



MEXICAN FAMILIES AND THE SUGAR INDUSTRY IN GARLAND

Miriam B. Murphy

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Sixty families from Juarez, Mexico, came to Box Elder County in 1918 to work in the sugar beet fields. They established a colonia on the outskirts of Garland where Utah-Idaho Sugar Company had built a sugar factory in 1903. Farmers in the area had increased their sugar beet acreage over the years. That and labor shortages associated with World War I led the company to seek workers outside the United States. During the harvest season the company brought an additional 150 Mexican workers to Garland.



Garland Sugar Beet Plant

In 1920 Frank A. Arnold visited the Mexicans in Garland. His account of the colonia, including several photographs, was published in the Salt Lake Tribune. Today's readers may find fault with Arnold's simplistic and sometimes stereotypical view of the residents, but he clearly liked and even admired the people he met there. Regardless, he provided a rare look at the workers from Mexico who contributed so much to Utah's agricultural success.

The houses furnished by the company "look[ed] like cross sections of freight cars, and...rent[ed] for \$2 a month." Each house contained "a good range" that the tenants bought with small monthly payments and a corn mill. In back of each house the family grew chilies, corn, beans, garlic, lettuce, and cilantro—"so good in soups"—and kept chickens and rabbits for fresh meat. In the fall "the front of the house...is gay with drying red peppers and beef." The houses were evidently sparsely furnished with whatever each family had been able to bring with them from Mexico or acquire locally. The women, Arnold reported, sat on the floor much of the time to do their work: "...washing dishes, mixing tortillas or grinding corn. The tortillas they roll out as thin as paper on a board and then bake on top of the stove."

Arnold arrived at the colonia just before beet thinning began, so most of the women were at home with their children. "A few days later," he noted, "and most of the women would have followed their sons and husbands into the fields to cook for them, for beet work is a season of camping for the whole family..." The reporter was rebuffed at first by the shy and modest women who did not feel comfortable talking with a strange male, especially one who wanted to photograph them. He finally convinced them of his sincerity, and several of them eagerly posed for a photograph with their children: "First came Francisco Torres with her month-old baby. Then Guancha Ramos retreated into her house, all papered with the colored advertising pages of American weeklies, and in a few minutes

came forth with the most embroidered baby in Utah in her arms." All the edges of the infant's layered white silk dress were embroidered. Many women in the village were accomplished embroiderers, he discovered, most notably Señora Salome Sermeno.

The company had paid the workers to build a schoolhouse. This they did by making adobe bricks from clay found near the Malad River flats. The county furnished a teacher, and, Arnold wrote, "the work of Americanization is evidently succeeding, for the children are reported as being uncommonly bright. In fact, they gave much pleasure to the church-going population of Garland by singing 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' one Sunday night in meeting." According to Arnold, the Mexicans received a very friendly reception from Garland's townspeople, and unlike the situation in southern California, he noted, the Mexicans were welcome at local movies and restaurants and even, if the sad occasion arose, in the local cemetery. Still, Arnold related, "now and then a Garland small boy has to fight with a Mexican boy to show him that he belongs to the old aristocracy of Garland."

The Mexican worker was "malleable and dependable," Arnold wrote, spent his earnings locally for food and clothing—"a welcome addition to the trade of any town"—and when not needed in the beet fields was "willing to work on the railroad." Moreover, the women of the community made "excellent housekeepers."

When they were not hard at work, the residents of the colonia knew how to enjoy themselves on such Mexican holidays as September 16, celebrating their country's independence from Spain with feasting and music. "Many of them play the guitar well enough to go on a vaudeville circuit," Arnold averred. He said the men were planning to build a high adobe wall so they could play their favorite ball games. With a sense of irony Arnold noted that the roosters to be found in Box Elder County were "tame, spiritless birds," implying that cockfighting—an activity frowned on in America—would not be found in the back alleys of the Garland colonia.

The idyllic picture Arnold painted of Mexican life in Garland focussed on the positive aspects of the residents' activities and their relationship with townspeople. The life of migrant workers and their families was arduous, a fact only hinted at by Arnold. After 1930, historian Vicente V. Mayer wrote, these early agricultural colonias disbanded. To meet the demands of Utah farmers, more and more Mexican migrant workers came to toil in fields and orchards. Señora Francis Yanez recalled "working on the farm, from the time I was about seven....We started topping beets in the early season. You were down on your knees...hour after hour...and the sun would be beating on you, and it would rain on you. But we were hungry...our parents would tell us, 'We have to do it—to feed the younger ones.'" Migrant workers in Utah and elsewhere often faced discrimination and hostility from the local community and lived in crowded, squalid conditions in the camps provided for them. They endured, however, and many of these unsung heroes and heroines of agriculture took up permanent residence in the state as part of Utah's growing and diverse Spanish-speaking community.

See: Salt Lake Tribune, June 13, 1920; Vicente V. Mayer, After Escalante: *The Spanish-speaking People of Utah*, in *The Peoples of Utah*, ed. Helen Z. Papanikolas (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1976), and *Migrant Labor* clipping file, Utah State Historical Society Library.