The Toledo Blade*.

In 1997, Eduardo Xocopil also cut his teeth as a milker and pusher, and faced significant discrimination as he tried to become a farm manager. Xocopil traces the history:

So, when I left the pines for the barns it was only milking and shoveling shit...we [undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants] would get jobs on the farms and then they'd [Ashbecks] never move us up or pay us more, right. They didn't think we could do anything else...Well, I asked [Mr. Ashbeck] and of course he laughed. He goes, "You could be gone tomorrow, how can I promote you?" And I had been there almost three years, I wasn't going anywhere without a reason...The next time I asked, he goes, "You guys aren't made for this, if you were, you'd have real jobs back in Mexico." That really set me off. I found that second job with the other racist boss, but at least they paid me more.⁹⁰

To maintain control over him, Ashbeck worded his responses to Xocopil's requests for promotion as both reasoned pacifications and veiled threats. In the first instance, while it could be argued that undocumented workers were more likely to leave a job without notice, much of that can be attributed to their economic vulnerability, oppressive working conditions, and their precarious immigration status. Having worked on the farm for years, there was no indication that Xocopil was the type of person to neglect his job or quit abruptly. By telling him that he could be "gone tomorrow," Ashbeck both pointed to the realities of worker mobility and made a veiled threat that he would call the immigration authorities if Xocopil did not abide. In the second case, Ashbeck discriminated against Xocopil's ethnicity by claiming that Mexicans were too ignorant to be dairy managers or owners otherwise they would have never left Mexico. The farmer's statements reveal the depths of his ignorance about Mexican history and the global economy, as well as his racialized thinking about human intelligence.

In response, Xocopil secured a 20% raise at another dairy farm. After exiting, the Ashbeck farm fell into disarray as the owners realized that Xocopil had been doing the work of two and they would have to account for two full-time salaries to replace him. Without any clear business hierarchy, the Ashbecks had grown their business beyond their means. In the ensuing years, they struggled to balance their books, fell into crippling debt, and eventually sold their

⁹⁰ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by author, 8 January 2020.

farm in the early 2000s. Having developed routines to increase production efficiency, Xocopil knew he possessed proprietary knowledge about the Ashbecks' business. When it became clear that his superiors would never offer him an opportunity to advance and would continue to disrespect his hard work and ethnicity, Xocopil dealt a devastating blow to their milk operations. In doing so, he sent a message to the Ashbecks and dairy farmers statewide that undocumented Mexicans were not only essential laborers, but they were also innovative members of the dairy community that deserved esteem for their leadership in bringing the industry into the twenty-first century. While Xocopil individually negotiated a higher wage and refused to accept racism, his actions created collective power for other undocumented Mexicans by helping eliminate a bigoted business owner and making clear that dairy workers had agency in America's Dairyland.

Confronting a rigorous job and racialized professional structures, undocumented dairy workers like Eduardo Xocopil and Silvana Reyes suffered numerous common injuries. To start, most Nahua had no health insurance and could not afford to pay for basic medical services. Fear that a dairy owner might call a doctor out to the farm, therefore, compelled many undocumented dairy employees to keep quiet. Consequently, they often accumulated multiple afflictions simultaneously, which made them more vulnerable to a serious injury that would render them at risk of losing their jobs.⁹¹ Reyes explains how undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants encountered unregulated workspaces across Wisconsin that presented an array of potential problems from broken bones to tetanus and water contamination:

Some farms were newer, others were pretty old, broken...there were rusty nails everywhere, broken metal bars and the aluminum siding, broken floors with holes...it's always slippery in the barn with water or ice, because they spray it down...If you don't watch out you will get hurt...I'm talking about the cows too. The cows are usually good, but you don't know for sure, and they're very big and...They can hurt you bad...I had deep cuts, a twisted finger, and I fell a few

⁹¹ Sociologists researching the dairy industry confirm that fear of job loss was a key factor in workers' decisions not to report injuries to their bosses. Keller, Gray, Harrison, "Milking Workers, Breaking Bodies," 39.

times, but didn't break anything. My friend, he fell in the barn once and a cow stomped his leg.⁹²

In this era, it was often assumed that large-scale dairy farms were pristine new facilities, but, as Reyes demonstrates, cow barns were filled with hazards. Since the job demanded that dairy workers constantly be on the move, either shifting around milk parlors or walking through barns, it was imperative that they paid close attention to their environments. One wrong step could lead to a rusty nail puncture, a cut on a jagged edge of vinyl siding, or a bone fracture. While dairy barns were technically indoor facilities, most suffered from significant drafts and were not much warmer, or cooler, than the outdoor temperature. In addition to the floors being slippery from water and ice, cows often roamed freely within their barn sections and created additional obstacles for workers as they scraped up hundreds of pounds of cow excrement. Understanding this, it is clear how Reyes and other dairy workers could incur multiple injuries at once. In her example of a colleague's crushed leg, Reyes sheds light on the various factors affecting workers' safety and the unpredictability of cow behavior. In this regard, dairy farms normalized conditions where undocumented laborers were perpetually at risk of injuries, from mild to lethal.

Active in the industry during the same time, Moises Arreola incurred repeated injuries and contends that Nahua youth who worked in the mountainous fields of Veracruz were more likely to ignore symptoms of illness or poor health in Wisconsin, because their work ethic and origin labor culture demanded it. Days after his seventh birthday in 1983, Arreola started farming with his father in the fields where he learned to push through pain. He elaborates,

...people like me grew up in the fields [in Veracruz] with cracked fingers and bruises, that's just part of the fight. Then, you get up here and you keep fighting, but it's more dangerous. Before we were with corn, beans, chiles. Now, we work with these big fuckers [cows] and we have real problems...many bosses do nothing unless you tell them, but no one does...[Carlos] got hit into the rail by a

⁹² Silvana Reyes, interviewed and translated by the author, 12 March 2020.

cow and broke his rib. He comes back the next day and he looks like an Egyptian mummy all wrapped up in tape and ice.⁹³

For Arreola, paternalistic labor structures and expectations on the dairy farm were similar, if not the same, as those that he experienced toiling in the mountainous fields of Veracruz. Describing work as a “fight,” Arreola perceived life as a test of character in which the most virtuous and deserving individuals struggled through physical pain to accomplish their goals. In his mind, dairying, just like harvesting beans or corn, was a job that needed to be done every day until completion. Arreola confirms that undocumented Nahua often refrained from approaching their bosses, who were more than happy to avoid interactions in favor of efficiency. In this atmosphere of prideful silence, bosses could claim their employees to be fine since they did not complain. The example of Carlos’s broken ribs points to the great lengths undocumented workers went to not miss a shift or ask for help. While economic need was certainly a factor, he, like Arreola, spent his youth tilling Mexican corn fields and learned grit from his older brothers. Despite feeling pain with every breath, Carlos spent weeks recovering on the job wrapped in tape, cloth, and ice. In this way, both Wisconsin dairy farmers’ labor culture and undocumented workers’ formative work experiences inspired them to endure pain to please their bosses and abide by their own code of manliness.

While broken bones and limp walking were clear to see, other health problems were less visible. The long and mechanical nature of the dairy work presented significant risk for overuse injuries, defined as damage and pain caused by repetitive movement. Eduardo Xocopil and dairy workers of his ilk usually did not complain of excessive lifting or trouble with a single task, but indicated that they would get worn down over time and have lasting distress. Xocopil elaborates,

Once you had the speed and pace, you had to keep it or the boss was on you...Yes, milking a cow is easy, but it’s hard to milk one thousand cows every day for

⁹³ Moises Arreola, interviewed and translated by the author, 20 February 2020.

years. You start to feel it in your bones...It's hard because everybody gets sick or tired, or maybe you get older and slow down...Some nights you can't sleep, you know how it is. But the problem is you can't be slow, not in here...What then? You hustle, but always a little slower.⁹⁴

Xocopil notes that the speed of dairying was something that farm owners instilled in their workforce to ensure milk production levels. On a weekly basis, Xocopil usually logged seventy-five hours and over the years soreness and fatigue became constant companions. While the regimen enabled him to earn as much as possible, it also eroded his shoulder and elbow ligaments. Despite his increasingly bad health, Xocopil's desire to keep his job and earn promotions inspired him to never slow down or take a recovery day. Having witnessed several coworkers lose their jobs by taking too many sick days, he knew that his bosses valued consistency and had no tolerance for employees calling in sick. Thus, Xocopil did what was best for his career by working through illnesses, sprained body parts, and sleeplessness. Ultimately, the economic and social pressure on him and thousands of other undocumented workers to labor while depleted or unhealthy exacerbated risks for more severe injury. As workers reached the end of long days, simple mistakes were easier to make, which led to bigger problems for the farm and the individual. Ultimately, the pace and repetitive motion put significant pressure on undocumented dairy workers' bodies and created long-term pain problems that they weathered without health care.

Responding to the strain of excessive labor, Hector Jaimes protested oppressive work conditions after taking his fourth dairy job in 2004. Jaimes spent his first week identifying numerous potential dangers and approached his bosses about repairs:

Every farm has problems and no time to repair them. This is stupid. The bosses need us to be on our feet. So, why not repair?...I say to the [Nagel] bosses, when people get hurt they won't work, so let me do the construction...They [Nagels] thought the barn was fine and didn't want to pay me. So, I talked to [three other

⁹⁴ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

undocumented workers] and they agreed to a plan. I went back to [the Nagels] and explained how our plan cost them very little, and if they didn't agree we would leave right away...Well, he [Mr. Nagel] knew I was right, so he agreed.⁹⁵

During his years in the industry Jaimes observed countless injuries and became determined to improve his working conditions. Using his basic understanding of English and body language, Jaimes made a presentation to the Nagels. In it, he detailed a plan to fix glaring problems on the farm and ended with an ultimatum: pay him and other Nahua to do the work or lose four employees. Knowing his bosses could not tolerate an exodus of employees mid-shift, Jaimes calculated that he could negotiate with strength knowing that their group could find work immediately if needed. Furthermore, his moxie and leadership were effective in convincing his coworkers that he could win, which inspired them to take a stand with him. Recognizing their position, the Nagels accepted Jaimes's proposition to avoid a walk off. Taken together, Jaimes's fight for a safer workplace illustrates one way in which undocumented Nahua resisted hazardous workplaces and created collective power in America's Dairyland.

Living Conditions and Winter Tales

Alongside their wages and work environments, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants negotiated their living conditions with dairy owners who usually helped them secure housing in company-owned buildings, trailers, or nearby apartment rentals. Consistent with the US agribusiness practice of migrant camps, many farmers included lodging with undocumented workers' wages as an instrument for controlling their employees. Like sugar beet and cucumber farmers before them, Wisconsin's dairy owners deduced that they could keep their laborers close, supervised, and available by paying for them to live near the cow barns. From 1997 to

⁹⁵ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 13 February 2020.

2000, Eduardo Xocopil shared a two-bedroom mobile home with three other Nahua men, all of whom worked at the same dairy farm located 1500 feet from their front door. He observes,

The first time I went to Wisconsin [in 1997] the boss put me alone in a trailer, but soon I had three roommates. All Mexican guys. The four of us, men, all living in this place, and we had nowhere to go, but where would we go...Growing up in [Mexico] we lived in a small two-room house, me and my six brothers and sisters, but that was a family. One man...So, when I quit and moved up to the good jobs on the second dairy farm, I talk to the boss, and I ask him, "How would you like to live with me and two other guys?" He laughed and said, "Okay. Okay. We'll work something out."⁹⁶

Just as he had with wages and hours, Xocopil negotiated his living conditions. While he had grown up inhabiting an even smaller home with his six siblings, mother, and father, Xocopil felt uncomfortable because his roommates were grown men. With only two bedrooms for four males, dairy workers were expected to split the area like a university dorm room. Irrked by this layout, Xocopil spent most nights sleeping on the couch in their living room. Upon securing a higher-paying position at a new farm, he exploited his boss's masculine social expectations and reasoned with him that grown men should have more personal space. Having secured a promotion and endeared himself to management with his quality performance, Xocopil dictated the housing terms on his unwritten contract with the caveat that if he was unsatisfied he could easily find another job and leave the farm owners scrambling for a viable replacement.

One thing Eduardo Xocopil never fully adjusted to were Wisconsin's severe winters. "From May to October," Xocopil says, "things are nice, but once the cold hits, you better be ready."⁹⁷ While he and other Nahua from the high mountains of Veracruz were more accustomed to cool weather than those from central or northern Mexico, the ice and snow-ridden winters of

⁹⁶ Eduardo Xocopil, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

America's Dairyland were a new experience that tested migrants' mettle. Nevertheless, Xocopil says he made fun memories in Wisconsin's rural winter land:

The first time [in 1997] our trailer froze, the wood steps turned to ice and we [he and his roommate Alfonso] did not know anything. Of course, I'm late at 3:45 in the morning and I run out the front door and fly into the snow. Plop! I was a cartoon...That trailer was close to a hill and we parked the car in front next to the hill, right. I wipe my eyes and look around for the car, but it's gone. What the hell? I look over the hill and there it is. It fell down the hill! [*Laughs*] Well, we decided to slide down. So, we grabbed these tins [vinyl siding] and we slid down the hill! [*Laughs*]

Growing up they saw snow on mountain tops near their hometowns, but Xocopil and Alfonso had never dealt with the wintery conditions they encountered in Wisconsin. Although Xocopil had no experience with vehicles in freezing conditions, he had remembered seeing sledding in a TV movie. In the heat of the moment, both men could have easily become angered, saddened, or even depressed by the circumstances. Instead, they found humor in the absurdity of the situation and used it to generate positive energy that endured. By sharing the story with their coworkers, family, and friends, the Nahua men not only made people laugh, they taught them an important lesson about driving in the snow. These moments of levity were powerful and gave undocumented workers unmeasurable emotional strength to endure. Recognizing the opportunity to do something adventurous and funny, Xocopil and Alfonso made a lasting memory that distracted them from Wisconsin's chilling temperatures and the strenuous work of dairying.

Hector Jaimes also found adapting to winters in the upper Midwest a trial, most notably driving on slippery country roads. While a friend taught Jaimes to drive by giving him lessons on a golf cart, he never received formal training. During his first Wisconsin winter in 1997, Jaimes explains, the icy and snowy thoroughfares gave him an education in drivers' safety:

Many of us learned about driving in winter up here on these country roads [in Wisconsin]. Nobody had cars in the mountains [of Veracruz]. So, we had to learn two new things at once...I worked for a year, maybe less, with no car [in

Wisconsin]. Then, I bought the truck in November and crashed it twice before December! [*Laughs*] I'm sliding this way and that way, and I had no license yet. I had to teach myself, that's how I did things...I was scared I might slide off the road. So, I put pillows inside the car to save me, just in case I crashed again. When I got to work all the guys were laughing at my pillow car. Then, they played a trick on me with some stuffed animals and started calling me "fluffy."⁹⁸

The only safety features he could afford – pillows – bowled over his Nahua friends and coworkers, who attached two stuffed bunnies to his front headlights with the words, "*Maneja seguro mullido*/Drive safe fluffy."⁹⁹ At the moment he clocked out and left the building, four Mexican coworkers hid behind his truck and waited for Jaimes to find their surprise. After the front office door swung shut, there was a two second pause followed by the roaring sound of Jaimes's laughter. Hearing this, the men behind the truck started chuckling and popped up from their hiding spots to find Jaimes giggling to the point of tears. The name Fluffy stuck. As Jaimes's crew and thousands like them plugged away at their dairy jobs in Wisconsin, these kinds of jokes and moments of joy helped not only sustain workers' emotional and physical strength, they had the ability to change people's outlooks on life and make dairying bearable.

Like Eduardo Xocopil, Hector Jaimes lived in several farmer-owned trailers, and although he resided with one other person in a considerably smaller space, he had ambivalent feelings about the conditions. He recalls,

I cut grass in South Carolina, right. Then, wrapped cigarettes in Kentucky, but nothing gets in your nose like being out here [rural Wisconsin]. People always say, "Yea, it smells like shit!" But no, that's not it. It's more the combination and you only get that when you live here by the dairy farm...I'm talking about the cow shit mixed with the morning moisture and the first rays of sun over the hill in winter. The sun comes through and you see these big shadows move across the [trailer] walls.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 26 February 2020.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

While Xocopil was a married man with two children who he longed to reunite with in Veracruz, he generated happiness by appreciating the small things and finding beauty in everyday experiences. While most people despised the stench of cow excrement, the smell signified something more personal to Jaimes, because he associated it with aspects of his surroundings that made him happy. Rather than focus on his drowsiness or upcoming twelve-hour shift, Jaimes admired the way that the morning dew glistened with the sunrise or how at dusk disappearing light beamed through hillside trees to project crooked figures on his trailer's vinyl walls. To generate the strength needed to overcome his poor living conditions, Jaimes harnessed his positive feelings about the natural environment and transformed his rusty trailer into a focal point of optimism.

After a five-month stretch in Veracruz, Jaimes migrated to Wisconsin for a third time in 2005, took a dairy job recommended to him by a relative, and arranged to live in a nearby town where he received wage compensation in lieu of company housing. Contrary to his previous experiences, Jaimes explains, he had a new air of confidence:

It was a new journey. It was easy, I had a job before I left [Veracruz]. No border issues, no hunger. There's always fear, because you never know, but I went straight to [Wisconsin] and moved into my apartment in town. It was my place, no one else's. Do you live alone? [**Interviewer:** No] Then you know how great it would be. [*Both laugh*] Can you imagine nobody bothering you?!?...The difference was I finally had room to breathe and I didn't even know I needed it. After a while, I had energy and I could deal with people...definitely more patient.¹⁰¹

Jaimes had come a long way since the dirty and dangerous migrations of the mid-1990s, negotiating his wage, shift schedule, and living arrangements weeks earlier via phone in Veracruz. Reentering the job market with an extensive resume, Jaimes landed a job after two calls. His new residence—a four-hundred square foot studio in the heart of a west Wisconsin

¹⁰¹ Hector Jaimes, interviewed and translated by the author, 26 February 2020.

small town—symbolized his success and bright future. More than anything, Jaimes appreciated the peace and freedom of having a place to himself. As the conditions became normalized, he got more restful sleep, which translated into increased daily energy, and an overall transformation in the mental facets of his professional skills. In this regard, his transition to the studio apartment sparked a spiritual awakening that not only made him a better dairy worker, but also set him on a path to become a manager and achieve economic stability. While he still appreciated Wisconsin mornings, he could now enjoy them from the comforts of a livable space.

Conclusion

The example of Wisconsin dairy workers in the late twentieth century highlights the need for a closer examination of undocumented workers' labor negotiations outside of labor unions. Although it is commonly believed that unauthorized immigrants were not protected by US labor laws, US courts routinely concluded the opposite, adding that employers should be penalized for attempting to turn their employees into immigration authorities.¹⁰² Nevertheless, engaging in the legal system requires financial resources that undocumented dairy workers lack. Furthermore, it was often undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants' perception that they had no legal recourse to defend themselves against exploitation due to the threat of deportation. Isolated in rural Wisconsin with limited funds, it made sense to endure racism, unsafe conditions, and farm wages, because there were no viable alternatives. Unlike other labor histories that highlight the ways that job competition created schisms between and among ethnic groups, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants on Wisconsin dairy during the period did not compete with Mexican Americans or other non-white communities. Indeed, upon entering the industry, it

¹⁰² Michael J. Wishnie, "Emerging Issues for Undocumented Workers," *Journal of Labor and Employment Law* 6, no. 3, (2004), 503-04.

became clear that there was a scarcity of workers relative to the demands on Wisconsin dairy farms. Additionally, there was a learning curve for all people new to large-scale dairying that required time for new hires to come up to speed. Although their jobs were dangerous and backbreaking, Nahua and Mexican immigrants like Joaquín Galarga, Hector Jaimes, Silvana Reyes, and Eduardo Xocopil took advantage of the circumstances by seizing opportunities to learn transferable skills, earn more than they could in any seasonal or temporary position, and eventually take on supervisory roles. They used their learned expertise in modern dairying to bargain for higher wages and safer workplaces. Despite having no connection to formal unionism, their concerns over pay rates, health care, and working conditions were strikingly similar to most working-class Americans. Since 2020, collective actions and unions have sprung up among immigrant dairy workers in New York, Vermont, and Washington, but these movements have yet to have an impact on America's Dairyland.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants ascended in the industry, drawing on their transnational networks to learn about an array of things including local cultural expectations, job opportunities, details on social events, and places to buy Mexican products. Immediately, many prospective dairy workers learned the value of a year-round job. Although the history of Mexican migration and work in the Upper Midwest has been defined by seasonality and transience, undocumented dairy workers were employed in a full-time capacity unbound by temporary agreements or harvest periods. This distinction enabled them to establish

¹⁰³ Steven Greenhouse, "Union wins at New York farms raise hopes for once-powerful UFW," *The Guardian*, 6 July 2023, accessed 20 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/06/new-york-farm-workers-ufw-unions>; Elodie Reed, "Vermont immigrant dairy farmworkers face unique safety risks. Research shows this hotline helps," *Vermont Public*, 17 August 2023, accessed 20 September 2023, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2023-08-17/vermont-immigrant-dairy-farmworkers-safety-hotline>; and Ximena Bustillo and Andrea Hsu, "They put food on our tables but live in the shadows. This man is fighting to be seen," *NPR's Morning Edition*, 26 July 2023, accessed 20 September 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/26/1188074488/farm-overtime-workers-immigrants-undocumented-civil-rights-jose-martinez>.

a greater degree of job security. As Mexicans became the dominant workforce, they gained an advanced understanding of dairy farm operations and bargained for higher wages and better shift schedules. With that foundation, they built expertise in dairying and farm management, used labor shortages to their advantage, resisted exploitation, and continued to grow their transnational networks. As they negotiated higher wages and greater control over the workplace, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants created economic stability by saving and remitting millions of US dollars to their families in Mexico. Enduring years of physical pain and racial discrimination as casual workers, they exploited the dairy industrial system to create benefits for themselves and those in their community. With their newly acquired power, undocumented dairy workers pulled themselves out of unending poverty and created a culture of remittances used to pay for medical bills, school tuition, and concrete homes in Mexico. Ultimately, these material symbols served as inspiration to thousands of future migrants destined for America's Dairyland.

While the racial labor hierarchies instituted by Wisconsin farmers routinely placed undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants in the most dangerous, dirty, and low-paying positions, this situation also produced a space for resistance. In response to physically and verbally oppressive work conditions, Nahua laborers whittled away at racial structures by using their knowledge of the industry job market to locate more humane bosses and protest unsafe farms. In time, dairy owners who judged immigrant laborers' value based on merit instead of skin color or nationality recognized that many undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants had become skilled employees who could create efficiencies for their businesses. Accordingly, laborers displayed their freedom to choose to work at farms that paid and treated them fairly. In the process, they became experts and innovators who negotiated power and workers' rights on an

individual level, thereby setting a foundation for dairy workers' collective agency. Like the rising tide that lifts all boats, Galarga, Jaimes, Reyes, Xocopil, and thousands of other immigrant dairy employees created collective advantages by reshaping the balance of power on independent farms. Ultimately, the history of Nahua and Mexican immigrants in America's Dairyland is critical, because it helps us better understand how undocumented workers have shaped industrial livestock farming and recast power dynamics on dairy farms across Wisconsin.

CONCLUSION

“Are we finished? I have to go to the dairy farm,” said Orvilio Méndez. “The boss doesn’t know I’m talking to you, and I don’t want to explain it.”⁶⁰² After a productive interview in a tight sixty minutes, Méndez ended the conversation abruptly, and made me aware that he had spoken to me without the consent of his employer. A Nahua man indigenous to the high mountains of west-central Veracruz, Méndez had developed a strong network of friends and family who had experience with Wisconsin’s dairy farms and their owners. Although Méndez had worked his way up into a middle management position, he was not about to be a minute late to work. Despite his elevated position relative to other undocumented workers, he still felt the need to cover his tracks and keep things confidential. His boss needed and valued Méndez’s work enough to promote him and pay him more money, but there was little leeway in that arrangement. Like many undocumented dairy workers, Méndez and his boss maintained a tenuous alliance; one defined by mutual need and reciprocity. Both parties knew that if the other’s needs changed, the relationship could end suddenly. In this regard, both employer and employee maintained a degree of power over their positions, and although an owner may have had absolute control over a farm’s finances and operations, the size of modern dairy farms and the demands of its milk cows were too great to have significant labor turnover. Unlike regions with an oversupply of cheap workers, farmers in the Upper Midwest in the 1990s and 2000s were desperate for a consistent stream of workers willing to toil in dirty and dangerous jobs. To understand how Mexican immigrants became the predominant labor force on Wisconsin dairy

⁶⁰² Orvilio Méndez, interviewed and translated by the author, 5 April 2020

farms in the period, one must first examine the massive changes that led to increased mechanization, competition, and consolidation in the industry.

Beginning as early as the 1930s, the number of dairy farms has been decreasing in Wisconsin. Around the same time, the United States embarked on a campaign for cheap food that hoped to save the nation from the Great Depression and create competitive advantages over global enemies during the Second World War and the Cold War. This push to create food abundance and reduce the price paid by American consumers was first realized in crop agriculture, but the policy gradually gained traction in livestock sectors like poultry, pork, and later milk cows. While the decline in dairy farms was steady from the 1930s through the 1960s, it began to accelerate in the 1970s as a prolonged economic recession created tighter margins for farmers, leading some to early retirement and forcing others to transition into another economic sector. In the name of cheap food, US Secretary of Agriculture Earl “Rusty” Butz called on American farmers to “get big or get out,” in order to maximize the nation’s agricultural output, feed its citizens cheaply, and rescue its economy.⁶⁰³ In addition, new mechanical technology and dairy science presented opportunities for some to expand their cow herd and become efficient and specialized milk producers. This was no more true than in Southern California where dairymen had been pioneering industrial-scale models. These West Coast trail blazers transplanted drylot techniques from northern Europe that concentrated milk cows in densely-packed barns, fed them complex alfalfa-based meals, and rotated them through three daily milking to maximize their output. Unlike their counterparts in Wisconsin that operated diversified farms with an array of livestock and crops, California dairymen were highly specialized on milk production. Consequently, they justified making large investments in

⁶⁰³ Michael Carlson, “Earl Butz: US politician brought down by racist remark,” *The Guardian*, 4 February 2008, accessed 18 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/04/usa.obituaries>.

dairying technology and science that helped grow larger, more productive cows and sped up the process of farming. In particular, California dairymen were able to finance milk processing machines, modern refrigeration, and automated feeding systems that helped them vertically integrate their businesses and prolong the life of their dairy products.

While California dairymen specialized and reinvested in their businesses during the period, Wisconsin dairy farmers struggled to overcome the rising prices of raw materials and overhead expenses, as stagflation and price fluctuation created hardships. In order to survive as dairy farmers in this environment, Wisconsin producers had little choice but to expand their herds with limited capital, thus increasing their overall debt and putting even greater pressure on the following year's output. These conditions were made even more difficult by the cultural norms and traditions of the Upper Midwest, where it was widely believed that a diversified farm with 25-50 milk cows was ideal for a family farm. In this regard, producers in the Upper Midwest were fighting an uphill battle against the forces of consolidation and specialization. While California dairy farmers pushed forward with milk production technologies and created competitive advantages over producers in other regions of the country, they shattered notions of the idyllic small-herd operation. As the 1970s wore on, the economy continued to wreak havoc on the industry as farmers grappled with milk price volatility, increased debt, and supply fluctuations, which combined to tighten farmers' margins even further. Without the capital or expertise to transition to industrial dairying, as well as their cultural rejection of the large-scale model, Wisconsin dairymen failed to "get big" and compete with growing competition from the West Coast.

Instead, farmers and regional industry leaders focused on lobbying for greater government price supports, which established a milk price floor intended to keep producers

profitable. Although this system of government subsidies helped keep some farmers afloat, the policy only provided temporary relief for career dairymen. By the beginning of the 1980s, a decade of rapid inflation, increased dairy imports, and growing societal opposition to federal spending made the price support system untenable in the eyes of conservative politicians and voters. Responding to those concerns, President Ronald Reagan moved to change the federal policy, setting milk price support levels on a steadily decreasing schedule, and opening the dairy industry up to the unfettered forces of capitalist markets without the safety net of considerable government subsidies. Under these circumstances, Wisconsin dairymen could not survive without making significant changes, and many felt they had been dealt an ultimatum: either specialize or exit the industry. These conditions only became more acute as the 1980s bled into the 1990s. At a crossroads, operators in Wisconsin's historic industry closed their doors in record numbers, selling off their milk cows to growing producers or beef ranchers, and witnessing the transition to large-scale dairying in the Upper Midwest. After decades of prosperity and relative stability in models of dairying, the people of America's Dairyland had no choice but to "get big or get out."

As Wisconsin dairymen made the transition to large-scale operations in the 1990s and 2000s, they encountered a need for cheap labor to sustain their new twenty-four-hour businesses.⁶⁰⁴ Looking to adjacent industries as examples, dairy farmers began to hire those socially and economically vulnerable enough to accept the trying conditions on industrialized

⁶⁰⁴ One of the many changes that came along with large-scale dairying was the need to milk cows throughout the day and night. Once a dairy reached a certain size, often determined by the number of cows and the farm's milking parlor technology, it had no choice but to milk 24 hours a day in order to keep its animals healthy. What was once a twice daily routine that took a few hours to accomplish, had become a constant process that literally never ended.

dairies. While this labor pool was by no means homogenous, it did comprise a predominantly undocumented immigrant population that historically had not had a presence on Wisconsin dairy farms. Investigating this phenomenon further, it became clear that during its time of transition the Wisconsin dairy industry had turned almost exclusively to Mexican immigrants, both documented and undocumented, to run their new industrial dairies. While Mexican migrants had been working in the Upper Midwest since the nineteenth century, this period witnessed the entrance of a new wave of indigenous Nahua people from the high mountains of west-central Veracruz, who gravitated to dairy farms during this time of epic industry transition. Predominantly an undocumented community, these new dairy workers did not arrive in rural Wisconsin by chance. Hence, telling their stories requires an investigation into the origins and processes of their migration, beginning in their native *pueblos* in previous decades.

In Mexico, opposing global structural forces in the 1980s and 1990s led indigenous Nahua communities in the high mountains of west-central Veracruz to work in America's Dairyland. In the early 1980s, economic shocks led the Mexican government to devalue the peso, reducing real wages for workers everywhere. Still, the group most affected were subsistence farmers, especially those located in isolated portions of the country's southern states—Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. Due to the severity of this economic depression, many impoverished Mexicans felt forced to leave their homes to find work and supplement their family's subsistence farm income. While some found sufficient opportunities in Mexico's larger urban centers (namely Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey), many others made the decision to try to cross the US-Mexico border to secure better wages. During a time of immense change in Mexico, Nahua migrants from Veracruz became representative of a broader emigration from

indigenous areas in Southern Mexico that began in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁰⁵ In an effort to curtail the increased flow across the US-Mexico boundary, US lawmakers enacted the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). Despite the law's intention, the population of undocumented immigrants expanded quicker than ever. While there were 3.2 million in 1986, that number grew to 5 million in 1996, and 11 million in 2006.⁶⁰⁶ The collision of these economic and legal forces created the conditions that led undocumented Mexicans from their indigenous *pueblos* to Wisconsin dairy farms.

Another important layer of this history is the way that these specific immigrants migrated both transnationally and circularly—that is, laboring in the US on a seasonal basis and returning to their native home at the end of a designated period. Prior to the 1970s, this phenomenon was common, but tended to be more representative of Mexican immigrants concentrated in the American Southwest where they had greater proximity to Mexico. In the post-IRCA moment of the late 1980s and 1990s, though, this changed in large part due to the increased militarization of the US-Mexico border. In the ensuing decade, deaths peaked along the border, with the greatest increase coming in the Arizona-Sonoran borderlands.⁶⁰⁷ Scholars have noted that once in the US, undocumented Mexican migrants were less likely to risk another clandestine border crossing.⁶⁰⁸ Instead, they chose to stay in the US without documentation, erecting long-term and long-distance relationships that placed great strain on their now transnational families. By contrast, undocumented immigrants from indigenous Nahua *pueblos* in the high mountains of Veracruz

⁶⁰⁵ Alberto del Rey Poveda, "Determinants and consequences of internal and international migration: The case of rural populations in the south of Veracruz, Mexico," *Demographic Research* 16 (Apr., 2007), 291; and Gloria Ciria Valdéz-Gardea, "Current Trends in Mexican Migration," *Journal of the Southwest* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 563.

⁶⁰⁶ Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 183.

⁶⁰⁷ Government Accountability Office, "Report to the Honorable Bill Frist, Majority Leader, U.S. Senate,: Illegal Immigration," United States Government Accountability Office, Aug 2006, Report #06-077, <https://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06770.pdf>.

⁶⁰⁸ Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 6.

continued to migrate circularly. Rather than remain proximate to Mexico by staying in the Southwest, those that found their way to Wisconsin dairy farms traveled hundreds of miles beyond the border. Additionally, scholars of Midwest Latina/os have often found that Mexican immigrants (in places like Detroit, Chicago, and St. Paul) were more likely to settle and build ethnic communities rather than return to Mexico.⁶⁰⁹ Importantly, this group spent most of their time in rural Wisconsin, making them different from the usual topics of scholarly study in urban enclaves. Due to their continued post-1986 circular migrations, this particular group became expert border crossers, who developed intricate transnational networks that spanned from mountainous Mexican *pueblos*, to the US-Mexico border, and into the Upper Midwest. During the period, the needs of the US and Mexican nations affected global markets and shaped the migration process. Resisting economic oppression, restrictive US immigration law, and international trade agreements, undocumented dairy workers reshaped both their indigenous *pueblos* and rural Wisconsin.

As they entered the dairy industry in the Upper Midwest, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants encountered a predominantly white world, where their racial differences stood out and created suspicion about their immigration status. Fear of law enforcement and small-town locals impelled many dairy workers to become quietly obedient on the job, unflinchingly performing their responsibilities while enduring onerous conditions. For similar reasons, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants often remained close to their dairy farm and places of residence—likely a trailer home, rented room, or small apartment. While fear had a

⁶⁰⁹ Valdes, *Barrios Norteños*, 23.

significant impact on their daily lives, it did not control migrants absolutely. While some found the isolation of rural farms to be debilitating, others felt empowered to explore the countryside and nearby cities, using their limited free time to patronize local grocery stores, shops, gas stations, restaurants, and bars. It was in these situations that interactions between local white Wisconsinites, Americans of Mexican descent, and Mexican immigrants played out. The nuances of these exchanges help explain how alliances and antagonisms developed in the burgeoning multiethnic and multiracial spaces of rural Wisconsin.

While some of the more recent waves of undocumented Mexicans in Wisconsin came directly to dairy farms, most early entrants to the industry came from another low-wage job. The story of Nahua man Jesus Rivera is an illustrative example. Entering the US on an H-2A temporary work visa in the 1990s, he chose to overstay his legal residence, finding work in Texas and South Carolina before migrating to Wisconsin. In his first two stops, Rivera noted the ease with which he made contacts with fellow indigenous Mexicans. Rivera felt secure knowing that he had a network of people to lean on when he encountered issues with his citizenship status, despite the inherent fear of living in the US without authorization. Upon entering the rural hills of America's Dairyland, Rivera found a much different world, where indigenous connections were not as apparent and ethnic populations were less visible. On one of his trips to the local town grocery, an unidentified person threw a cinder block through his car window. From this, Rivera deduced that some people did not want him there, and were more than willing to use scare tactics to frighten him into leaving town. Without the support system he had become accustomed to in Texas and South Carolina, and the perceived safety of living among a more densely populated community of fellow undocumented immigrants, Rivera felt that he would have to

limit his trips to town and live in greater solitude. Over time, he learned to deal with the inevitability of racism, or at the very least cultural ignorance, living in small-town America.

Rivera's experience is representative of the broader population of undocumented dairy workers. Like Rivera, undocumented Nahua dairy workers from the high mountains of Veracruz had no choice but to interact with the local white population, and these contacts played a large part in defining their experiences in the region. According to many undocumented dairy workers that worked in Wisconsin at the time, it was common for local Wisconsinites to profile them as potentially dangerous and criminal. Making matters worse, locals also assumed that the presence of Latina/o immigrants working on dairy farms meant that they were taking jobs away from Americans. To shield themselves from criticism, dairy farmers often asserted that their predominantly Mexican labor force was filled with "good" immigrants that worked hard and just wanted to make a life for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, people like Jesus Rivera continued to endure physical and psychological violence without protection of their civil or labor rights.

Living through these conditions, some undocumented Mexican dairy workers found refuge in regional Mexican American communities. In and around smaller urban centers like Green Bay, Eau Claire, and La Crosse, Wisconsin, they developed friendships and romantic entanglements with Mexican-descent Americans. Jesus Rivera, for instance, made his first connection by going to a Mexican-run restaurant and striking up a conversation with the people working there. Over time, Rivera and those of his ilk established lasting relations by patronizing these spaces and becoming part of the local community. Later, often through word of mouth, undocumented Nahua were also able to expand their social networks, finding solace from hard labor in new friendships and interethnic exchanges. In this regard, Latina/o communities in

Wisconsin exhibited remarkable interconnectedness and cross-cultural acceptance. As they became more intricately connected to Americans of Mexican descent, undocumented dairy workers learned about local customs, police behavior, and rumors of immigration enforcement actions in the area. Through these connections, people like Jesus Rivera created lives and made place in the rural hills of the Upper Midwest. Beyond that, they expanded preexisting Mexican American communities, incorporating their own customs, and forging a new multiethnic culture.

As they integrated themselves into local cultures and learned to live in rural Wisconsin, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants negotiated power and their rights as workers on dairy farms across the state. The labor systems they encountered on large-scale operations in the 1990s and 2000s had roots in paternalistic family labor practices dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. On a traditional farm that housed 50 milk cows or less, a single farmer handled the daily tasks on their own. By contrast, an operation with several hundred animals demanded constant attention, a labor force, and an expanding skill set that incorporated new dairy science, equipment, and computer technology. When Wisconsin dairy owners transitioned to hired labor with the growth of their herds, they shifted from being farmers who toiled to managers who oversaw operations. Furthermore, as dairy farms grew in scale, dangers to workers increased in kind. The two greatest hazards were livestock and heavy machinery, like tractors. With hundreds of large milk cows densely-packed in closed barns, it was common for animals to step on, mangle, or otherwise injure workers. In the year 2000, on average a fully-grown cow weighed about six to nine times as much as a human man. Considering this ratio, it is

easy to see how fingers, arms, and legs could be crushed.⁶¹⁰ Although smaller in number, female dairy workers faced an even more lopsided size ratio, bearing in mind the average woman weighed about twenty pounds less than the average man. Operating in tight quarters, undocumented dairy workers risked life and limb as they cleaned bars, fed livestock, and guided animals to and from the milking process. Without formal representation, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants endured exploitation, working long hours for relatively low wages in hazardous conditions without the benefit of a shared language to communicate their concerns to managers or ownership.

Despite having similar concerns to citizen workers—income, work conditions, and health care—undocumented laborers often have historically been excluded from the US labor movement. However, as this dissertation shows, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants in American Dairyland developed direct action techniques and informal workers’ networks that helped create collective power similar to a formal union. Critical to their increased agency was their awareness of dairy farmers’ needs and financial limitations. In this regard, gaining expertise on the job meant mastering the physical tasks and developing perspective on how dairy owners managed their operations and made economic decisions. Using this knowledge, some undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants moved their ways up the professional ladder into middle management. In 2003, for example, Felicio Gallardo learned from contacts in his network that a few regional dairies were about to shut down and sell their milk cows to a larger producer that would be looking to hire new managers.⁶¹¹ Seeing this as an opportunity, Gallardo requested

⁶¹⁰ While the average milk cow weight has grown over time, in the 1990s and 2000s the size ranged between 1,200 and 1,600 pounds. Considering an average human man weighs 190 pounds, the average cow weighs between 6.49 to 8.65 times more. These numbers only increase among women, who on average weigh about 20 pounds less than men. Margaret A. McDowell, Cheryl D. Fryar, Rosemarie Hirsch, and Cynthia L. Ogden, “Anthropometric Reference Data for Children and Adults: U.S. Population, 1999–2002,” *Advance Data*, National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control, no. 361 (July 2005): 6-31.

⁶¹¹ Felicio Gallardo, interviewed and translated by the author, 8 January 2020.

a promotion from his boss, explaining that while he would rather stay, he had heard of several management positions elsewhere and was willing to leave. After four years in the industry, Gallardo had become a highly proficient worker and would not have been easily replaced—a fact that both he and his boss understood. Twenty-four hours after their meeting, Gallardo's boss made his promotion official and announced that their farm would be expanding its herd. The calculation was simple; either take a major hit or expand his operations and elevate Gallardo into a new role supervising new hires. While it was not easy to advance on a dairy farm, it was by no means impossible. Thus, Gallardo's experience is representative of how undocumented dairy workers gathered information and used it as a bargaining chip in informal negotiations.

Recognizing their labor as valuable, it was common for undocumented dairy workers to actively seek better wages on other farms. Initially they pulled on community knowledge shared through immigrant networks in Wisconsin, across the US, and in Mexico. This information ranged from the basics of maintaining a dairy farm position, to insights on job opportunities, and even specific details about farmers and the industry broadly. Sharing such information helped newer entrants as they tried to find work, communicate with their family in Mexico, and live safely in Wisconsin. If they could not secure a raise at one farm, then there were hundreds, if not thousands, of other operations that could potentially offer more. Dairy work was dangerous and difficult no matter where it was performed. Thus, immigrant workers were often willing to leave behind one farm for another, unless they had a particularly close relationship with their boss(es).

For dairy farmers, taking on new employees that had no experience in dairying involved growing pains as they learned procedures, schedules, and the flow of the operation. By and large, high levels of turnover could not be tolerated on dairy farms. If a single worker walked off the job, it would negatively impact the farm temporarily, but the remaining employees could usually

pick up the slack by working more hours and taking on greater responsibilities until the new hire caught up. By contrast, consider the effects of a 50% exodus from the night shift. With hundreds of cows in need of thrice daily milking, the action could have detrimental consequences for the animals and the farm's financial well-being. In this way, it behooved dairy owners to retain quality employees, avoid the inevitable struggles of training new people, and do everything in their power to keep workers from performing a multi-person work stoppage.

Still, instances of collective action were relatively few. More often, undocumented dairy workers negotiated power relations through one-on-one interactions. In the absence of union representation, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants negotiated for higher wages, better conditions, and promotions. By gaining operational and organizational expertise on modern dairy farms, they made themselves valuable assets. Playing on farmers' needs, undocumented Nahua and Mexican immigrants used their value to compel dairy owners to take greater account of their employees' needs, thereby improving working conditions on an individual basis, and influencing future industry standards. Developing critical negotiation skills, they generated ways to change owners' management styles, reshape power dynamics farm-by-farm, and establish collective rights as workers. Despite the perils of working with large animals and heavy machinery in a fast-paced environment dedicated to maximizing efficiency, undocumented dairy workers carved out space to bargain with owners and established power by leveraging their learned skills as modern dairy workers.

Absent significant North American wealth redistribution, revisions to US immigration and labor laws will not be enough to change the deep seeded economic issues driving poor Mexican communities into labor migration. While IRCA and NAFTA have had tremendous

impacts on people in Mexico, the root force pushing them out of the country across an increasingly militarized border is economic. Undoubtedly, the financial vulnerability of Mexico's rural poor has been a continuing issue since the country's independence in 1821. However, the increased connectivity of their financial well-being with global markets in the 1980s and 1990s has made it nearly impossible to retain traditional mechanisms of subsistence farming without supplemental income. While Mexico's economic policies helped create the conditions leading to extreme poverty in indigenous communities, the US government and American businesses also played a significant role in extracting wealth from the country.

As the Mexican economy destabilized following the 1982 debt crisis, the government tried to ramp up foreign investment through deregulation. From February 1984 to September 1986, they introduced new measures allowing for majority ownership in Mexican-based businesses, eliminating investment restrictions for small-to-medium sized businesses, and started a debt for equity swap program.⁶¹² In 1989, Mexico's participation in the "Brady Plan," a US-initiated strategy that forced banks to provide debt forgiveness, and used the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to collateralize debt at significant discounts.⁶¹³ In taking these steps, Mexico made itself a more attractive landing spot for outside capital, the highest percentage of which came from the US.⁶¹⁴ With reduced restrictions on foreign ownership, some multinational businesses set up operations in Mexico because of the ready access to cheap labor.

⁶¹² Michael W. Goldman, Michael C. McClintock, James J. Tallaksen, Richard J. Wolkowitz, "An Introduction to Direct Foreign Investment in Mexico: A Contemporary and Historical Legal Analysis of Mexican Direct Foreign Investment Laws and Policies and their Relation to the North American Free Trade Agreement," *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review* 5, no. 1 (1994) 109.

⁶¹³ Sara Hsu, *Financial Crises, 1929 to the Present* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 66.

⁶¹⁴ The ratio of foreign direct investment to GDP rose from 1.4% between 1980 and 1985, to 1.8% between 1986 and 1993, and 3.4% between 1994 and 2000. Jorge Máttar, Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid, and Wilson Peres, "Foreign Investment in Mexico after Economic Reform," in *Confronting Development: Assessing Mexico's Economic and Social Policy Challenges*, edited by Kevin J. Middlebrook and Eduardo Zepeda (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 144.

The best example of this was *maquiladoras*, or duty- and tariff-free factories strategically positioned in Northern Mexico. Created in the wake of the bracero program under Mexico's Border Industrialization Program of 1965, they grew substantially during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶¹⁵ With the intention of importing goods to the US, multinational companies set up manufacturing operations near the border to limit distribution expenses while taking advantage of Mexico's working-class population and poorly enforced labor laws, which empowered them to be highly exploitative.⁶¹⁶ Although the added jobs helped Mexican families in the interim, the presence of foreign corporations did not create long-term benefits for Mexico's economy or its inhabitants. By the end of the century, global corporations had begun moving their operations again, this time to parts of South and Southeast Asia where labor was even cheaper.⁶¹⁷ Like *maquiladoras*, foreign investment in the final decades of the twentieth century created limited positive impacts for the Mexican people. As the country and its government grappled with the 1982 debt default, the 1994 peso devaluation crisis, and the continued recession brought on by NAFTA, external investors repeatedly withdrew and left Mexico in dismal financial shape. Those moments expose the roots of undocumented Mexican immigration.

In an age when the lives of urban elites and rural poor had never been so connected, the economy and other global forces had an equally enlarged effect on indigenous *pueblos* in the high mountains of Veracruz. Suffering from an ongoing economic struggle for their lives, Mexicans with both urban and rural origins continued to cross the US-Mexico border in the

⁶¹⁵ Carolyn Tuttle, *Mexican Women in American Factories: Free Trade and Exploitation on the Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 65-66.

⁶¹⁶ Robert E Stevens, David L Loudon, Gus Gordon, and Thurmon Williams, *Doing Business in Mexico: A Practical Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2; and Kathryn Kopinak, "The Relationship Between Employment in Maquiladora Industries in Mexico and Labor Migration to the United States," Working Paper 120, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego (August 2005): 10.

⁶¹⁷ Elizabeth Malkin, "Manufacturing Jobs Are Exiting Mexico," *New York Times*, 5 November 2002, accessed 11 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/05/business/manufacturing-jobs-are-exiting-mexico.html>.

1980s, 1990s, and 2000s out of desperation and hope for their families' survival. As the history of Nahua dairy workers makes clear, the violence of US immigration policies and enforcement shaped migration, but it did not stop it. The same forces that have been driving indigenous people from their homes and out of Mexico did not cease. Like history itself, we must look at the origins of undocumented immigration to understand how it develops, why it persists, and how it can be resolved.

Although extreme poverty compelled migratory labor from Mexico to the US in the 1980 and 1990s, the solution in the 2020s may not be economic. In my view, the only viable solution is to eliminate border restrictions for Mexican citizens without violent criminal records. Consider the metaphor of people fleeing a fire at a concert venue where the only exit forces the masses through a bottleneck passage bounded by metal fencing. In this case, the fire is the Mexican economy, the concert venue is Mexico, and the main exit is US immigration policy. While the concert hall has another way out, representing Latin America, flames have already consumed it. As they approach the border, US immigration policies under IRCA and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 serve to tighten the guardrails. From the moment the fire pushes them to move, to the fracas of the packed crowd, and the narrowing bottleneck, people endure violence to their bodies, hearts, and minds. While some people make it through, others die in the chaos or trying to find alternative exits. Despite the fire's embers still smoldering, the people desire to return to the venue. Like the global economy, the fire comes and goes, but people's passion for family, culture, and their native lands remain, driving them back. Such were the feelings of many Nahua migrants from the high mountains of Veracruz.

This metaphorical fire may have started in Mexico, but the ongoing pain and strain it has caused the Mexican people is also the responsibility of the US. As the country's geographic

neighbor, one of the key players in the global economy and Mexico's foreign investment, and a nation founded on principles of freedom and human equality, the US is obligated to help address the roots of the forces driving Mexican undocumented immigration, and assist in creating solutions. Without a sincere plan for economic balance, there is no hope of creating greater equality across the continent. It is imperative, then, that the US eliminate human borders in the same way they have done for trade and investment. There is no fair rationalization for reducing restrictions for goods and dollars crossing borders, but not humans. Paradoxically, the only way to stem the tide of unauthorized entrants is to eliminate all restrictions. With people able to move freely across the border, the balance of economic need, opportunity, and growth can be realized. By eliminating immigration restrictions, the US will not only relinquish its economic dominance over Mexico, but it will also invest in its future as an economically vibrant and self-sufficient country.