

POVERTY, SOLIDARITY, AND OPPORTUNITY: THE 1938 SAN ANTONIO
PECAN SHELLERS' STRIKE

A Thesis

by

MATTHEW JERRID KEYWORDH

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2007

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	David Vaught
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ABSTRACT

Poverty, Solidarity, and Opportunity: The 1938 San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike.

(December 2007)

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In 1938, San Antonio's pecan shellers waged a five-week strike against their employers. The shellers had few resources at their disposal, and, moreover, most of them were Mexican women. During the work stoppage, the picketers endured widespread opposition and police brutality. Nonetheless, the shellers forced their employers to arbitrate. Previous scholars have characterized the strike as spontaneous, but closer examination reveals the events and circumstances that spurred the shellers to action. Specifically, this work will address why the strike occurred at the beginning of 1938, and how the shellers achieved a successful outcome.

Political and economic factors in the early twentieth century resulted in a massive wave of migration from Mexico into the U.S. Newly arrived Mexican workers faced discrimination in the workplace and in their personal lives. That discrimination resulted in low wages for Mexican workers. Low wages forced Mexicans in San Antonio to live in the city's west side neighborhood, which lacked adequate housing and infrastructure. Such conditions gave pecan workers considerable reason to resent their employers and seek change.

Grievances alone might explain why the shellers struck, but they do not explain the strike's success. Pecan workers relied on solidarity formed over many years to sustain their work stoppage until their employers surrendered. Solidarity was formed in a variety of venues on the west side, in both formal and informal organizations. Leisure activities also fostered unity, often along cultural lines. The shellers also built a sense of togetherness through labor organizations and mutual aid societies.

The political climate in San Antonio during the late 1930s provided the final piece to the puzzle of the strike's success. Election results at the federal, state, and local levels signaled that voters sought the leadership of individuals who advocated increased rights for workers and minorities. The shellers seized on the political climate, waging their strike at a time when it stood a better than average chance to succeed. Without the combination of poverty, solidarity, and opportunity that existed for Mexicans on the west side in January 1938, the strike's occurrence and outcome would have been in considerable doubt.

For my mother, for Nikki, and for all women who work too hard for too little.

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I also want to thank my family, whose unwavering support throughout my life has allowed me to pursue a career as an historian. Mom listened patiently as I worried out loud about meeting the demands of graduate school, and then convinced me that I was equal to the task. Dad's enthusiasm for my work has at times surpassed even my own, and I always leave our conversations impassioned to work harder. Kelsey reminds me of why I wanted to be a professional historian in the first place, and Nikki is simply my role model. Finally, I must express my considerable gratitude to Ronda. She has

been more supportive and understanding of my goals than I have any right to expect, and she has given me the latitude to see how far I can go.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On February 23, 1938, Maria Hernandez sat on her porch with her sisters and watched San Antonio's police force descend upon hundreds of striking pecan shellers who picketed in the street.¹ Tear gas filled the strikers' lungs while they gasped for fresh air, a task complicated by the bevy of police batons that pummeled their defenseless bodies. Terror seized the Hernandez sisters as their attention turned from the horrific scene before them toward a contingent of officers marching in their direction. Paralyzed with fear, the women remained on their stoop until forced to the ground by their uniformed captors. "If you resist," one officer screamed, "we'll split your head!" An additional warning of indefinite incarceration further discouraged the women from supporting the strike. The latter threat rivaled the first, as each woman knew that pecan workers already filled the city's jails well beyond capacity and that the facility had degenerated into a filthy, disease-ridden, Tejano repository.²

Three weeks earlier, the city's shellers walked off the job when their employers instituted a one-cent per-pound pay cut. Local labor leader Emma Tenayuca had been organizing the shellers for several months, and her passionate speeches roused the workers to action. City leaders attempted to discourage the strike and undermine

This thesis follows the format and style of the *Southwest Historical Quarterly*.

¹ The term pecan sheller will be used interchangeably with the term pecan worker. About 90 percent of workers were shellers. Crackers and washers constituted the remainder of workers, and they also partook in the strike. Moreover, the term Mexican will refer to Mexican Americans, as that was the most common term used at the time for that population. Additionally, Mexican will be used interchangeably with Latino/a and Tejano/a. The term Mexican national will refer to citizens of Mexico. The term Anglo will refer to all non-Hispanic whites, regardless of ethnicity.

² *San Antonio Express*, 24 February 1938; *La Prensa*, 24 February 1938.

Tenayuca's leadership in the opening days of the work stoppage, but police violence ensued when peaceful measures failed to produce a resolution. The workers came under daily attack from police chief Owen Kilday's officers, but they also received an infusion of support from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). As CIO organizers took control of the strike, they asked Governor James V. Allred to send Texas Rangers to protect the shellers from Kilday's police force. The governor refused that request, but assisted the workers by establishing a committee to consider their grievances and pressuring the municipal government to end police abuses.

The strike hobbled into its fourth week as the Hernandez sisters succumbed to arrest. The Texas Civil Liberties Union had already declared that there was "no blacker page in the entire history of Civil Liberties in the United States than the story of the San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike," and the brutal tactics employed by Kilday's officers to end picketing corroborated that conclusion.³ Yet, the strike continued. In mid-March, after thirty-seven days of intense confrontations between the estimated 12,000 shellers and local law enforcement, the city's pecan workers and their employers agreed to arbitration. Both sides claimed victory at the arbitration board's decisions. Just as it seemed that the workers had achieved some measure of equality in bargaining with their employers, however, the newly mandated federal minimum wage significantly changed the shelling industry in San Antonio.⁴

³ Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 8.

⁴ *La Prensa*, 9 March 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 10 March 1938.

The strike's success raises several important questions. What sorts of grievances prodded the shellers to action? Why were San Antonio's pecan workers all Mexican, and what other employment opportunities did they have in the city? How did the strikers manage to sustain the work stoppage given their lack of resources? What reason did shellers have to believe the public might be sympathetic to their strike in early 1938? Was the strike merely a spontaneous reaction to the wage cut implemented by the industry or the result of more profound circumstances and processes? And why did the strike occur precisely at this time, and not earlier?

The pecan shellers' grievances stemmed from numerous inequalities both inside and outside of the workplace. Many of the industry's workers came to Texas from Mexico as part of a great wave of migration between 1910 and 1930. Political turmoil in Mexico drove people out of the country, and abundant jobs in the railroads and agriculture attracted them to Texas. Mexican wage laborers quickly displaced poor white sharecroppers in South Texas, but they paid a significant social price, as Anglos refused to accept them as equals. Jim Crow laws did not technically apply to Tejanos, but white attitudes almost universally relegated them to poorly paying jobs that offered few opportunities for advancement.

For geographic, cultural, and economic reasons, San Antonio became a destination for thousands of Mexicans seeking more stable work, and possibly more equal treatment, in an urban area. Although jobs abounded, most were in the city's low-paying light manufacturing sector. Those wages condemned the city's Tejanos to tenements on the west side, which lacked sufficient electrical, water, and sewage

services. Diseases thrived in the underdeveloped neighborhood and infant mortality rates soared. Inadequate educations received in segregated schools further handicapped Mexicans seeking to improve their circumstances. As the Great Depression set in, the situation became even more bleak as competition for jobs increased and wages plummeted.

Despite such harsh conditions, Tejanos in San Antonio sought to improve their lives through group action. Institutions such as the Catholic Church allowed many Mexicans to practice organizing and leadership skills and incubated solidarity formation among members. Some used those experiences to form advocacy groups that appealed to the city on behalf of west side residents. Others formed labor unions that looked to secure better pay and working conditions from the city's employers. Unity among Mexican workers in the mid-1930s fostered a labor militancy on the west side that led to a series of strikes in several industries. Moreover, solidarity formed through a variety of organizations and social activities served the shellers well during their work stoppage by giving them vital support from fellow Tejanos.

While discrimination and limited job possibilities provided pecan workers a reason for discontent and solidarity allowed them to pose a legitimate threat to their employers, neither of those factors account for the strike's timing. Rather, the general mood of the community in 1938 signaled that even Anglo residents of San Antonio would be sympathetic to a walkout. Evidence of the pro-labor atmosphere can be culled from election results at the federal, state, and local levels in the 1930s that indicated Anglo willingness to support labor against management. Without such indications that

the city's white population would at least remain neutral during a strike, the shellers would probably not have believed they could successfully challenge the city's pecan operators.

* * * * *

A cursory examination of the pecan industry in Texas prior to the Great Depression adds context to the events of the shellers' strike. By the 1930s, those who occupied the strip of central Texas between the Brazos and Nueces Rivers had enjoyed pecans for hundreds of years. The state's sandy river bottoms proved an ideal environment for wild groves. As early as 1533 Spanish explorers, including Lope de Oviedo and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, noted that the indigenous population consumed the nuts in significant quantities. Moreover, pioneering pecan cultivator E. E. Risien claimed to own a fossilized kernel that a neighbor discovered 38 feet underground while digging a water well. No real planning went into pecan horticulture in Texas until 1880, when F. A. Swinden planted the state's first commercial orchard on 400 acres near Brownwood. Most growers during that era maintained trees exclusively along streams, often in single file, unless widespread lowlands allowed for more dispersed groves. Settlers new to central Texas sold bags of pecans in San Antonio for a nickel per pound just as commercial orchards came into being, and by 1882 G. A. Duerler, Sr., was hiring Mexicans to crack the nuts with railroad spikes and shipping the edible meats to the east coast.⁵

⁵ Fred R. Brison, *Pecan Culture* (Austin: Capital Printing, 1974), 2-3, 6-7; E. E. Risien, *Pecan Culture for Western Texas* (San Saba, TX: Published by Author, 1904), 8; S. A. Jones et al., *An Economic Study of the Pecan Industry*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Technical Bulletin 324 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, September 1932), 11; Seldon C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassemore, *The Pecan*

By the early 1900s, the tree had achieved symbolic status in Texas. E. J. Kyle, dean of the Texas A&M School of Agriculture, first offered a course in pecan cultivation in 1911, and he continued to do so each year until his retirement in 1948. The state Department of Agriculture established the Pecan Division in 1915, and the state legislature proclaimed the pecan the state tree four years later, declaring that “patriotic Texans who have pioneered in the propagation and improvement of the pecan thus far, have rendered their State an outstanding constructive service which is a real heritage to present and future generations.” Former governor James S. Hogg expressed his sentiment for the tree by insisting that he wanted “no monument of stone or marble, but plant at my head a pecan tree and at my feet an old-fashioned walnut . . . and when these trees shall bear, let the pecans and walnuts be given out among the plain people of Texas, so that they may plant them and make Texas a land of trees.”⁶

Into the 1920s, the public beyond Texas and the South began clamoring for pecans. Improved varieties, such as the Stuart, the Success, and the Moneymaker, typically shipped directly to consumers who then shelled them in their homes. These varieties came primarily from states east of the Mississippi River, particularly Georgia. Ninety percent of the nuts grown in Texas, however, were seedlings. Seedling varieties lacked the size and sweetness of their improved brethren, but could be purchased for less than half the price. In 1928, for example, improved varieties sold for 52 cents per

Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor, Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 7.

⁶ Brison, *Pecan Culture*, 12; J. H. Burkett, *The Pecan in Texas: Pecan Soils, Districts, Streams, Orchards, Groves, Care, Propagation, Cultivation, Covercrops, Irrigation, Production, Insects, Diseases, Etc.*, Texas Department of Agriculture, Bulletin 111 (Austin: Texas Department of Agriculture, July-August 1932), foreword and introduction (first and second quotes).

pound, while seedling varieties cost only 24 cents per pound. Transportation costs from Georgia to the nearest shelleries in Chicago or St. Louis could add another dollar to the cost of each pound of improved pecans. Seedling pecans particularly appealed to confectioners, bakers, and ice cream vendors who used them as ingredients rather than stand-alone treats. To further reduce expenses, operators shelled seedling pecans in San Antonio, then shipped only the meats to customers across the nation. This step allowed shelleries to reduce shipping weights, and therefore costs, by almost two-thirds. Although most consumers preferred unshelled nuts for sanitary reasons, they willingly indulged in less expensive foods enhanced with seedling pecans from Texas.⁷

Texas pecan growers found themselves well-positioned as nationwide demand for pecans increased. Large tracts of suitable land and inexpensive agricultural labor catapulted the state into the national lead in production. In 1925 Texas groves housed nearly 2.5 million pecan trees. By 1929 that figure had ballooned to 6.6 million trees, which produced more than 9.5 million pounds of pecans. At decade's end, thirteen counties in central Texas surpassed 200,000 pounds of production a year and accounted for more than half of the state's harvest. San Saba County led the way in 1929 with 745,324 pounds harvested. Beyond good soil and cheap labor, growers expanded quickly because pecan growing became big business in Texas before it did in other states. The early 1930s saw 44 percent of Texas's growers claiming more than 2,000 trees in their groves, and the average number of trees per enterprise topped 175. Second place Oklahoma's growers, in comparison, averaged 110 trees each. Georgia, the only

⁷ Menefee and Cassmore, *Pecan Shellers*, 6-7; Jones et al., *Pecan Industry*, 63-4, 79-81, 85.

state outside of Texas to produce more than three million pounds of pecans in 1929, averaged only 68 trees per grove. Texas eclipsed all other states in production throughout the 1930s, accounting for one-third to one-half of the national total each year.⁸

As the state's growers sought methods of outpacing their rivals, so too did Texas pecan shelling operators. Like other light manufacturers, most operators turned to mechanization. The process began in 1889 when Robert E. Woodson developed the first lever-operated cracking machine. He improved upon that effort in 1914 by providing operators with the first power-driven crackers. Rudimentary machines that sorted nuts based on size soon followed, but the fragile nature of the meats made mechanized shelling impractical. Unbroken halves constituted the most valuable meats, which made hand shelling the only viable option for operators through the 1930s. G. A. Duerler reached the pinnacle of mechanization in 1928, when cracking and grading operations were completely automated and 1,000 Mexican women and girls shelled the pecans then packaged them for shipping. Duerler dominated the shelling industry by 1930. His operation soon faced a formidable challenge, however, when an upstart competitor introduced a more flexible business model that defied conventional thinking about mechanization.⁹

In 1926, Julius Seligmann used the land he inherited from his father and \$50,000 in cash to found the Southern Pecan Shelling Company. At a time when the industry's

⁸ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xv; Jones et al., *Pecan Industry*, 7-9, 11-2; Burkett, *Pecan in Texas*, 228-32.

⁹ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, x, xv, 7-8.

largest operators, including Duerler and R. E. Funsten in St. Louis, marched toward increased mechanization, Seligmann envisioned plants filled with inexpensive manual laborers rather than machinery. These sweatshop shelleries drastically reduced the startup capital required to enter the pecan business. Whether or not Seligmann's business plan could compete with those of larger, mechanized operators initially remained unclear. Perhaps if the economy had continued to boom as it had through much of the 1920s, Southern Pecan's seemingly retrogressive model would have failed. Instead, it was the economy that failed.

As the Great Depression devastated business and industry, mechanized pecan operators found it difficult to cut spending. Expensive machinery required maintenance and upgrades, and operating costs did not decline as far or as quickly as pecan prices. In contrast, Southern Pecan thrived during the Depression. With few capital expenses, Seligmann simply cut wages to ensure his pecans sold at a profit. No longer able to continue, Duerler's operation collapsed under the Depression's immense weight. Southern Pecan survived by transferring that weight off of the business onto its employees.¹⁰

By the early 1930s, Seligmann had established a monopoly over the pecan industry that allowed him to set wages for all operators in San Antonio. Demechanization created thousands of low-paying jobs for the city's Mexican population. The number of positions peaked over the winter of 1933-4, when San Antonio's operators employed as many as twenty thousand shellers in more than four

¹⁰ Ibid., x, 8, 12.

hundred facilities spread across Bexar County. Southern Pecan commissioned more of those workers than any other operator. By 1935 the company enjoyed the largest market share in the nation, turning out approximately one-third of all the pecans shelled in the United States. The following year, as many businesses struggled for survival, Southern Pecan grossed more than three million dollars in profit. The combination of inexpensive Mexican labor and an expansive growing area constituted Southern Pecan's simple, yet effective, blueprint for success, but chronically low wages engendered considerable resentment on the west side.¹¹

* * * * *

Like farmers throughout the nation and other manufacturing concerns in San Antonio, Southern Pecan relied on a pool of readily available laborers willing to take temporary or seasonal work. In Texas, those workers overwhelmingly tended to be Mexican. In recent years, several scholars have examined the role of Mexican labor in the United States generally and in Texas specifically. Mark Reisler's study of Latino workers north of the Rio Grande concludes that "the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt administration showed little inclination to protect the political or economic security of Mexican workers." Additionally, Reisler claims that "Mexican unions were more ad hoc than permanent. They were . . . victims of flaws characteristic of all migrant organizations: financial and political impotence engendered by rootlessness." While these claims may generally be true, the pecan workers' story demonstrates that President Franklin D. Roosevelt did take notice of the shellers and their families on the west side.

¹¹ Ibid., xv, 7-9; Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio*, 3.

Moreover, Tejanos in San Antonio proved they could build organizations that, while limited in some respects, were certainly not impotent.¹²

More recently, several major works have explored Mexican workers in Texas. David Montejano's 1987 monograph remains required reading for anyone seeking to understand racial relations between Anglos and Mexicans in Texas history. Since then, Emilio Zamora has focused this lens of racial relations on the dealings between Tejano workers and their mostly white employers, arguing that those workers formed organizations designed to protect and promote their interests as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Zaragosa Vargas builds on Zamora's work, contending that the labor organizations Mexicans formed in the 1930s and 1940s included elements of a nascent civil-rights crusade that reached maturity in the 1960s as the Chicano Movement. While these works demonstrate Mexican aptitude in forming groups that proved crucial in creating solidarity, they do little to explain the timing of the shellers' strike, let alone the wave of strikes that preceded it.¹³

Although the pecan shellers still await the monograph that tells their complete story, several articles in the past six decades chronicle their 1938 strike. Harold Shapiro examined early organizations that attempted to unionize the pecan workers in the mid-1930s, such as El Nopal, and concentrated on the role of CIO leadership during the strike. He also considered how the minimum wage requirements stipulated in the

¹² Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 248-9.

¹³ David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and mechanization affected the pecan workers and their union. Kenneth Walker further emphasized mechanization's impact on the pecan industry. Like Shapiro, Walker claimed that mechanization fundamentally changed the pecan industry and subsequently resulted in many hardships for workers displaced by equipment. More recently, Patricia Gower has explored the strike's substantial political fallout, demonstrating that San Antonio's Mexican community abandoned the city's political machine by the spring of 1939. Voting in their own interests, Tejanos overturned the city's establishment by electing former U.S. Congressman Maury Maverick mayor. Although Maverick's time in city hall proved short, San Antonio's Mexican community exercised their political might and provided warning to future candidates who might take their votes for granted. Other historians briefly discuss the strike in broader works, but these accounts typically echo the episode's milestones and focus on the mechanization and federal legislation that affected pecan workers after the strike without offering new interpretations.¹⁴

The majority of scholars who have considered the shellers' strike have characterized it as a spontaneous reaction to the one-cent pay cut that took effect in the

¹⁴ Harold A. Shapiro, "The Pecan Sheller of San Antonio, Texas," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 32 (March 1952): 229-44; Kenneth P. Walker, "The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio and Mechanization," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 69 (July 1965): 44-58; Patricia E. Gower, "Unintended Consequences: The San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938," *Journal of South Texas* 17 (Fall 2004): 88-103; Irene Ledesma, "Texas Newspapers and Chicana Workers' Activism, 1919-1974," *Western Historical Quarterly* 26 (Autumn 1995): 309-31; J. Gilberto Quesada, "Toward a Working Definition of Social Justice: Father Carmelo A. Tranchese, S. J., and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 1932-1953," *Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 4 (1993): 44-64; Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66 (November 1997): 553-80.

winter of 1937-8.¹⁵ The shellers' actions were far from spontaneous, however, and the pay reduction simply sparked an explosive atmosphere that had developed over years. The pecan workers' reasons for fighting the pay decrease were ample, and most stemmed from discrimination in education, the labor market, and in housing. The poverty that followed from discrimination did not prevent Mexicans from forming and participating in a multitude of organizations that bred solidarity amongst members of the community and allowed them to develop crucial skills. Furthermore, by the late 1930s the Great Depression had transformed American thinking about the proper relationships between labor, capital, and the government. That transformation presented workers with an opportunity for action. Poverty and solidarity intersected with opportunity in San Antonio on January 31, 1938, when thousands of pecan workers resisted their employers' attempts to reduce wages by launching the largest strike in the city's history. Their success can only be explained by examining each of these three elements that led to the strike in more detail.

¹⁵ The following attribute the strike primarily to the pay cut: Roger C. Barnes and Jim Donovan, "The Southern Pecan Shelling Company: A Window to Depression-Era San Antonio," *South Texas Studies* 11 (2000): 58; Ledesma, "Texas Newspapers," 317; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 17; Walker, "Pecan Shellers," 49. These authors characterized the strike as spontaneous: Richard Croxdale, "The 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike," in *Women in the Texas Workforce: Yesterday and Today*, ed. Richard Croxdale and Melissa Hield (Austin: People's History in Texas, 1979), 28; Gabriela Gonzalez, "Carolina Munguia and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," *Frontiers* 24 (2003): 214; Stuart Marshall Jamison, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 836 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 280; Reisler, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 229-30; Shapiro, "Pecan Sheller," 235.

CHAPTER II

IMMIGRATION, DISCRIMINATION, AND WORK

San Antonio's pecan industry almost exclusively employed Mexican labor after the founding of Southern Pecan in 1926. The reasons were simple: profits from hand shelling depended largely on the cost of labor, and an abundance of Tejano agricultural workers in the city during the winter months suppressed wages. The surplus of such labor began building earlier in the century, when immigration to south Texas from Mexico accelerated due to political and economic factors on both sides of the Rio Grande. Migrant workers from Mexico encountered migrant farmers from the Midwest and South, reshaping social relations between Anglos and Mexicans in the region. Increased ethnic stratification led to occupational stratification, and Tejanos found themselves barred from most skilled positions and other well-paying jobs. Rural Mexicans picked a variety of crops in Texas and other parts of the nation, while urban Mexicans worked in light manufacturing, construction, or service jobs. Both earned low wages and endured poor working conditions. This was particularly true for pecan shellers, as their ranks swelled with Tejanos physically unable to perform other sorts of work. By 1938, largely as the result of a discriminatory labor market, shellers were the lowest paid workers in the nation, and they toiled in dark, dusty shacks that lacked heat, ventilation, and often restrooms. Such dismal conditions provided shellers ample reason to strike.

* * * * *

Immigration from Mexico dramatically increased after 1900 as thousands poured into Texas to either work on the railroad or in agricultural jobs. In the previous thirty years the Mexican population in the U.S. had more than doubled from less than 45,000 to nearly 100,000. This increase seems significant on the surface, but Anglo migration from the Midwest and the South to southern Texas actually outpaced that of Mexicans over the same period. Migration quickened in the opening decade of the twentieth century, as nearly 25,000 Mexican nationals crossed the Rio Grande into the U.S. Railroads and mining interests in Mexico's less populated northern states lured unemployed workers from the central and southern parts of the nation, and by 1900 the rail network allowed relatively easy passage to the American border. During the same period, improved irrigation and refrigerated rail cars made wide-scale commercial agriculture viable in South Texas. These improvements spurred railroad development in the Rio Grande Valley, and Mexican nationals often entered the United States to continue working in that industry. This wave of immigrants between 1900 and 1910 included few of the elites who characterized later migrations, and instead came "largely from the migratory laboring class of their own country," according to one federal report. Upon arriving in Texas, the typical worker had traveled "a thousand miles from his home" where "American employers, with a gold wage, . . . had little difficulty in attracting him across that not very formidable dividing line." Many immigrants paid between \$10 and \$12 for bus tickets to a port of entry into the U.S., the most popular

being El Paso. Some journeyed from their homes in central and southern Mexico as far north as the upper Midwest each year. Most, however, remained closer to home.¹⁶

Whereas economic factors spawned a trickle of immigration into Texas before 1910, Mexico's bloody revolution fuelled a flood of immigration after that date. Between 1910 and 1919, more than 170,000 Mexicans entered the U.S., and that number grew to 487,000 the following decade. Furthermore, Mexican records suggest that U.S. figures substantially underreported the rate of immigration. In 1911, for example, American sources indicate that 18,784 migrants entered the U.S. from Mexico. That same year the Mexican government counted more than 58,000 emigrants to the U.S.¹⁷

American officials registered such inaccurate counts for several reasons. Many Latinos wanted to avoid "embarrassing questions as to literacy, worldly wealth, and other things," and some found the eight-dollar head tax required for legal entry unaffordable. "Why bother the officials and undergo the necessity of answering strange questions from the brusque gringos [sic]," one journalist asked, "when upon paying a ferryman a dollar one could cross the Rio Grande almost anywhere, and thereafter go in peace to practically any place within the perfectly safe domain of Uncle Sam?" Laborers who lived in Mexico and worked in the U.S., thus crossing the border twice each day, further complicated the task of census workers and immigration officials.

¹⁶ Victor Clark, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bulletin 78, (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1908), 467 (first quote), 470 (second quote), 471-4; Julie Leininger Pycior, "La Raza Organizes: Mexican American Life in San Antonio, 1915-1930 as Reflected in Mutualista Activities" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1979), 21; Ricardo Romo, "Responses to Mexican Immigration, 1910-1930," *Aztlan* 6 (Summer 1975): 174-6; Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 15-6.

¹⁷ Samuel Bryan, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Survey: A Journal of Constructive Philanthropy*, 7 September 1912, 726-7; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 180; Romo, "Mexican Immigration," 173-5, 178.

Despite this degree of unreliability, the raw data clearly demonstrates that immigration accelerated during World War I and throughout the 1920s. Once the wave of migration that began in 1910 ceased in 1930, Mexico had lost ten percent of its population to death or emigration. In contrast, the Mexican population of Texas had tripled.¹⁸

The sudden surge in Mexican immigration received mixed reactions from the American public. Businesses, particularly large South Texas farming interests, generally favored open borders, and the state's agribusiness lobby persuaded the U.S. Congress to exclude Mexican nationals from anti-immigration legislation in the 1920s. By that time a patchwork of disparate groups, including small farmers, eugenics proponents, and organized labor, coalesced in opposition to unfettered Mexican immigration. Those exclusionists rationalized ending Mexican immigration for both economic and social reasons. Small farmers worried about competing against better financed rivals who could afford to employ legions of inexpensive Mexican laborers, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) feared that immigration suppressed white wages. Eugenics advocates believed that Mexican nationals lacked inherent qualities essential to participation in a representative democracy. Despite these arguments, exclusionists enjoyed little success during the 1920s. Most of the nation considered Mexican immigration a regional, rather than national, problem until later decades.¹⁹

¹⁸ Max Sylvius Handman, "The Mexican Immigrant in Texas," *Political and Social Science Quarterly* 7 (June 1926): 34; Seldon C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassemore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 2, 4-5; "Mexican Invaders Relieving Our Farm-Labor Shortage," *Literary Digest*, 17 July 1920, 53 (first and second quotes).

¹⁹ Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 466; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 179-96; Romo, "Mexican Immigration," 34-8; Zamora, *Mexican Worker*, 18.

With opposition to immigration weak, Mexicans filled both the rural and urban areas of Texas. San Antonio proved a popular Latino destination for several reasons. Historically, the city had maintained a substantial Mexican presence. Geographically, its proximity to the border allowed people and culture to flow in and out with relative ease. Economically, the arrival of railroads and commercial agriculture connected San Antonio to the rest of the nation by World War I. This meant jobs for semiskilled and unskilled labor, as did construction work provided by new and expanding military installations and a burgeoning light manufacturing sector. San Antonio also served as a clearing house for low-wage labor. Even prior to the revolution, one government official recognized that the city was “probably the most important distributing point of Mexican labor for Texas proper.” That role continued into the 1930s, and, as one municipal report concluded, many migrant workers used the city “as a farm labor camp during the winter months since it [was] the largest recruiting center for Latin-American farm labor in the country.” Beyond its economic significance, the city functioned as a meeting place for elite exiles, as upper-class Mexican nationals streamed into San Antonio during the first years of the Mexican Revolution. More than 25,000 resided in the city by 1913, although many considered their stays temporary. Most elites expected to return to Mexico once the political situation there stabilized.²⁰

²⁰ Richard A. Buitron, Jr., *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16, 19; Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 475 (first quote); Frances Jerome Woods, *Mexican Ethnic Leadership in San Antonio, Texas* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 20-1; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 2; City of San Antonio, *An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas* (San Antonio: s. n., 1942), 33 (second quote).

The revolution dragged on, however, and San Antonio steadily accumulated Mexican residents. By 1930 more than 82,000 Latinos lived in the city, up from about 29,000 in 1910. When the pecan shellers struck in 1938, estimates showed 100,000 Mexicans in San Antonio, nearly 40 percent of the city's total population. Despite a relentless repatriation campaign that slowed immigration to Texas in the 1930s, the city's Mexican population continued to grow. By 1950 only four cities in Mexico claimed more citizens of Mexican descent than San Antonio.²¹

Not all migration into San Antonio and south Texas during the first half of the twentieth century came from below the Rio Grande, however. White settlers left the American South and Midwest for south Texas hoping to find the cheap, plentiful farmland advertised by promoters. Speculators preceded those farmers and sold them land purchased for as little as fifty cents an acre in the 1890s for as much as \$300 an acre ten years later. In addition to cash, the newcomers brought racial attitudes with them that informed their dealings with Tejanos. Southerners who equated Mexicans with African Americans fought to implement Jim Crow in their new surroundings. Rural Midwesterners had less personal experience interacting with racial minorities, but considered chronically high disease rates in the Mexican community evidence of poor hygiene and general uncleanness.²²

²¹ Richard A. Garcia, "Class Consciousness, and Ideology – The Mexican Community of San Antonio, Texas: 1930-1940," *Aztlan* 9 (Fall 1978): 30; Patricia E. Gower, "Unintended Consequences: The San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938," *Journal of South Texas* 17 (Fall 2004): 88; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 2-3; Mary John Murray, "A Socio-Cultural Study of 118 Mexican Families Living in Low-Rent Public Housing in San Antonio, Texas" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1954), 8.

²² Buitron, *Tejano Identity*, 13; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 108-9, 233-4; Zamora, *Mexican Worker*, 31-3.

The recent arrivals' generally low opinions of Tejanos often extended to the native Anglo population of south Texas, as well. Many newcomers looked disparagingly on the extant society, and set upon "civilizing" the area. Conflict arose amongst Anglos on several fronts, but, according to historian David Montejano, it "centered on control of county governments that possessed the power of tax assessment and collection and the provision of public services." New settlers sought high governmental investment in infrastructure, while their long-time Texan counterparts preferred lower taxes. To enact desired changes, newcomers divorced established politicians from their largely Mexican constituency with poll taxes that discouraged Tejano voting and measures forbidding interpreters in voting places. By the late 1910s hostilities between long-time residents of the region and their newer Anglo counterparts ceased, as both groups realized that their common interests outweighed their disagreements.²³

The native white population in South Texas, after all, harbored their own racially charged attitudes toward Mexicans. Military victories in the Texas Revolution and Mexican-American War, as well as countless skirmishes between Latinos and Texas Rangers, led many Anglos to view Mexicans as both violent and inferior. Nevertheless, as immigration increased, so did the percentage of Mexican nationals in South Texas. Anglos came to assume that all Tejanos were Mexican nationals, a trend accelerated by white migrants who failed to understand the historical complexities of ethnicity and citizenship in the region. Assumptions of citizenship often justified withholding civil

²³ Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 110-1, 112 (quote), 143.

rights from Tejanos, many of whom further aroused suspicions by defiantly identifying as Mexican nationals. Some Anglos, however, recognized the emotional dilemma citizenship posed to Mexicans. “The Mexican knows he is entering territory that used to belong to Mexico,” wrote one uncommonly sympathetic observer, “and which he dreams may some day be returned. And so while the immigrant from across the Atlantic arrives with the dream of becoming an American citizen, it is doubtful if among the two or three million Mexicans who have crossed the Rio Grand, a dozen ever came with any such intention.” This informant further postulated that Americans erred in believing that “Americanization is a dose to be administered entirely to the alien. We look at him en masse, and wonder what ought to be done to him, little realizing that for intelligent solution of the problem, we might well be wondering also what we ought to do to ourselves.”²⁴

Beyond citizenship, white Texans struggled to place the round pegs of Mexican ethnicity into the square holes of segregation. Brown skin disqualified Tejanos from being white, but did not necessarily condemn them to the same fate as African Americans. Jim Crow applied only sporadically to Mexicans in most parts of south Texas, but de facto segregation typically followed from economic conditions. Low-rent housing and inexpensive restaurants, movie theater seats, and rail tickets kept Tejanos both concentrated together and away from Anglos, particularly in San Antonio.

²⁴ Ibid., 181, 223-4; Robert N. McLean, “Rubbing Shoulders on the Border,” *Survey*, 1 May 1924, 185 (first quote) 201 (second quote); Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 51; Victor Nelson-Cicneros, “La Clase Trabajadora en Tejas, 1920-1940,” *Aztlan* 6 (Summer 1975): 251; Pycior, “*La Raza*,” 129; Walter Elwood Smith, “Mexicano Resistance to Schooled Ethnicity: Ethnic Student Power in South Texas, 1930-1970” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1978), 79.

Mexicans often attended African American schools where such institutions existed, but a dearth of blacks in south Texas occasionally meant the establishment of Mexican schools. A minority of those who supported Jim Crow criticized three-tiered segregation because they saw social and political promise in the Tejano community. “The Mexican is theoretically not limited either in his educational opportunities or in his occupational field,” one representative of this camp claimed, “Neither is he disfranchised. He is educating himself rapidly, only to find that his education above the literacy line is quite useless to him. He will soon be going to college in large numbers, and he will soon wield an emphatic and brilliant English pen. He will organize his group politically and then what?”²⁵

Nevertheless, most Anglos were blind to this potential, and their arguments for perceived Tejano mediocrity ranged widely. Prominent contemporary economist Paul S. Taylor noted that “belief in the inferiority of Mexicans was general, and was assumed by many to be axiomatic, although whether the inferiority was biological or social, whether it could be removed with education or not, occasioned more differences of opinion.” Those subscribing to biological explanations typically rested their arguments on the foundation of Social Darwinism. This group viewed the plight of Tejano workers as evidence of a biological defect in the Mexican “race,” and believed that most had already “reached their potential as actors in the political and economic spheres.” Moreover, many Anglos drew lines of distinction within the Mexican community according to complexion. Light-skinned Latinos suffered less discrimination than their

²⁵ Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 37, 40-1 (quote); Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 51; Jay S. Stowell, “The Danger of Unrestricted Mexican Immigration,” *Current History*, August 1928, 765.

darker-skinned companions, many of whom ranked only slightly above African Americans socially. Outdoor work further punished Mexican laborers in this regard, as the sun darkened their skin while they toiled in the fields and on the railroads.²⁶

Others favored environment over biology in explaining the plight of Tejanos. One informant believed that “unfavorable climatic conditions in certain sections of Mexico, inadequate food, and a dull social life have combined to make ‘a lazy Mexican.’” Another theory identified disparate levels of industrialization between the U.S. and Mexico as the culprit. Proponents claimed that recent immigrants needed time to acclimate to the quick pace and long hours that American employers expected. Some critics of biological causation attacked the scientific underpinnings of Social Darwinism directly. They viewed the theory as a product of racism rather than of scientific understanding. Noted Mexican sociologist Manuel Gamio recognized as much, declaring there was “no scientific basis for an innate inferiority of the Mexican, nothing beyond the dark pigmentation of the Mexican to account for the racial prejudice against him.”²⁷

Of the stereotypes leveled against Tejano workers, laziness was perhaps the most damaging. Workers could be “dirty,” since they spent most of their time with each other, and even the most “ignorant” workers could be shown how to perform rote tasks

²⁶ Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 52-3; Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 255 (first quote); Smith, “Schooled Ethnicity,” 81-2, 84 (second quote).

²⁷ Edwin F. Bamford, “The Mexican Casual Problem in the Southwest,” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 8 (July-August 1924): 367; Emory S. Bogardus, *The Mexican in the United States* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1934), 33 (first quote); Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 43-4, 172 (second quote).

with some efficiency. No employer could abide “lazy” workers, however, because they viewed sluggishness as a choice. Management often used slothfulness to justify subjecting workers to dangerous or unsanitary conditions. A contemporary journalist suggested cultural misunderstanding as the root of friction between Mexican labor and Anglo management, explaining that the American’s “love of speed convinces him that the Mexican has no idea of the value of time, while the Mexican feels sure that the American is simply rude.” He went on to conclude that “as a consequence, the American has much to say about the ‘mañana’ propensities of his Mexican neighbor, while the alien from the south feels sure he is dealing with a manicured savage, whom for some inexplicable reason, the gods of fortune have peculiarly blessed.” Most employers attempted to overcome this perceived shortcoming in the Tejano workforce by implementing incentive wages. Agricultural workers typically earned a set amount per pound of crop harvested, while industrial workers were often paid by the piece.²⁸

At the same time, Mexican also workers had defenders. Arthur J. Drossaerts, Bishop and then Archbishop of San Antonio between 1918 and 1940, stated the predicament of Tejanos in stark terms, claiming that “Negro slaves before emancipation were a thousand times better off than these poor, defenseless people.” Some Anglos vouched for the basically good nature of Mexicans and their desire to become good Americans, while others fought to demonstrate intellectual and moral equality between whites and Latinos. Several commentators described Mexicans as peaceful, clever,

²⁸ Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 33-4; McLean, “Rubbing Shoulders,” 185 (first quote), 201 (second quote).

loyal, and “at heart honest.” A common concern of whites involved the lack of interest upper-class Mexicans displayed for their downtrodden compatriots. One Anglo lamented the situation, arguing that the relatively well-off political exiles were “the group from which leaders could be recruited for the masses. . . . But from home they have never been required to take any interest in the masses except as exploiters. The Mexican masses mean nothing to them in Mexico and they mean nothing to them in Texas.” Unfortunately for Tejanos, most white appeals for justice were ignored.²⁹

Discrimination and racial prejudice manifested in several ways. For Mexican workers, one was the emergence of a dual labor market. Anglos labored in the market’s primary sector in jobs characterized by high wages, fringe benefits, and job security. Tejanos, conversely, toiled in the secondary sector, where low pay, lack of benefits, and high turnover rates accompanied most positions. The dual labor market’s most insidious feature, however, was a nearly impenetrable barrier between the two sectors that relegated Mexicans to the lowest economic stratum in Texas. Without hope of advancement, Tejanos took virtually any work offered.

Texas became the beneficiary of plentiful, inexpensive Mexican labor just as other southern states experienced a significant loss of equally affordable African American labor. Immediately after World War I, thousands of blacks left the rural South

²⁹ Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 17; Frank Callcott, “The Mexican Peon in Texas,” *Survey*, 26 June 1920, 438 (second quote); Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 501; Servando Esquivel, “The Immigrant from Mexico,” *Outlook*, 19 May 1920, 131; Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 33 (third quote), 39; Alvin S. Johnson, “Mexico in San Antonio,” *New Republic*, 24 June 1916, 191; George Lambert, “The Jersey City of the South,” Unpublished article, 4 July 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, Special Collections, Central Library, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter referred to as SC-UTA), 2 (first quote); Paul S. Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” *Survey*, 1 May 1931, 201.

in search of better jobs, and better treatment, in the northern cities. This migration affected other southern states more than Texas, where Tejanos quickly replaced lost labor, and by 1919 Texas led the nation in total value of agricultural production. Although one Department of Commerce and Labor official characterized Tejanos as “unambitious, listless, physically weak, irregular, and indolent,” he nonetheless accepted the conventional wisdom that they were well-suited to farm work in the hot, arid environment of south Texas. A contemporary observer attributed this aptitude to their Aztec roots, claiming that Mexicans “had a rather high type of civilization, and were village dwellers,” who, even centuries earlier, made “good farm-workers.” Others saw a considerable downside to immigrant labor. Many worried over the social costs of having so many Tejanos in Texas, and one detractor asserted that “the evils to the community at large which their presence in large numbers almost invariably brings may more than overbalance their desirable qualities. Their low standard of living and of morals, their illiteracy, their utter lack of proper political interest, the retarding effect of their employment upon the wage scale of the more progressive races, and finally their tendency to colonize in urban centers, . . . combine to stamp them as a rather undesirable class of residents.” Yet, in their drive to increase profits, Texas growers dismissed these worries and continued hiring Tejanos. By 1937, the Texas Farm Placement Service estimated that Mexicans constituted 85 percent of all migratory farm laborers in the state.³⁰

³⁰ Bryan, “Mexican Immigrants,” 730 (third quote); Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 466, 496 (first quote); Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 26; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 209; Richard Lee Strout, “A Fence for the Rio Grande,” *Independent*, 2 June 1928, 520; “Mexican Invaders,” 53-4 (second quote).

Although agriculture remained the primary source of employment for Mexicans in Texas throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many found work in other occupations. Railroads employed more Tejanos than any other non-agricultural enterprises, and occasionally used more Latino labor than farmers during winter months. One Texas railroad official explained that Mexicans were “better than any other immigrant labor we can get. They are better than Negroes [sic] at ballasting, laying ties, and ordinary track work,” though he also lamented that he had “to carry about 50 men on a pay roll to be sure of 30 to 35 men working every day.” Railroads also appealed to Tejanos because they transported laborers from their homes to their places of work for free, eliminating the need to find a ride through notoriously unscrupulous labor agents, otherwise known as *enganchadores*. Moreover, if workers stayed with the railroad for at least six months, they typically received free transportation back to their homes as well, a significant bonus for workers who usually earned less than \$1.25 each day. Many Mexicans forewent that bonus, however, and left to work in the fields. Railroads suffered a steady attrition of labor as farmers lured workers with promises of better wages, a tactic that saved growers the expenses associated with recruiting labor. According to one estimate in 1907, thirty percent of the wheat harvesters in Kansas were Mexicans who had deserted the railroad, and entire work gangs sometimes abandoned the rails to pick cotton in Texas. Beyond railroad work, some Tejanos in rural areas hired out as blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons, although most could only find such work near the

border. Others found employment in small towns and villages as ice haulers, auto mechanics, and truck drivers.³¹

The bulk of Mexicans toiled in the fields, however, and farmers and growers searched endlessly for means of limiting their movement. Many employers realized that women and children significantly reduced Tejano men's mobility. Those employers encouraged entire families to work on their farms, knowing men would be reluctant to leave their loved ones behind for better opportunities. Furthermore, farmers struck deals with labor agents that made the laborer, rather than the employer, responsible for paying transportation costs, meaning that Mexican field hands could find themselves in debt even before beginning work. Anglos designed this measure in response to the notion that after earning a few dollars, Tejanos would "quit, because they would have enough money for beans and *tortillas* for a week." Coercive methods eventually became more sophisticated. Under the labor contract system, migrant workers bid against one another for the right to harvest a particular crop, with the low bidder receiving the contract. Besides suppressing wages to an absolute minimum, contracts invariably withheld 25 percent of the total price as retainage until the crop was completely harvested. Most migratory workers forfeited this portion of their pay, as they could ill afford to postpone moving on to their next job. Similarly, the family contract system paid Tejanos enough

³¹ Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 37-8; Bryan, "Mexican Immigrants," 728; Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 471-2, 475-9 (quote); Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 46; Seldon C. Menefee, *Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas*, Federal Works Agency, Works Progress Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 36; Romo, "Mexican Immigration," 29.

that a couple and several children working together could survive, but one or two adults working alone could not support their offspring.³²

In addition to exploitative contracts, growers threatened workers with deportation. The Farm Placement Division of the Texas State Employment Service reported that illegal entries into the U.S. outnumbered legal entries into the 1920s. Employers and labor agents “could and often did keep the fact of illegality . . . dangling over the heads of the frightened peon workers, paying them meager wages and treating them almost as slaves.” Mexican workers occasionally had allies, however. Those who physically assaulted their laborers, for example, risked garnering attention from the Mexican consulate. Consuls regularly pushed for higher wages and better working conditions on American farms, and even supplied workers with a sample contract designed to protect their wages. Yet, the contracts proved impotent because American employers refused to sign them, the U.S. and Texas governments refused to enforce them, and migrant workers refused to trust a Mexican government that had historically undermined their interests. In other instances the consulate proved more helpful. In 1918, Consul General Teodulo Beltran stepped in on behalf of beet field workers in California, and in another case consuls ensured highway construction workers would be paid by placing a lien on the project.³³

³² Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 40-1; Bryan, “Mexican Immigrants,” 728; Audrey Grannberg, “Maury Maverick’s San Antonio,” *Survey Graphic*, July 1939, 422 (quote); Zamora, *Mexican Worker*, 26.

³³ Lawrence A. Cardoso, “Labor Emigration to the Southwest, 1916-1920: Mexican Attitudes and Policy,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 79 (April 1976): 409-15; Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, *Employment Problems of Migratory Farm Workers: Hearing before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens*, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess., Part 5, Oklahoma City Hearings, 1799-1832, quoted in Stuart Marshall Jamison, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, U.S. Department of

At the same time, migrant workers developed techniques for confronting employers when consuls could not, or would not, help. Mobility and the willingness to travel formed their most potent weapons, and growers by the 1920s understood that they competed against one another for labor in a national market. A spinach farmer in South Texas who refused to pay a minimum threshold of wages could see his entire labor force leave to work onion fields in the next county or sugar beet fields as far away as Michigan. One family that crossed the border at Laredo in 1920, for example, cleared land near San Antonio, worked in a cotton seed oil factory in Belton, Texas, packed meat in Fort Worth, and eventually picked sugar beets near Casper, Wyoming, in 1927. From there they purchased a car, picked beets again in Colorado, and then worked in the coal mines of New Mexico before returning to Texas late in 1928. Buying automobiles reduced travel costs significantly, and often removed usurious *enganchadores* from the equation. Many Tejanos acquired cars at their first opportunity despite having to pay inflated prices for used models. After working several seasons, Tejanos used their own autos and knowledge of the industry to anticipate labor needs and travel to areas that promised the best wages. By the 1930s, so many Mexicans owned cars that they often raced to a particular location only to find hundreds of other unemployed migrant workers with the same idea begging for jobs. Generally, however, independent mobility afforded Tejanos some leverage in dealing with their employers.³⁴

Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 836 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 260; Stowell, "Danger of Immigration," 765; Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 134.

³⁴ Handman, "Mexican Immigrant," 36; Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 270; Menefee, *Migratory Workers*, 15, 33; Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 136; *Ibid.*, "Mexicans North," 136.

Whether migratory workers owned their own means of transportation or not, at some point most spent time in Texas's cotton fields. Harvest began each year near Brownsville in late June. To one observer, it seemed that by "July and August . . . most of the Mexicans of the state converge on Corpus Christi." Workers traveled in "caravans led by *contristas* who know enough English and have sufficient initiative and experience to take the lead in finding employment and making labor contracts for others." Pickers worked their way north until the last bale was weighed, at which point they returned to their homes or went to cities such as San Antonio in search of winter employment. By 1919 the state produced 2.7 million bales of the crop annually, 20 percent of the national total and more than any other state. Mexican men, women, and children picked most of that cotton as families; indeed, one in six workers had not yet reached their fourteenth birthday. Growers required one family per 40 acres of cultivation on average, meaning that each square mile of cotton fields housed approximately sixteen Mexican families. Most lived in one room shacks that rarely exceeded 200 square feet, and in some instances up to fifty people shared a single unisex outhouse. Curtains formed interior walls, and, since few could spare the room to transport furniture, everyone ate, slept, and socialized on dirt floors.³⁵

Cotton growers preferred Tejano laborers over Anglos or African Americans because they worked for less money, but also for their reputed work ethic and docility. Most Mexicans spoke poor English, if at all, and few fully grasped American concepts of civil liberties. Added to threats of deportation, these factors dissuaded most migrant

³⁵ Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 482; Menefee, *Migratory Workers*, 33-4; Taylor, "Mexicans North," 137 (first and second quotes); "Mexican Invaders," 53.

workers from demanding better living and working conditions. One farmer who owned 700 acres complained that poor whites expected decent housing, “better clothes and more provisions,” and another observer concurred that “the Mexican works for less, he can be supervised more easily, and the problem of labor is solved by his working the whole family and living in conditions which the American farmer would not tolerate.” Moreover, these characteristics prevented other ethnic groups, such as Greeks and Italians, from gaining a foothold in Texas agriculture as they had in other parts of the U.S.³⁶

Although King Cotton reigned in Texas agriculture through the 1920s and 1930s, other crops employed significant numbers of Mexicans as well. The federal government commissioned a survey of migratory workers in 1941 that focused on the community of Crystal City, about 115 miles southwest of San Antonio. The survey revealed that more than ninety percent of the town’s residents worked on spinach farms each year. Most spinach laborers toiled as cutters, spending endless hours on their knees “clipping the mature plants and sorting out defective leaves.” Children as young as ten worked in spinach fields, and those fourteen and under constituted more than ten percent of the workforce. Once the spinach season ended in May, some workers found jobs in one of the state’s numerous onion patches. Wages for onion work surpassed those for spinach, but the season was much shorter. One onion grower complained about the pay each worker received, believing it was “about four bits too much. He should get about \$1 a day,” the farmer concluded, “just enough to live on, with maybe a dollar or two to spend.

³⁶ Bamford, “Mexican Casual Problem,” 365-6; Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 35-6 (second quote); Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 126-34; *Ibid.*, “Mexicans North,” 136 (first quote).

. . . If he is paid any more he won't work so much or when we need him; he's able to wait around until we have to raise the price above what's legitimate." Even after exploiting growers so brazenly, about one-third of Crystal City's migrant population found work picking cotton when the onion season ended. The remainder left Texas for sugar beet fields farther north.³⁷

Mexican workers willingly traveled to the upper Midwest and Rocky Mountain states when sugar beets offered the most financially lucrative opportunities. Inexpensive labor was so scarce in the Great Lakes region that five different employment agencies in San Antonio catered to that market. Tejanos flocked to the beet fields any way they could; nearly half drove their own vehicles, and another quarter paid friends or relatives for rides. The rest paid ten dollars per adult and five per child for a spot in the back of a truck alongside as many as 40 other workers. The trucks stopped only for gasoline and generally took 48 hours to cover the 1,600 mile route each way. About five thousand Mexicans trekked to the Great Lakes for beet work each year, and another three thousand went to Colorado and Wyoming.³⁸

Those who successfully completed the journey often reaped great rewards. Most of Crystal City's migratory laborers earned more money in the sugar beet fields than in spinach, onions, and cotton combined. Although workers suffered from poor living conditions and often failed to escape the long shadow of segregation even outside the

³⁷ Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 483; Menefee, *Migratory Workers*, xi, 13-4, 16, 19, 35; Taylor, "Mexicans North," 202 (quote).

³⁸ Charles August Arnold, "The Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs of the Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas" (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1928), 10; Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 381; Menefee, *Migratory Workers*, 21.

South, beet workers earned at least \$200 annually even during the worst of times. One worker in 1938, for example, made \$230 during the sugar beet season in Colorado, while the other six member of his family collected a total of \$440 picking cotton during the same period. Under better conditions, beet workers could earn as much as \$650 per year. The federal government buoyed wages for sugar beet workers by subsidizing the industry in 1934, but monopolizing refiners kept wages in check. Along with substantial pay, however, came substantial work, and sugar beet fields required two sorts of laborers. Blockers and thinners groomed each plant to maximize yields, while hoers loosened the soil to prevent weed infestation. Each worker tended ten acres for twelve hours a day from May through October. Most Mexicans who worked the sugar beet fields believed it offered unparalleled opportunities, as evidenced by one survey that found they stayed with their employers an average of 2.35 years, far longer than normal for seasonal labor.³⁹

In addition to having the most coveted jobs among migratory laborers, sugar beet workers showed greater inclination toward organizing than their cotton, spinach, and onion picking brethren. That tendency met challengers on several fronts, however. The seasonal ebb and flow of labor in different regions made unionization difficult for agricultural workers, and the threat of imminent deportation compounded the struggle. Federal agents could arrest Mexicans without obtaining warrants, arguing that such a lengthy legal procedure would allow mobile illegal immigrants to escape. The AFL also undermined organizing efforts by excluding Mexicans from their unions and Tejano

³⁹ Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 233-5; Menefee, *Migratory Workers*, 19-21, 23, 29; Taylor, "Mexicans North," 137.

unions from their organization. In some instances this decision backfired dramatically, as Latino strikebreakers crossed AFL picket lines. Nevertheless, in sugar beet growing regions shallow labor pools afforded migratory workers better opportunities to bargain with employers. Tejanos in the Great Lakes region “were particularly susceptible to unionism because of their proximity to important industrial areas,” such as Detroit and Toledo, according to one government report. Mexicans enjoyed some organizing success in Colorado as well, where they joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) beet strike in 1927, and formed their own beet workers’ union the follow year.⁴⁰

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By the end of the 1920s, Tejanos had joined the current of urbanizing Americans flowing into the nation’s cities. Many left the fields due to harsh treatment, including whippings and inadequate diets, at the hands of their employers. Mechanization forced others off farms and into cities. For Mexicans in South Texas, San Antonio promised both opportunity and familiarity. That promise was often broken, however. A study commissioned by the city explained that Texas farmers could not support seasonal labor for “five to seven months a year, and [left] it to San Antonio to harbor.” The labor could

⁴⁰ Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 42; Bryan, “Mexican Immigrants,” 729; Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 496; D. H. Dinwoodie, “Deportation: The Immigration Service and the Chicano Labor Movement in the 1930s,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 52 (July 1977): 195-6; Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 383 (quote); Taylor, “Mexicans North,” 201-2; Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” *Communist* 1 (March 1939): 262; Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 62.

not “be put to work and it [had] no buying power. The conditions under which it [lived] brought San Antonio ill fame and expense.”⁴¹

Heading into the 1930s, moreover, twenty years of uninterrupted supply had filled the reservoir of agricultural workers in Texas to the brim. Mexicans went to San Antonio chiefly for jobs. As the Depression wore on and jobs became increasingly scarce, a broad repatriation campaign forced up to 300,000 Latinos from Texas into Mexico. Some Tejanos voluntarily fled to avoid the trauma of being dragged from their homes by immigration officials. During the same period, however, the Mexican population of San Antonio increased. Migrant workers tired of ceaseless travel accepted lower pay in the city in exchange for more time with their families. Nevertheless, in lean times men took to the fields, leaving their wives and children behind to cope with travails on the west side. Urban Tejanos often found themselves exploited by unfettered capitalism in occupations that were unfamiliar, unsanitary, and unsafe. They received little assistance of any kind from the local government and endured blatant racism from the city’s Anglo population. While workers of other ethnicities in other areas faced similar obstacles, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report suggested conditions in San Antonio were particularly dismal, commenting that it was “one of the four cities in the United States where repression is so continuous as to clearly stand out.”⁴²

⁴¹ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 29-30, 35-6; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 201, 218; City of San Antonio, *Industrial and Economic Survey*, 122 (first and second quote).

⁴² Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 495; Richard A. Garcia, “Class, Consciousness, and Ideology,” 35-6; Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 38; Lambert, “Jersey City,” 9 (quote), R. Reynolds McKay, “The Federal Deportation Campaign in Texas: Mexican Deportation from the Lower Rio Grande Valley During the

Like ethnic and racial minorities across the nation, San Antonio's Tejanos contended with a dual labor market that devalued their work and gave little hope of economic advancement. Although border towns employed substantial numbers of skilled Mexican workers, few found work in San Antonio. Additionally, a second division in the labor market afflicted Tejanas. While their ethnicity condemned them to menial work, their gender condemned them to the menial work that Mexican men avoided. One contemporary study even suggested that the penalty associated with gender suppressed Latinas' wages more than that associated with their skin color. On average they earned 85 percent of Anglo women's pay stubs, but made only 42 percent of their husbands', brothers', and fathers' incomes. Latino men had historically forbidden their wives from working, and most women, therefore, had little work experience outside the home. Consequently, those women had to accept abysmally low wages for unskilled labor.⁴³

A statistical analysis of jobs held by Tejanas in San Antonio during the 1930s is complicated by the system of categorization utilized by the government during that period. The U.S. Department of Labor labeled Mexican women as Anglo, with African American being the only other category. Yet, some reasonable inferences can be made. Of 949 female workers classified as "semi-skilled workers in manufacturing and other industries" who drew federal relief in March, 1935, only 161 were black. Tejanas

Great Depression," *Borderlands Journal* 5 (Fall 1981): 95-6, 110, 112; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xvii, 3; Pycior, "La Raza," 226; Woods, *Mexican Leadership*, 19; Zamora, *Mexican Worker*, 40.
⁴³ Arnold, "Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs," 6; Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 495; William John Knox, "The Economic Status of the Mexican Immigrant in San Antonio, Texas," (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1927), 21-3; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 33; 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), 29; Zamora, *Mexican Worker*, 22, 28.

almost certainly formed the remainder, as enterprises of that nature gravitated toward the west side. While African Americans constituted the majority of “domestic and personal service workers,” Anglos made up 46 percent. Again, most of these “Anglos” likely came from the Mexican quarter, since white women generally refused such work, and a separate survey demonstrated that Tejanas labored outside their homes twice as frequently as their Anglo counterparts.⁴⁴

All of San Antonio’s Mexican population struggled, however, as substandard wages became endemic. West side employers realized a twenty percent discount from their Tejano workforce compared to white laborers performing the same jobs in Dallas and Houston. Furthermore, the city’s business elites actively barred heavy manufacturing and industrial enterprises from entering Bexar County for fear that such work would foster organized labor, a headache they sought to avoid. Instead, those elites envisioned a local economy based on military spending, tourism, agriculture, and light industry. Of San Antonio’s 1,100 manufacturing ventures, 264 involved food products. Many of these businesses, including a vinegar factory, flour mills, Armour and Swift meat packinghouses, and the Delaware Punch bottling facility, employed large numbers of Tejanas. Other Mexican women worked as seamstresses or cigar rollers, occupations notorious for piecework.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Philip M. Hauser, *Workers on Relief in the United States in March 1935, Volume I, A Census of Unusual Occupations*, Work Projects Administration, Division of Social Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 840, 848; Knox, “Economic Status,” 22.

⁴⁵ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 29-30; L. Patrick Hughes, “Beyond Denial: Glimpses of Depression Era San Antonio,” *Journal of South Texas* 14 (Fall 2001): 225-6; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xvii, 36; Thomas Guy Rogers, “The Housing Situation of the Mexicans in San Antonio

Male workers on the west side had more options for employment. While some toiled alongside women in food-related ventures, others found jobs in lumber yards, furniture factories, and icehouses. In addition, a train depot utilized by the International Great Northern and Missouri, Kansas, and Texas rail lines created hundreds of warehouse jobs. Beyond those opportunities, Mexican men engaged in occupations traditionally reserved for their gender, such as machinist, mechanic, and iron worker. Yet, the most coveted jobs among Tejanos were in construction. Expanding army forts and air corps bases fueled a construction boom in San Antonio after World War I, and by 1939 the military poured almost \$40 million annually into the city. Common laborers earned as much as thirteen dollars each week, and a lucky few landed jobs on Works Projects Administration (WPA) worksites where they had an opportunity to learn a skill. Moreover, WPA jobs regularly enforced wage scales set forth under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), meaning workers could earn three times more money for performing the same tasks. Mexicans so highly regarded such positions that some quit jobs as skilled laborers to take WPA positions as common laborers.⁴⁶

Enviably construction jobs were the exception, however, and although hundreds of ventures offered work on the west side, no single industry in San Antonio employed more Mexican labor than pecan shelling. Pecan workers outnumbered those in any other sector, including women's and children's garments, cement plants, and meat packinghouses. While the majority of Tejanos arrived in San Antonio looking for work,

Texas," (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1927), 4-6; Works Progress Administration, Writers' Program, *San Antonio: A History and Guide* (San Antonio: Clegg, 1941), 43.

⁴⁶ Grannberg, "Maury Maverick," 426; Knox, "Economic Status," 16; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 30-2; Rogers, "Housing Situation," 4-6; Tenayuca and Brooks, "Mexican Question," 259.

only two percent came to toil specifically in shelleries. Pecan workers almost invariably lacked marketable job skills, and two-thirds of women shellers surveyed had never been employed except as unskilled labor. Furthermore, all rank-and-file pecan workers were Mexican. Anglos seldom appeared in the shelleries, and those who did performed supervisory roles. Nearly ninety percent of workers shelled pecans, with crackers constituting another nine percent and the remainder functioning as washers. A government report conducted just after the 1938 shellers' strike found that women held one-third of full-time shelling jobs, but this number was skewed by the omission of part-time workers. Overwhelming anecdotal and photographic evidence from the period substantiates that women formed the solid majority of pecan labor. In addition, shelling's relatively light physical demands opened doors for workers excluded from or incapable of any other work. The elderly, physically challenged, and children as young as ten years old expanded the pool of available shellers, further suppressing wages. At the time of the 1938 strike, about forty percent of shellers had worked in the pecan industry at least seven years, a testament to the immobility of those snared in an occupation that most Mexicans considered a last resort.⁴⁷

Inadequate pay topped the list of reasons Mexicans shunned pecan work. Shellers made the lowest wages in the city, and earned even less than sharecroppers according to one source. In the late 1920s, pecan workers made about one dollar a day, but the Depression drove earnings down as enterprises such as Southern Pecan slashed pay to ensure profits. Wages fluctuated throughout the 1930s, but workers typically

⁴⁷ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 55; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xvii, 4-5, 9-10, 26, 31.

received between four and seven cents for each pound of shelled halves, with broken pieces garnering a penny less per pound. The most skilled shellers finished each shift with about ten pounds worth of earnings, six of which were halves. Average laborers, on the other hand, only shelled between three and six pounds each shift. Wages hit bottom over the 1933-34 shelling season, when many took home less than a dollar each week. By 1938, the average weekly paycheck totaled \$2.73, compared to \$3.50 for agricultural workers in the region. The mean income of pecan shelling families that year was \$251, and fewer than two percent made more than \$900. About one-quarter of shelling families supplemented their income by picking cotton or, if lucky, sugar beets. Few shellers could afford cars, however, and exorbitant transportation costs offered by labor agents usually precluded more lucrative work.⁴⁸

Like most agricultural ventures, pecan work followed seasonal rhythms. Shelling in San Antonio ran from October through May, and peaked during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Depending on pecan prices and demand, the industry typically employed between ten and twenty thousand shellers each winter and spring. Pecan concerns also implemented a duplicitous contract system designed around hand shelling that exempted the largest operators, including Southern Pecan, from hiring pecan workers directly. Under this system, large operators harvested pecans from their own land or bought them from growers, then shipped the nuts to San Antonio. Those

⁴⁸ Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 278; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xv, xvii, 26, 31-3, 35; Felipe Ybarra, "The Pecan Slaves of Texas," Unpublished paper, 1932, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA; Pecan Workers Relief Committee and Pecan Workers Local No. 172, "America's Lowest Paid Workers: San Antonio's Pecan Shellers Present Their Case," 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA.

operators then sold the pecans, still in their shells, to one of the city's hundreds of contractors. Once at the contractors' facilities, the pecans were soaked in water overnight to moisturize the meats, dried until the shells were rigid, and cracked with hand operated machines that often took years to master. The cracked nuts then went to shellers who carefully removed the meats and separated them into halves and pieces. Cleaners placed the meats onto screens that sifted out dirt and debris. Contractors only compensated shellers for what remained on the screen, collectively costing workers tens of thousands of dollars each year as fine particles of pecan meal fell through the mesh and directly onto the contractors' bottom lines. Finally, workers packaged the meats in 50-pound boxes, 5 pound cartons, or smaller, vacuum sealed cans or jars that were sold back to the operator for distribution. The contract system projected the illusion of free enterprise at work, but in reality the operators dictated the terms of both sale and purchase to the contractors. Operators thus set wages for pecan workers by proxy.⁴⁹

Working conditions in shelleries corresponded to the level of pay. One man who labored in a shellery as a boy remembered being "packed wall to wall, shoulder to shoulder with people sitting at benches to shell the pecans – old people, young people, children from the earliest age, sick people, well people, bad people, good people." Furthermore, he claimed that "whole families . . . worked there 10, 12, 14 hours daily to together bring home enough to keep body and soul together." Government reports also bear out the oppressive conditions shellers endured. Open doors and windows provided

⁴⁹ S. A. Jones et al., *An Economic Study of the Pecan Industry*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Technical Bulletin 324 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 85; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xvii, 5, 9-11; Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 4.

the only lighting and ventilation, but they could only be left ajar during nice weather. City health ordinances exempted small contractors from providing toilet facilities until 1936, and after that date employers only had to provide a single restroom for all employees. To make extra money, workers often brought cracked pecans home for the whole family to shell overnight. The nuts were soaked with water to prevent splintering, but the water added weight that penalized shellers when they returned with only meats the next morning. Operators subtracted the weight of the dry meats from an expected yield based on the weight of the wet pecans that the workers took home, and charged shellers the difference for presumably eaten pecans. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expounded on the plight of pecan workers in 1936, concluding in one report that “standards for industrial homeworkers have not been raised to anything approaching the level of factory standards. Earnings, whether measured by the hour or the week, are extremely low, inhumanly long hours are still permitted, and child labor is still prevalent . . . where children can profitably be employed.”⁵⁰

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The tidal wave of immigration from Mexico into Texas between 1910 and 1930 dramatically increased the state’s Tejano population at a time when Anglos from outside of Texas also surged into the area. Prejudices and economic circumstances bred discrimination against the Mexican community, resulting in a two-tiered labor market that subjected Tejanos to low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions. Entering

⁵⁰ Menefee and Casemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 10; Ruben Munguia, “The Nuecero Spoke,” booklet, 1982, Texas AFL-CIO Miscellany Collection, 1888-1985, SC-UTA (first and second quotes); U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Handbook of Labor Statistics*, Bulletin 616 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 200 (third quote).

the 1930s Mexican laborers began asserting their rights in the workplace, but disaffected workers alone explain neither the timing nor the success of the pecan shellers' strike that occurred in 1938. Working conditions in the 1920s, after all, were scarcely better, and Texas experienced few work stoppages during that decade. Moreover, the world of Tejano laborers remains partially obscured by simply examining their experiences at work. To further understand the degree to which Mexicans in San Antonio suffered from discrimination during the Depression, their lives outside of the workplace also need to be explored.

CHAPTER III

EDUCATION AND LIFE

By the 1930s, San Antonio had developed an identity crisis. While the city published brochures that touted the west side as “Mexico itself,” where “shops, theaters, [and] homes offer colorful contrast to the American mode of life,” and local businessmen promoted the neighborhood as a place to “see re-created the life of another world and another day,” critics often told another story. The manifold problems that plagued the shellers in San Antonio’s Mexican quarter led one journalist to describe the area as “one of the foulest slum districts in the world.” Another contemporary chronicled the barrio’s troubles in more detail. A local resident and columnist explained that the west side was “notorious for its crimes of violence, its filthy and disease ridden red-light district, its pecan shelling sweatshops, its illegal gambling dens, and its four-mile square Mexican slum, often mentioned as the worst in America.” Similarly, a fourth informant proclaimed the neighborhood’s wretched living conditions without peer in North America, a sentiment echoed decades later by historian Richard Garcia, who called the west side the “Paris of the Southwest urban barrios.” Discrimination and racial prejudice toward Tejanos underpinned the quality of life on the west side. Mexican children uniformly received substandard educations that condemned them to low-paying jobs and lives of virtual peonage. Small paychecks ensured residence in shacks that typically lacked utilities, but abounded in access to liquor, gambling, and prostitution. Nonexistent infrastructure and inadequate municipal services led to disease and infant mortality rates unknown elsewhere in the country. If conditions in the

workplace failed to produce sufficient animosity amongst San Antonio's pecan shellers to prompt a strike, then conditions in their harsh Mexican ghetto surely did.⁵¹

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Educational inequality provided a foundation for broader discrimination against pecan shellers and other Tejanos. Although state law allowed Mexican children to attend white schools, most found themselves in segregated institutions. By 1930, nearly ninety percent of Tejano students checked in to exclusively Mexican schools or classrooms each day. Elementary schools in particular enforced strict segregation, since few Mexicans progressed beyond that level of education. Regardless of the classroom's ethnic makeup, instructors always taught in English, as dictated by state law.

Occasionally districts employed Mexican teachers, but Anglos held a large majority of positions in all schools. In the late 1920s at San Antonio's Washington Irving Junior High School, test scores determined which classes students would attend. This system also resulted in ethnic segregation, as Mexicans invariably scored lower than the Anglos in their cohort. The principal at Washington Irving defended this practice, suggesting that segregation allowed Tejano children to develop leadership skills that would have remained dormant in the company of whites. He further characterized racial relations in his schools as harmonious, although he admitted that students tended to socialize within

⁵¹ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 4 (fifth quote); Audrey Grannberg, "Maury Maverick's San Antonio," *Survey Graphic*, July 1939, 423 (third quote); Ralph Maitland, "San Antonio: The Shame of Texas," *Forum and Century*, July-December 1939, 51 (fourth quote); Green Peyton, *San Antonio: City in the Sun* (New York: Whittlesey House, a Division of McGraw-Hill, 1946), 147; Municipal Information Bureau, "See San Antonio," (San Antonio, 1939), 9 (first quote); Passenger Traffic Department, Southern Pacific Lines, "San Antonio, A Picturesque Metropolis of the Southwest," (n. p.: Southern Pacific Lines, 1920), 22; San Antonians, Inc., "San Antonio, Land of Romance," (San Antonio: San Antonians, Inc., 1930), 3 (second quote).

their own ethnic groups. Rural Tejano children suffered greater problems. As farmland consolidated into fewer white hands, Mexican agricultural workers increasingly replaced Anglo tenant farmers. The remaining landowners had little interest in financing predominantly Tejano schools with their property taxes, thus local funding often evaporated through bond measures. Furthermore, the state disproportionately funded white schools, leaving Mexican children to work with minimal resources in substandard facilities.⁵²

Overcrowding and under funding topped the list of problems that hindered schools on the west side. The neighborhood's eleven public schools housed more than 12,000 students, 3,200 more than state guidelines allowed. On average, those schools spent \$24.50 per year on each of the 48 children in a typical classroom. In contrast, Anglo schools spent almost \$36 each year per child, and classes averaged 33 students. In 1934, the League of United Latin American Citizens' (LULAC) Educational Committee recommended to the San Antonio School Board that the west side needed 88 new elementary classrooms, as well as an entire junior high school, to relieve overcrowding. The committee went on to accuse the school board of "spending in schools situated in other [i.e. white] sections of the District funds that lawfully belonged to the children of the western section of the city." Their accusation was corroborated by the \$350,000 profit the district made each year running west side schools, money that rarely found its way back into Mexican classrooms. After gaining little ground with

⁵² Charles August Arnold, "The Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs of the Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas" (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1928), 11-3; Frank Callcott, "The Mexican Peon in Texas," *Survey*, 26 June 1920, 438 (quote); Max Sylvius Handman, "The Mexican Immigrant in Texas," *Political and Social Science Quarterly* 7 (June 1926): 36-7; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 160.

officials in San Antonio, the committee contacted the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, who promised to “make further investigation into the Mexican children of [their] territory,” and avoid being “a party in hurting the Latin-American children of San Antonio.” Nevertheless, segregated education continued in San Antonio through the 1930s.⁵³

At the same time, an educational paradox existed on the west side. Chronic overcrowding was tempered by absenteeism, a problem that became more acute as Mexican children matriculated from one grade to the next. Municipal school authorities in 1931 revealed that 56 percent of elementary school children in San Antonio had Spanish surnames. By junior high, only 22 percent had such names, and in the city’s high schools the number plummeted to nine percent. Of 546 Mexican men surveyed a few years earlier, 524 had less than eight years of schooling, and 367 had fewer than four. Latinas faced an even bleaker situation. Female enrollment in Tejano schools trailed that of males at every grade level in 1930. Many Mexicans considered educating girls superfluous, since families expected young women to marry and start families while still in their teens.⁵⁴

⁵³ Thomas Guy Rogers, “The Housing Situation of the Mexicans in San Antonio Texas” (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1927), 10; Committee on Public School Buildings and Recreational Facilities of the League of United Latin American Citizens, “More and Better Schools for the Western Section,” 27 September 1934, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as BLAC); Alonso S. Perales, “Statement Made Before the San Antonio Board of Education,” 15 May 1934, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, BLAC; Dr. L. A. Woods, to Eleuterio Escobar, 17 September 1934, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, BLAC.

⁵⁴ Max Sylvius Handman, “San Antonio: The Old Capital City of Mexican Life and Influence,” *Survey Graphic*, May 1931, 164; William John Knox, “The Economic Status of the Mexican Immigrant in San Antonio, Texas” (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1927), 28-9; H. T. Manuel, “The Mexican Population of Texas,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 15 (June 1934): 44; Mary John Murray, “A Socio-Cultural Study of 118 Mexican Families Living in Low-Rent Public Housing in San Antonio, Texas” (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1954), 90.

Nonetheless, Mexican children usually missed school in order to work, many of them in the city's shelleries. Parental wages rarely supported an entire family, pulling adolescents into the workforce. Since the harvest time table, rather than academic calendars, dictated the work schedule of agricultural labor, migrating families typically missed both the beginning and the end of the school year. In San Antonio, for example, school began the first of September and ran through the following May. Children in migratory families often returned to school in November, once the final harvest ended, and went south the following April to follow the cycle of crops once again. In one west side school, average attendance in September lingered near 200, but by December reached as many as 1,200. Such sporadic attendance ensured Mexican children would not receive enough education to break the chains of the secondary labor market.⁵⁵

Some Anglos wondered why the children of migrant workers bothered with school at all. The author of one 1931 article made the case that "farmers want their labor, the parents their children's earnings, it costs money and effort to put them into school, and causes a lot of disturbance after they get there. If you think Mexican children should have the pressure of the American state behind their education, it is a 'problem.' If you do not, their non-attendance may mitigate local difficulties in getting the kind of farm labor you have a hard time finding anyone else to do." The children of migratory laborers held no monopoly on work, however. Most students on the west side worked after school in neighborhood businesses, including shelleries, and long hours

⁵⁵ Arnold, "Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs," 11; Victor Clark, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bulletin 78 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1908), 509; Everett Ross Clinchy, "Equality of Opportunity for Latin-Americans in Texas" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1954), 110-1; Rogers, "Housing Situation," 61; Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," *Communist* 1 (March 1939): 261.

contributed to absenteeism. Only 55 percent of children who worked as shellers during the 1938-9 school year attended from September through May, and only 62 percent attended even part of the year. The typical adult pecan worker dropped out of school in the fifth grade, and none of the 82 shellers surveyed in a 1940 federal report had passed beyond tenth grade.⁵⁶

Some Anglos dismissed such statistics as a cultural deficiency, or rationalized that Mexicans found school burdensome. One farm manager in the early 1930s claimed that Mexicans were “a happy people . . . they don’t want responsibility, they want just to float along, sing songs, smoke cigarettes. Education doesn’t make them any happier; most of them continue the same sort of work at the same wages as if they had never attended school.” Later in his interview, however, this informant’s more deeply seeded reservations surfaced. Education, he believed, “only makes them dissatisfied, and teaches them to read the wrong kind of literature (I.W.W.) and listen to the wrong kind of talk.” Nevertheless, others believed Tejanos placed considerable emphasis on education, and considered Tejano children well-suited to academic work. One contemporary scholar reported that Mexican parents showed “a decided interest in the schooling of their offspring, in some instances amounting to a passion. The children themselves are almost addicted to it – voluntary truancy is quite unknown. . . . Teachers seldom complain of the Mexican children, they are usually obedient and appreciative, with a tendency to show extreme devotion.” Even prior to the Mexican Revolution, a

⁵⁶ Seldon C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassemore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 48; Paul S. Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” *Survey*, 1 May 1931, 200 (quote).

U.S. government official witnessed that “the Mexicans of San Antonio show an interest in the public schools.” Contrary to popular opinion at the time, many Tejanos understood the importance of educating their children.⁵⁷

By the mid-1930s, moreover, many began to fight for better education. The League of United Latin American Citizens’ (LULAC) Committee on Public School Buildings and Recreational Facilities argued that equitable access to education was an issue of “justice, equal rights, and fairness.” They argued that a well-schooled Mexican population would “grow up to become an asset to our community . . . that we may safeguard the governmental institutions for which our forefathers fought and bled.” Disappointed, the committee disbanded when it failed to win financial support from the Mexican business community or upper class. Eluiterio Escobar resigned as chair and venomously attacked his fellow Tejanos on his way out. “We wonder,” he wrote, “why we don’t have a voice or representation in our City, County or State Government, we wonder why our race is the most inferior – and acting as thus we pay from \$5.00 to \$10.00 to see a discrimination fight in Goliad, Corpus Christi or Del Rio, while we have discrimination right here in our own City.” Although segregation continued after the committee disbanded, working- and middle-class Mexicans demonstrated that they could cultivate organizations and leaders capable of making their issues heard without external

⁵⁷ Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 508-9 (fourth quote); Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 38-9 (third quote); Taylor, “Mexicans North,” 200 (first and second quotes).

support. This capability proved crucial in the shellers' initial efforts to organize in the months preceding the strike.⁵⁸

Despite the popularity of segregation among Anglos, some educators acknowledged the potential of Mexican students. One Nueces County teacher represented the view that “if the Mexicans were brought up with an equal force of primary teachers, and were not overcrowded, the majority would probably be equal to the whites.” Others looked outside of the classroom for factors contributing to under performance. University of Texas professor Max S. Handman discovered that Tejanos in urban schools outperformed their rural Anglo counterparts on standardized tests, suggesting that the rural-urban divide contributed more to scores than ethnicity. Sociologist and Mexican national Manuel Gamio similarly concluded that perceived Mexican limitations were “probably affected by racial attitudes and by a translation into terms of mental competence of differences in economic and cultural position.” Even Anglos who considered themselves inherently more intelligent often admitted that Tejanos could overcome biological differences with hard work. Generally, educators believed Mexican children excelled in subjects that allowed them to use their hands, specifically art, home economics, and manual arts, such as “auto painting, sheet and metal work, acetylene welding, woodwork, forging, and job-printing.” Prejudice notions

⁵⁸ Eluiterio Escobar, to Dr. O. Jorodetti, 4 April 1934, Eluiterio Escobar Papers, BLAC (third quote); Committee on Public School Buildings and Recreational Facilities, “More and Better Schools,” BLAC (first and second quotes).

of Mexicans as fit only for domestic work and manual labor undoubtedly informed those beliefs and explain, in part, the preponderance of Tejano shellers.⁵⁹

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Meanwhile, most Anglos simply failed to see the point of educating a permanent laboring class. This attitude locked Mexicans into the poorly-compensated secondary labor sector, which in turn dictated where and how they could afford to live. Low-quality housing was perhaps the most visible facet of poverty on the west side. About two-thirds of the city's Mexican population lived in the neighborhood's tenements, where most paid between fifty cents and one dollar in rent each week. Anglo investors owned most of the rental units, known as *corrales*, although Tejanos gave them colorful names. Urban geography helped established some monikers, such as Freight Train Alley, while the local fauna undoubtedly inspired the naming of Rat Alley. Pecan shellers filled west side *corrales*, as they could not afford to live anywhere else in the city.⁶⁰

Housing, although decrepit, was remarkably uniform. Rows of *corrales* typically bordered all four sides of a property, creating a courtyard in the center. Clothes lines crossed the courtyard, as laundry was a daily chore for Mexicans who owned few garments. One reporter testified to the quality of *corrales* by describing the units as

⁵⁹ Arnold, "Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs," 12, 15 (third quote), 17; Clark, *Mexican Labor*, 510; Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 72 (second quote); Handman, "Mexican Immigrant," 39; Alvin S. Johnson, "Mexico in San Antonio," *New Republic*, 24 June 1916, 190-1; Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 203 (first quote).

⁶⁰ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 43-4; Rogers, "Housing Situation," 22, 50; Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 12.

“wooden boxes, slapped together with half- and quarter-inch boards and set up under one roof,” which in some cases was less than six feet high. Heywood Braun, a columnist from New York, was skeptical about the severity of housing on the west side until he visited in person. “It seems devilish,” he wrote his office, “that one crazy combination of old lumber and stray tin should be set as a flap upon the side of another equally discreditable. I did not quite comprehend the character of the alley,” he confessed, “until I discovered that what I took to be a toolhouse was a residence for a family of eleven people.” The worst units had no windows, limiting both light and ventilation and trapping unpleasant barrio odors inside of dark Mexican homes. More importantly, lack of air circulation afforded infectious airborne diseases an inviting atmosphere in which to thrive. This affected pecan shellers in particular, since shelleries offered similarly dusty, stagnant environments.⁶¹

The interiors of homes on the west side were no more impressive than the exteriors. A housing ordinance passed in San Antonio in 1936 stated that dwellings must have “at least . . . 400 square feet of space for every person above twelve years of age,” but that requirement was rarely, if ever, met in the Mexican quarter. In an average unit, 4.6 people shared 2.2 rooms, although 46 percent of houses had only one or two rooms. Rooms could be as small as eight feet square, meaning that even three room apartments could total less than two hundred square feet of living space. Most *corrales* had dirt floors covered with scrap materials dug from the garbage bins of local businesses. Because west side residents migrated less than their rural counterparts, some

⁶¹ Maitland, “San Antonio,” 53 (first quote); Peyton, *San Antonio*, 161-2 (second quote); Rogers, “Housing Situation,” 10-1, 40, 65.

managed to accumulate furnishings. Manuel Gamio described the typical dwelling, where furniture was “of cheap American manufacture, bought on the instalment [sic] plan, and very frequently even in a poor house there is a phonograph or piano. The decoration,” he continued, was “usually of religious pictures and saints, Mexican pictures or postals, Mexican flags, portraits of Mexican heros [sic] – Hidalgo, Juarez, and Madero.” Although many Tejanos acquired phonographs, pianos, and other material conveniences that their contemporaries in rural Mexico could not afford, their levels of material accumulation lagged behind those of Anglos in urban areas.⁶²

In addition to stipulating interior space requirements, the 1936 housing ordinance ordered that dwellings must have “hydrants, sinks, water closets, sewer connections” and baths to ensure the “health and comfort of the tenants.” Yet, indoor plumbing and electricity were almost entirely absent on the west side. Some argued that Mexican immigrants lacked such utility services in Mexico, and, therefore, should not have missed them in San Antonio. That reasoning failed to recognize that homes and communities in Mexico were designed to function without those amenities, whereas American city planners by the 1930s assumed at least a minimum of services would be available. Moreover, some charged that the federal and state governments apportioned less relief funding per capita to Tejanos than Anglos on the basis that the former had fewer utility bills to pay. Only one-quarter of west side homes had electricity, despite its relatively cheap availability, and most of those belonged to landlords who feared losing

⁶² Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 43, 146-7 (second quote); Grannberg, “Maury Maverick,” 423; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xviii, 43; Rogers, “Housing Situation,” 23-32; “Disease and Politics in Your Food: The Case of San Antonio,” *Focus Magazine*, April 1938, 5 (first quote).

their investments to fire. Nearly eighty percent of Tejanos in the barrio lit their *corrales* with kerosene lamps, and slightly more cooked their food over open flames fuelled by scrap lumber. Indoor plumbing was equally scarce. Potable water flowed into fewer than one in five homes, and three-quarters of those who had that luxury occupied homes built decades earlier for Anglo habitation. Lack of water inside the home meant that most Tejanos neither bathed nor washed their hands regularly, further compounding health problems and reinforcing the stereotype of “dirty” Mexicans. *Corrales* typically wanted for sewage lines, as well, and one study of living conditions in the late 1920s found private toilets nonexistent in the tenements. In some instances, outhouses sat in courtyards for use by up to fifty families. A government report in 1940 demonstrated that the situation improved only marginally during the 1930s. By that date, more than ninety percent of homes in the barrio still lacked private toilets.⁶³

Dilapidated housing was only the most acute symptom of the endemic poverty that afflicted shellers, however. The neighborhood’s infrastructure suffered considerable neglect from the city. One group aiming to promote San Antonio as a center of business and tourism touted the city’s modern architecture and claimed that “wide thoroughfares and a completely motorized public transportation system preserve the peace and quiet that belongs always to a community that respects its age and ancestry.” This imagery contradicted reality in the Mexican quarter, where the most densely populated district had only two paved streets and no public transportation. In other parts of the west side,

⁶³ Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 141-2; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 44; Rogers, “Housing Situation,” 10, 14, 41-3, 46-9; Tenneyuca and Brooks, “Mexican Question,” 260; Pecan Workers Relief Committee and Pecan Workers Local No. 172, “America’s Lowest Paid Workers: San Antonio’s Pecan Shellers Present Their Case,” 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA; “Disease and Politics,” 5 (first quote).

large businesses that contributed significantly to the city's tax base commanded paved roads, while residential areas that produced little revenue received none. Beyond unpaved streets, the west side lacked paved sidewalks, as well as playgrounds or other green spaces. Consequently, even small rain showers turned the barrio into a muddy, stagnant breeding ground for insects and diseases, and, according to one observer, created stench "so varied, and so strong that visitors often [had] to turn back and continue their sightseeing in less malodorous parts of the city." Charles Bellinger, professional gambler turned political boss, acted as an advocate for his fellow African Americans on the city's east side. That neighborhood correspondingly enjoyed "adequate light, water, and sewer service . . . numerous public schools, parks and playgrounds, fire and police stations, a public library, and a public auditorium." To their detriment, Tejanos failed to produce a political leader of Bellinger's stature who could similarly protect their interests on the west side.⁶⁴

A dearth of adequate shelter and infrastructure on the West Side was exacerbated by malnutrition, and the combination produced a multitude of illnesses in San Antonio's Mexican community. Tejanos' diets consisted primarily of tortillas and beans, which provided enough carbohydrates to fuel their bodies through the workday but failed to supply other nutrients essential to good health. Shellers supplemented their diets with pecans, but each bite they took ate into their day's earnings. West side residents commonly suffered from pellagra and scurvy, diseases closely associated with poor diet,

⁶⁴ Grannberg, "Maury Maverick," 423; Maitland, "San Antonio," 53 (second and third quotes); George Sessions Perry, "The Cities of America: San Antonio," *Saturday Evening Post*, 24 November 1945, 108; Rogers, "Housing Situation," 11-4; San Antonians, "San Antonio," 2 (first quote).

as a result. Others simply faced starvation. One Anglo investigating the barrio noted driving past “some sort of food-storage house whose refuse was kept in garbage cans a foot or so from the sidewalk.” He admitted that he could “only guess how it must have smelled to a skinny little Mexican girl who bent the entire upper half of her body into one of the big cans in search of something edible.” Malnourishment had particularly devastating effects on newborns. Although some blamed Mexicans’ tendency to use midwives rather than doctors for high infant mortality rates, several local physicians pointed to enteritis, an intestinal disease that leads to dehydration, as the primary culprit. Despite heated debate over causation, one fact remained undisputed. One of every eight Mexican children born on the west side in 1938 died before their first birthday.⁶⁵

Among the myriad of illnesses that plagued the city’s Tejanos, however, tuberculosis proved the most fatal. The disease spreads most easily between people who live or work in close physical proximity to one another and where particulates can hang in the air for prolonged periods due to poor ventilation. San Antonio’s shellers were prime candidates for such an endemic. Thirteen percent of Mexicans who died on the west side in 1938 succumbed to the disease, more than double the rate for Anglos. Low incomes and the substandard living conditions they engendered received most of the blame. “The most obvious reason why one Latin American out of twenty was found to have tuberculosis is poverty,” wrote Dr. David M. Gould for the U.S. Public Health Service. “These people have been exploited as a source of cheap labor,” he continued.

⁶⁵ Kathleen May Gonzales, “The Mexican Family in San Antonio, Texas” (MA Thesis, University of Texas, 1928), 35; Maitland, “San Antonio,” 53 (quote); Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, xviii, 45-7; Ruben Munguia, “The Nuecero Spoke,” booklet, 1982, Texas AFL-CIO Miscellany Collection, 1888-1985, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA; Pecan Workers Relief Committee, “Lowest Paid Workers.”

“They have harvested the crops, shell the pecans, wash the clothes, and dig the ditches. For this they receive barely enough to keep body and soul together.”⁶⁶

Meanwhile, some locals continued to advertise the city’s healthy environment, where residents found the “mild climate, dry, clean air and sunshine . . . especially beneficial to chronic chest and heart conditions.” The city government, however, recognized that conditions on the west side failed to meet such lofty rhetoric. A report commissioned by city hall concluded that “replacement of 35% of the Latin Americans by an equivalent number of economically independent families would transform San Antonio . . . in health,” but such a plan was unrealistic given the business community’s unquenchable thirst for cheap labor. Local politicians particularly worried about charges of negligence concerning sanitary conditions in the city’s pecan shelleries. They preemptively instituted a program that required a health screening for pecan workers every six months. Yet, the medical examinations amounted to little more than a formality, as virtually anyone able to pay the fifty-cent fee could obtain a health card without seeing a physician. One investigative report highlighted the problem, claiming that “it is possible for a four-plus syphilitic to obtain a health card . . . to go to work shelling pecans *by hand* for the nation to eat.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 40; *ibid.*, “Class, Consciousness, and Ideology – The Mexican Community of San Antonio, Texas: 1930-1940,” *Aztlan* 9 (Fall 1978): 33; Handman, “Mexican Immigrant,” 39; Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 45-7; Thomas Lathrop Stedman, *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*, 28th ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006), 2046-7.

⁶⁷ Maitland, “San Antonio,” 54; City of San Antonio, *An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas* (San Antonio: s. n., 1942), 124 (second quote); San Antonians, “San Antonio,” 14 (first quote); Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 13; “Disease and Politics,” 3 (third quote).

Indeed, the rate of venereal disease surpassed even that of tuberculosis on the West Side. In 1938 two San Antonio doctors, one of whom was a former city health officer, estimated that half of the city's Mexican population suffered from sexually transmitted diseases. This statistic hinted at another problem stemming from economic disadvantage in the barrio. Many women desperate to supplement their incomes turned to prostitution. Estimates in the late 1930s determined that between five hundred and two thousand Tejanas engaged in the occupation at any given time on the west side. Prostitutes ranged between thirteen and forty-five years of age, and charged customers, mostly military personnel from the city's various installations, as little as a quarter each. A contemporary reported that the women worked in "little individual coops," where they sat "on permanent display, one every eight or ten feet, awaiting business, their faces grotesque with thick rouge, lipstick, and eyebrow pencil, their bodies revealed by sleazy kimonos." After negotiating a price, the "door [was] shut, and a blind pulled down, but every sound inside the closed stall must [have been] audible through the paper-thin partitions."⁶⁸

Like pecan shellers, prostitutes had to obtain health certificates from the city. Whereas shellers paid fifty cents every six months, however, sex workers paid two dollars each week. In addition to venereal diseases, prostitutes often endured unwanted pregnancies. "One of the quaint features of our red-light district," a lifelong San Antonian wrote, "is the omnipresence of babies and children. . . . They play in the doorways, crawl around on the floors. It is not unusual to see a woman leering and

⁶⁸ Grannberg, "Maury Maverick," 423, 425; Maitland, "San Antonio," 54 (first, second, and third quotes); Peyton, *San Antonio*, 119.

whistling from a doorway with a dirty, underfed baby staring at the world from between her feet.” Beyond their additional costs, unplanned pregnancies jeopardized the lives of expectant mothers. Mexican women on the west side were five times more likely to die from complications during childbirth than their Anglo counterparts.⁶⁹

Prostitution was by no means the lone variety of vice in San Antonio’s Mexican quarter. The city had earned a reputation as a center of illicit activity over several decades, and its citizens had “drunk freely, gambled, loved and fought freely in the soft moonlight” for more than two hundred years according to one witness. Evangelist Dixie Williams purportedly once said that “San Antonio is the wickedest city in the Union, not excepting Washington City, which is the wickedest outside of Hell.” Some municipal officials took an equally dim view of San Antonio’s seedy reputation. Dr. Adolph Berchermann, chairman of the City Health Board, lamented that San Antonio was “associated with Shanghai as the most open vice city in the world!” Poker, craps, and other games of chance permeated the barrio, and even young boys gambled for pennies on the street corners. Evidence indicates that despite public statements to the contrary, the city government tolerated vice on the west side, likely in hopes that it would not spread into other areas of town. Despite rampant illegal activity in the barrio, the arrest rate for Mexicans was only half that for African Americans. The police even arrested Anglos seventy-five percent more often than Tejanos. Ironically, promoters often advertised San Antonio as a place where “desire finds complete gratification” and visitors could “relax or play as they want.” Although such promotions rarely mentioned

⁶⁹ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 46; “Disease and Politics,” 5.

the west side explicitly, the neighborhood's reputation for vice likely attracted visitors as well.⁷⁰

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Racist attitudes and discriminatory practices affected Tejanos in their lives outside of work as well as on the job. Segregation kept Mexican children in understaffed and under funded schools. The great majority of students left those schools for low-paying jobs in fields or factories before graduating. Small incomes condemned Mexicans in San Antonio to the west side, where makeshift *corrales* and nonexistent infrastructure contributed to unsanitary conditions that fostered the highest rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality in the nation. Most of the city's Tejanos battled on a daily basis to overcome crushing poverty.

Against this background, the portrait of the shellers' strike comes into better focus. Pecan workers struggling to feed, house, and care for their families could ill afford even the one-penny pay cut operators implemented at the beginning of 1938. Yet, the shellers had suffered through pay cuts before and could not muster the wherewithal to strike for a prolonged period. By 1938, however, those shellers could see that most San Antonians largely ignored living conditions on the west side and were content to see starvation and disease decimate the city's Mexican population. Barrio residents realized that outside help in their struggles would not be forthcoming and that meaningful changes could only be initiated from within the community. In fact, Mexicans in San

⁷⁰ Grannberg, "Maury Maverick," 425 (third quote); Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 49; Perry, "Cities of America," 23 (first quote); Peyton, *San Antonio*, 51 (second quote); Passenger Traffic Department, "San Antonio," 3 (fifth quote); San Antonians, "San Antonio," 1 (fourth quote); Works Progress Administration, Writers' Program, *San Antonio: A History and Guide* (San Antonio: Clegg, 1941), 62.

Antonio had been developing networks of solidarity through formal and informal clubs, organizations, and activities that proved essential in the pecan shellers' victory.

CHAPTER IV

SOLIDARITY

By the late 1930s, nearly 100,000 of San Antonio's Mexicans lived in abject poverty. This condition provided shellers a reason to demand higher wages from employers, but not a means for achieving that goal. To successfully challenge the city's pecan operators, pecan workers had to act collectively. Unlike laborers in other industries, such as garment workers and cigar rollers, pecan shellers rarely worked alongside one another in large numbers. The industry's contract system gave rise to hundreds of shelleries across the west side that employed the majority of pecan workers. Under this arrangement, according to one U.S. Department of Labor official, large operators "avoided the direct responsibility of an employer and reaped the advantages of sub-standard wage rates and low labor cost." Moreover, this economic model hindered cultivation of traditional workplace solidarity by keeping pecan workers physically separated. The shellers overcame that hindrance by drawing on reservoirs of solidarity accumulated over many years through participation in formal and informal organizations and activities.⁷¹

Any number of circumstances or events can obscure the often invisible process of solidarity formation. Although solidarity constitutes the glue that holds groups together, its strength remains unknown until tested by external challengers. Several scholars have examined solidarity formation under adverse conditions and developed

⁷¹ Seldon C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassemore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Federal Works Agency, Works Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), xvi, 9; Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, "Findings and Determination of the Presiding Officer," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 3 (quote).

frameworks that lend insight to the case of San Antonio's pecan shellers. Vicki Ruiz's study of Latina cannery workers in California reveals some mechanisms of shop-floor solidarity formation. She found that women working next to one another built relationships that spanned cultures and ethnicities by conversing about movies, their families, fashions, and other topics unrelated to their jobs. Richard Griffin's work on South Texas farm workers further demonstrates the ability of marginalized groups to form solidarity on the job, emphasizing "the primacy of intangible, internal resources to movements among the deprived and powerless." He argues that "elites do not make concessions to protestors solely on the basis of historical mandates. They make concessions because they are beaten in the streets and at the line of confrontation by resources they can not control, often do not understand, and can not co-opt." Karl von Holdt's essay on black South African steel workers reveals alternative paths to solidarity under oppressive conditions. "Union social structure," he contends "is permeable to processes of identity formation beyond the workplace, in addition to those that arise within the workplace itself." Similarly, San Antonio's pecan shellers developed a culture of solidarity, defined by sociologist Rick Fantasia as a culture that arises "in conflict, creating and sustaining solidarity in opposition to the dominant structure." Taken together, these arguments demonstrate that solidarity formation need not center on social or political rhetoric, that it does not require external allies, and that it can occur both inside of and outside of the workplace. As in these cases, the pecan shellers

overcame physical isolation and a lack of resources and formed enough solidarity to successfully challenge their employers.⁷²

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In San Antonio, solidarity formation outside of the workplace adopted a variety of guises. Mexican workers forged cultural solidarity through both formal organizations and less formalized recreational activities. Among the formal organizations that aided workers in creating solidarity, three stand above the rest: the Catholic Church, mutual aid societies (*mutualistas*), and, to a lesser degree, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). The Catholic Church claimed the allegiance of most Mexicans on the west side. The San Antonio Archdiocese, headed by Archbishop Arthur J. Drossaerts, was immense in both size and influence. Its 120 churches housed more than 200,000 communicants, about one-quarter of the state's total, and covered almost 40,000 square miles of territory. After the pace of Mexican immigration to the United States accelerated following Mexico's 1910 Revolution, the Church increased its compliment of priests in Texas. Few of the new clergymen, however, were Latin American.⁷³

⁷² Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 19 (fourth quote); Richard W. Griffin, "Political Opportunity, Resource Mobilization, and Social Movements: The Case of the South Texas Farm Workers," *Social Science Journal* 29 (1992): 145-7 (first and second quotes); Karl von Holdt, "Social Movement Unionism: The Case of South Africa," *Work, Employment and Society* 16 (2002): 287-8 (third quote), 297; 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), 21, 32-3.

⁷³ Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 39; Green Peyton, *San Antonio: City in the Sun* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1946), 163-6, 210; J. Gilberto Quesada, "Toward a Working Definition of Social Justice: Father Carmelo A Tranchese, SJ, and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 1932-1953," *Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 4 (1993): 44.

Largely because of the dearth of Latino priests during the period, some scholars have questioned the Church's influence on Tejano solidarity formation. Jay Dolan and Gilberto Hinojosa conclude that "the local Church's reluctance to grapple with social issues deterred many Mexican immigrants from reaching out to the Church and making it the center of their community in the way other immigrants had." One survey conducted on the west side revealed that while 88 percent of its residents identified as Catholic, only 38 percent attended mass at least weekly, an indication that the Church's role as a cultural symbol outweighed its influence in the community. Contemporary accounts corroborate this point, as witnesses observed that most Tejanos tempered their Catholicism with a healthy dose of indigenous belief. Moreover, the Church had been losing its stranglehold on Christianity in the barrio since the 1920s, when at least five Protestant churches conducted Spanish-language services on the west side. Conflict between Father Carmelo Tranchese, parish priest over the barrio's Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and Archbishop Drossaerts further handicapped the Church's efforts to attract and maintain parishioners, particularly since many Mexicans viewed the clergy with a wary eye. While Drossaerts supported the idea of a west side parish dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, he did not want it to become the city's Mexican parish. Instead, he hoped to limit membership to those residing within the parish's geographic boundaries. Tranchese, on the other hand, consistently supported Mexican efforts to attend his church, regardless of address. This conflict persisted until 1941, when a more flexible Robert Emmet Lucey replaced Drossaerts as Archbishop of San Antonio.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Dolan and Hinojosa, *Mexican Americans and the Church*, 45 (quote), 79 Manuel Gamio, *Mexican*

Yet, despite the lack of Latinos in the Church's hierarchy, the institution, scholars have noted, continued "to be the meeting place for a large segment of the wider Mexican community," particularly for women. The San Antonio Archdiocese sponsored several organizations that welcomed Tejano members, including the Holy Name Society, the Altar Society, the Agony Society, and the Christ the King Society. Women's participation in these societies caused little stir because most viewed the groups as apolitical. Nevertheless, researchers have argued that such societies provided female members "with 'safe' opportunities outside the home, including opportunities to socialize with other women and to exercise leadership and management skills." Those skills proved invaluable to the women who participated in the work stoppages that became routine on the west side in the years preceding the shellers' strike.⁷⁵

The city's Mexicans did not confine themselves to participation in Church-related organizations, however. While the Church remained central to Tejano identity, some joined secular associations that had a variety of goals, which included ending discrimination against Mexicans and supporting families that faced financial catastrophies. Notably, these groups received little to no assistance from outside of the community, and they allowed west side residents to develop critical recruiting, leadership, and organizational skills.

Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 108-13; Max Sylvius Handman, "The Mexican Immigrant in Texas," *Political and Social Science Quarterly* 7 (June 1926): 40; Mary John Murray, "A Socio-Cultural Study of 118 Mexican Families Living in a Low-Rent Public Housing Project in San Antonio, Texas" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1954), 64; Peyton, *San Antonio*, 211.

⁷⁵ Dolan and Hinojosa, *Mexican Americans and the Church*, 62 (second quote); Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 44; Murray, "Mexican Families," 69-70 (first quote), 78.

In 1929, a faction of the Hijos de America (Sons of America) founded the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in Corpus Christi, Texas. The Hijos, formed in San Antonio in 1921, limited membership to American citizens of Mexican or Spanish descent, and many were small business owners and successful professionals. In contrast, the founders of LULAC opened membership to all American citizens and adopted English as the organization's official language. Although some historians believe that LULAC's formation indicated the birth of middle-class consciousness among Tejanos, the league aspired to goals, including civil rights for Mexicans, that benefited all Latinos in the United States. The organization called on its members to adopt "American" values and to become politically engaged, but also demanded that Anglos accept cultural pluralism, improve minority schools, and end Jim Crow. One of LULAC's founders, M. C. Gonzales, identified five specific forms of discrimination on which he believed the organization should focus: segregated schools, segregated public facilities, discriminatory housing statutes, the state's white primary, and measures that prohibited Mexicans from serving on juries. LULAC initially experienced more setbacks than successes, but its mere existence demonstrated that the Tejano community could establish meaningful advocacy groups on its own behalf.⁷⁶

Although LULAC's middle-class leadership and the Church's European clergymen occasionally championed issues that benefited the working class, pecan shellers and other wage earners also worked independently to improve their lots. Mutual

⁷⁶ Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 25, 27, 29-30, 34-5, 38, 62; Richard A. Garcia, "Class, Consciousness, and Ideology – The Mexican Community of San Antonio, Texas: 1930-1940," *Aztlan* 9 (Fall 1978): 53-5; *Ibid.*, *Rise*, 4.

aid societies and related groups ranked among the most successful working-class organizations. *Mutualistas* began forming in Mexico during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The earliest *mutualistas* in San Antonio, Benevolencia Mexicana, Sociedad de la Union, and Orden Amigos del Pueblo, organized in the 1880s. Generally, these groups originated in Mexico and migrated north with the flow of human traffic. Some *mutualistas* formed around occupations, and members often also belonged to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or the Common Laborers' Union. San Antonio's mutual aid societies grew in popularity as discrimination increased, particularly after the turn of the century when poll taxes excluded most Tejanos from political participation. The largest *mutualistas* had more than one thousand members, but most memberships numbered in the hundreds. By 1920 ten percent of San Antonio's working class belonged to mutual aid societies.⁷⁷

Mutualistas met a variety of needs for poor Mexicans. According to one researcher, the Sociedad de la Union aimed to "attend to the physical and intellectual needs of the members; to protect them in case of adversity, sickness, and death; and to improve their social condition, without taking any part whatever in any political or religious faction." Funeral assistance constituted the primary function of most societies by covering burial expenses, which averaged ten dollars, and paying survivors as much as \$600. The Sociedad de la Union typified the cost of membership in an aid society. Each member paid a three dollar enrollment fee, plus 25 cents each week and one dollar

⁷⁷ Julie Leininger Pycior, "*La Raza* Organizes: Mexican American Life in San Antonio, 1915-1930 as Reflected in Mutualista Activities" (Ph. D. diss., Notre Dame University, 1979), 18-23, 26, 50, 125-8; Charles August Arnold, "The Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs of the Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1928), 7.

upon the death of another member. In addition, enrollees paid fifty cents each year toward the organization's anniversary celebration. As treasuries grew, benefits extended to compensation for doctors' bills and wages lost to illness or injury. One society's bylaws stipulated that after seven years in good standing, members were "entitled without cost to a surgical operation, to the application of electric battery-treatments, or to vapor baths" to heal their ailments. Some of the larger mutualistas also provided bail and legal support to members charged with crimes. Beyond these roles, aid societies established libraries and newspapers, helped members find jobs, provided small loans, organized beauty pageants and picnics, and shared their facilities with the public for lectures, boxing matches, and quinceañeras. More than any other institution, *mutualistas* threw Mexicans a lifeline in their most desperate times.⁷⁸

The myriad of services mutualistas performed for their members and the community contrasted sharply with the Church's role on the west side. The dearth of Mexican clergy made it difficult for the Church to make meaningful, personal connections with parishioners. Moreover, upper echelons of the Catholic hierarchy excluded Latinos from their ranks. At the neighborhood level, however, priests and other officials often enlisted the help of *mutualistas* in organizing functions or raising donations. Mutual aid societies occasionally assisted, but their nearly universal bans on religious speech limited contact with the Church. Rather than appealing to poor

⁷⁸ Arnold, "Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs," 8 (first quote), 9 (second quote); Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 76; Pycior, "La Raza," 23-4, 27-9, 50-60, 102-7; Ruiz, *Cannery Women*, 10-11; Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 102.

Mexicans on the basis of faith, *mutualistas* employed notions of nationalism and race to attract members.⁷⁹

Mutual aid societies also gave women more opportunities for developing organizational and leadership skills than the Church. Although men tended to dominate societies, women commonly participated. Seven of the nineteen *mutualistas* extant in San Antonio during the 1920s allowed women to hold office, two others had women's auxiliaries, and another pair catered almost exclusively to Tejanas. Despite the cultural stereotype of absolute patriarchy in the Mexican community, men typically respected female members as both homemakers and laborers. Women in aid societies often reciprocated that respect by avoiding overtly feminist causes.⁸⁰

Most mutualistas did not explicitly concern themselves with workers' issues, although, according to one historian, they sometimes "offered the only safe forum for controversial Chicano groups, especially labor unions." Wage earners often formed independent labor mutualistas that worked in conjunction with traditional aid societies, and Tejanos commonly belonged to both types of organizations. According to one scholar, labor mutualistas "helped laborers . . . bargain for improved wages and working conditions at a time when unions were regarded as conspiracies against both employer and society." Skilled workers, such as plumbers and carpenters, disproportionately populated labor mutualistas because they could more easily afford the regular dues. These workers constituted nearly half of the membership in labor mutualistas, while

⁷⁹ Jose Amaro Hernandez, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1983), 90-1; Pycior, "La Raza," 110-1, 114-7.

⁸⁰ Arnold, "Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs," 4; Pycior, "La Raza," 77-81.

unskilled laborers formed another thirty percent. Despite their relatively large numbers of skilled workers, both the treasuries and membership totals of these societies remained smaller than those of traditional aid societies.⁸¹

Labor mutualistas worked to protect their members' interests, but most tended to be conservative. They rarely called for strikes or walkouts, and few evolved into full-fledged unions. Several Latinos, including José María Mora and Sara Estela Ramírez, did attempt, however, to use mutualistas as vehicles for organizing workers. These organizers highlighted the theme of ethnic unity that undergirded all mutual aid efforts. Like leaders in traditional societies, they considered solidarity "a condition for growth and development and a source of political power essential for social change." Even more than the Church and LULAC, mutual aid societies represented the interests of the working class and exemplified the creativity and effort that Mexicans mustered to improve their own conditions.⁸²

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Informal gatherings complimented formal organizations in fostering ethnic unity and working-class solidarity. Annual festivals dotted the Tejano community's calendar as did periodic celebrations, such as weddings. Leisure activities provided opportunities for building camaraderie through shared cultural experiences and allowed shellers and other workers to congregate outside of the workplace on a regular basis. Closer examination of these informal gatherings exposes another means by which Tejano laborers, including the pecan workers, built solidarity outside of work.

⁸¹ Hernandez, *Mutual Aid*, 88 (second quote); Pycior, "La Raza," 46-7, 107 (first quote).

⁸² Hernandez, *Mutual Aid*, 89 (quote); Pycior, "La Raza," 134-5, 141; Zamora, *World*, 104-6.

Annual festivals occurred as both religious and secular affairs. Religious festivals typically centered on Catholic traditions, but often adopted a decidedly Mexican flavor. The Christmas season encompassed many of these celebrations, including the feast day for the Virgin of Guadalupe (December 12) and activities commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. The Virgin's feast day included a whirlwind of activity. One contemporary account explained that San Antonio's Tejano population would "go to Mass, present religious drama, march in procession, stage a cockfight, offer pagan dances, and sing *mañanitas* at dawn." Similarly, the ritual of Las Posadas commemorated the struggles Mary and Joseph endured while seeking shelter in Bethlehem. Closer to Christmas day, the faithful attended and performed in the play *Los Pastores*, which always premiered at Our Lady of Guadalupe before spreading into other venues, including back yards. The comedic performance depicted the nativity story, and featured "a lazy shepherd, who refuses to go with his comrades to find the manger." The actors practiced after the workday ended, and each made their own costumes, "the result sometimes being a spangled shepherd or an angel with six-foot wings of crepe paper ruffles." The play was simple and unchanging, but these characteristics masked its greater cultural function. According to musicologist Manuel H. Peña, the play was "a communal event designed to cement reciprocal relations between the members of the cast, who themselves [were] barrio residents, and the audiences." Moreover, the play served as a "symbol whose principal function [was] to 're-center' the community in a

common gesture of cooperation and reciprocity, free of the coercion that underlies social relations under wage-labor.”⁸³

Christmas did not exercise a complete monopoly over religious festivals, however. At the beginning of each November, west side Catholics celebrated All Saints’ Day to remember those who died as children. On the following day, known as All Souls’ Day (*Día de los Muertos*), Tejanos would “flock by the thousands to the graves of their dead, to decorate them with flowers of the season,” yet “outside the cemetery walls [were] the sights and smells of a Mexican *fiesta*: *cabrito* (young goat) roasting over charcoal, tamales for sale” and “merry-go-round rides for the children.” Besides these occasions, Mexicans participated in elaborate Easter processions, as well as the annual Blessing of the Animals. During the latter ceremony, a priest asked for blessings over dogs, cats, and other assembled pets to “preserve their bodies and save them from all hardship.”⁸⁴

The most important secular festivals on the west side involved important events in Mexican history. The two most prominent were Cinco de Mayo (May 5) and Mexican Independence Day (September 16). The former commemorated a Mexican military victory over the French in 1862. The latter, although less known in the U.S.,

⁸³ William John Knox, “The Economic Status of the Mexican Immigrant in San Antonio, Texas” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1927), 7-8; Manuel Peña, *Musica Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 8 (fourth quote); Charles Ramsdell, *San Antonio: A Historical and Pictorial Guide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1959), 262-8, 274-5; Julia Nott Waugh, *The Silver Cradle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), 24, 118 (first quote); Writers’ Program, Works Progress Administration, *San Antonio: A History and Guide* (San Antonio: Clegg, 1941), 66 (second and third quotes).

⁸⁴ George Sessions Perry, “The Cities of America: San Antonio,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 24 November 1945, 108; Ramsdell, *San Antonio*, 270-2 (first and second quotes); Waugh, *Silver Cradle*, 70-3 (third quote), 108-12.

celebrated the end of Spanish rule in Mexico, and it was “dedicated to patriotism and pleasure” with “speeches, concerts, and dances.” One witness explained that during this fiesta “all kinds of tempting foods and liquid refreshments are sold, and various wheels of fortune and many other kinds of games of chance afford thrills and excitement to great numbers whose innate instinct prompt them to spend their money freely for the possibility of winning some coveted prize.” These holidays enjoyed great popularity because they promoted cultural and national pride. *Mutualistas* often sponsored secular fiestas, further cementing unity within the barrio.⁸⁵

While annual holidays provided the steady beat by which residents of the west side marked time, sporadic celebrations provided impromptu occasions for revelry and solidarity building. Weddings, wakes, anniversaries, and other gatherings allowed Latinos to strengthen ties with each other in culturally rich settings. According to one historian, such events “heightened the Mexican workers’ sense of community, their sense of Mexicanness, and provided a consciousness of joy in a life of toil, misery, and depression.” Moreover, these celebrations encouraged total participation, as everyone felt obligated to take part in the festivities.⁸⁶

Anniversaries, weddings, and birthdays frequently resulted in evenings of great amusement, but funerals and wakes also presented opportunities to display unity, albeit under somber circumstances. Wakes typically involved hundreds of visitors, as families were large and relatives often lived within close proximity of one another. Furthermore,

⁸⁵ Arnold, “Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs,” 20-1 (third quote); Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 76; Ramsdell, *San Antonio*, 268-9 (first quote); Waugh, *Silver Cradle* 104 (second quote).

⁸⁶ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 77 (quote); Ramsdell, *San Antonio*, 257.

mutualistas often required members to either attend funeral ceremonies or face fines as high as several dollars. One observer reported that after a body had been prepared for burial, it was “viewed by streams of relatives and friends who call to show their respect. During the night an old-fashioned wake is held. Never fewer than half a dozen, and often considerably more, of the male friends keep vigil . . . and the gathering often assume the appearance to a passerby of a reception rather than of a solemn watch.”⁸⁷

Weddings offered opportunities for families to congregate under more pleasant conditions. Civil marriages often preceded religious ceremonies for financial reasons, and in Mexico many forewent church weddings entirely. Most couples on the west side, however, could save enough to eventually afford the Church’s twenty-dollar fee. Tejanos commonly married Mexican nationals, but unions with Anglos were rare. Some Tejanos constructed bridges between families without marriages. “This relationship of ‘compadres,’ or ‘co-fathers,’” noted one scholar, was “the basis of Mexican social intercourse. It is the binding element of their friendships, and is a virtual adoption of blood relationships.” The compadre arrangement required commitment from both families, as certain responsibilities, such as paying for adolescent baptisms, were considered an obligation of the adopted family. Weddings, funerals, and compadre relationships reinforced cultural values, which in turn fortified social relationships on the west side. These relationships proved instrumental in forming the solidarity utilized by pecan shellers in their 1938 strike.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Arnold, “Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs,” 35-6 (quote); Murray, “Mexican Families,” 76.

⁸⁸ Arnold, “Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs,” 5 (quote), 6; Emory S. Bogardus, *The Mexican in the United States* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1934), 24; Gamio, *Mexican*

Planned celebrations and festivals represented peaks in the social lives of Tejanos, but more mundane recreational activities played critical roles in preserving unity throughout the year. Some forms of recreation were gender-specific, but others, including movies, music, and dancing, allowed participation by both sexes and all ages. Despite low wages, most people managed to save enough money for an occasional respite from their daily struggles.

The most common forms of recreation on the west side involved separate male and female spheres. Men rarely congregated in the home, opting instead to imbibe with friends in one of the dozens of bars, pool halls, and taverns that populated the barrio. Cockfighting enjoyed a considerable following, and according to one informant “the feathered combatants, aided and abetted by the surrounding owners and other interested spectators” would “engage in a fierce struggle” until “one of the cocks [succumbed] to the fatal stroke given by his pugnacious antagonist.” After receiving the death blow, the loser was “usually handed over to some one of the housewives, and . . . later on served at the dinner table.” In contrast, women tended to gather around the house. Popular women’s activities included sewing, embroidering, making artificial flowers, and visiting relatives. Dances, often sponsored by *mutualistas*, presented the most conspicuous and socially-accepted opportunities for men and women to spend leisure time together.⁸⁹

Immigration, 76; Max Sylvius Handman, “San Antonio: The Old Capital City of Mexican Life and Influence,” *Survey Graphic*, May 1931, 164-5.

⁸⁹ Arnold, “Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs,” 14, 16, 18 (quotes); Bogardus, *Mexican in the United States*, 59; Murray, “Mexican Families,” 55.

Motion pictures also drew crowds on the west side, as they did throughout the nation. Ten percent of Mexicans attended picture shows at least weekly, an impressive figure considering workers' meager wages. Many patronized the Majestic, the Texas, and the State theaters, where they watched both English and Spanish language films. Some theaters offered discounts for women and the elderly, and prices in hard times fell to two cents per ticket. The Casa de Mexico laid claim as the most impressive cinema on the west side, and offered both "Spanish and Mexican films, together with a few from Hollywood." In addition to films, most theaters also treated customers to musical and vaudeville acts.⁹⁰

As movie theaters grew in popularity, an older and more traditionally Mexican form of entertainment found new influence as well. *Corrido* music originated in northern Mexico and by the 1920s had migrated into San Antonio in the hearts, hands, and voices of the city's Tejano population. Despite the contention by one school superintendent that Mexicans had only marginal musical aptitude, talented performers graced the city's restaurants, plazas, performance halls, and recording studios by 1930. Moreover, *corrido* had become a symbol of both ethnicity and class. Tejanos considered the music an integral part of weddings, funerals, birthday celebrations, baptisms, and any other occasion for gathering. The city's five radio stations that featured *corrido* programming testified to the music's popularity, as did the throngs of Tejanos who purchased radios and phonographs. Record promoters and radio stations often sponsored dances that solidified *corrido*'s importance on the west side. According to

⁹⁰ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 79; Murray, "Mexican Families," 55; Waugh, *Silver Cradle*, 17-8 (quote).

Manuel Peña, these dances could be “driven by cultural or ideological imperatives that [resulted] in bold statements of identity and communal obligations and goals.”⁹¹

Corrido lyrics may have seemed benign on the surface, but they provided deep historical interpretations and social discourse concerning racial relations to the Mexican community. For example, in “The Immigrants” a crew of railroad workers in the U.S. lamented their decisions to leave home, believing that American capitalism exploited migrant workers. Similarly, “The Beet Field Workers” tells of Don Santiago, who wants to return home from Michigan after realizing his employer had lied about the terms of his employment. Other popular lyrics focused on violence between Tejanos and Texas Rangers along the border or other miscarriages of justice. More than simply cementing its place as *the* music of the Mexican working class, *corrido* imbued its listeners with a pro-active, collectivist ideology. This way of thinking about employer-employee relations spilled over into workplaces, such as shelleries, where laborers translated it into action.⁹²

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Culture-based solidarity formation undoubtedly played a large role in building unity inside of the workplace, but other aspects of west side life allowed the pecan workers to see themselves as laborers first and Mexicans second. Solidarity formation

⁹¹ Arnold, “Folk-lore, Manners, and Customs,” 17; Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 81, 83; Manuel H. Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 136, 139; Manuel Peña, *Musica Tejana*, 9 (first quote), 12, 77; Perry, “Cities of America,” 113; Jorge Reina Schement and Ricardo Flores, “The Origins of Spanish-Language Radio: The Case of San Antonio, Texas,” *Journalism History* 4 (Summer 1977): 56-7; Daniel Sheehy, *Mariachi Music in America: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

⁹² Richard R. Flores, “The *Corrido* and the Emergence of Texas-Mexican Social Identity,” *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (Spring 1992): 169-71; Gamio, *Mexican Immigration*, 85-7, 104-7.

that rested on foundations other than shared culture fell into two general categories. Labor solidarity involved efforts by workers to unify in opposition to capital. Examples relevant to the pecan shellers include early attempts to organize the industry, unionization in other industries, and participation in other organizations that promoted working-class interests. Ideological solidarity formed through group identification with political and social agendas that did not directly rely on any association with a particular culture. The women who picketed as pecan shellers in 1938 enjoyed the benefits labor and ideological solidarity, which complimented the cultural solidarity largely brought with them from Mexico.

Efforts to unionize San Antonio's pecan shellers prior to 1938 benefited the picketers who brought the industry to a standstill that year. Attempts to organize the shellers before 1933 had failed, as union leaders consistently capitulated to operators in exchange for personal remuneration. This corruption seemed to stop temporarily when Magdelano Rodríguez formed the Pecan Shelling Workers' Union of San Antonio (PSWU) in 1933. An absence of alternatives persuaded most pecan workers to join the union despite Rodríguez's friendly relationship with Southern Pecan. At its apex, PSWU claimed ten thousand members. In December 1934, the shellers struck for better wages, prompting the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to become involved. The NRA sided with workers and instituted a minimum wage of 15 cents an hour, but workers remained unsatisfied for two reasons. First, they knew the industry's contract system could easily circumvent the minimum wage. Second, and more importantly, Rodríguez angered shellers by testifying on behalf of the industry against the minimum

wage. This move spurred one NRA official to characterize the union boss as a “fugitive from justice, a citizen of Mexico and a labor agitator who betrays his workers.”⁹³

The PSWU disbanded shortly thereafter, and workers established two other short-lived unions that proved ineffective at protecting the shellers’ interests. The Mondolares de Nuez el Nogal filled the void created by the PSWU’s failure and persisted until 1937, although membership never topped 2,500. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) chartered the Cooperative Nueceros in 1936, but high dues doomed that endeavor as well. Then in 1937, Albert Gonsen established the Texas Pecan Shelling Workers’ Union (TPSWU). Like the PSWU, Gonsen’s union was independent of national and international organizations. This enterprise quickly faltered, however, when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) arrived in San Antonio with aims of bringing the pecan workers under its formidable umbrella.⁹⁴

The CIO held its 1937 annual meeting in Denver, Colorado, and elected to create the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). Agricultural workers had proved difficult to organize due to their migratory nature and their lack of protection under federal law. The CIO’s leadership formed UCAPAWA to target the more sedentary industrial and manufacturing workers who processed crops for national distribution. The union grew rapidly, boasting 76

⁹³ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 60; Stuart Marshall Jamison, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin 836 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 279; Robert Garland Landolt, “The Mexican American Workers of San Antonio, Texas” (Ph. D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1965), 231; Menefee and Cassmore, *Pecan Shellers*, 16-7; Harold A. Shapiro, “The Pecan Sheller of San Antonio, Texas,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 32 (March 1952): 233 (quote); Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 5.

⁹⁴ Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 55, 60; Jamison, *Labor Unionism*, 279; Landolt, “Mexican American,” 231; Menefee and Cassmore, *Pecan Shellers*, 17.

locals by September 1937. Weeks later, UCAPAWA won a critical lawsuit against California's Walnut Growers Association. The courts agreed that employees who processed walnuts were not agricultural workers, and thus enjoyed the benefits afforded workers under the Wagner Act. This development fueled increased popularity for the union. Eighteen months after its inception, UCAPAWA was the largest union in the CIO with more than 124,000 members in over 300 locals.⁹⁵

In November 1937 representatives from UCAPAWA granted the TPSWU a temporary charter as the Pecan Workers' Union Local 172. Although UCAPAWA was conceived only months earlier, many of its organizers brought a significant amount of experience gained while working in the same capacity for the Communist Party USA (CP-USA). Contrary to the AFL, according to one historian, UCAPAWA served as a "model for democratic trade unionism," particularly by encouraging female and minority participation in local policy formation. Moreover, UCAPAWA gave women "the crucial 'social space' necessary to assert and display their talents." The evidence suggests that, like other ethnic workers, Tejanas recognized the opportunities this new organization afforded them. In explaining the way Polish and Italian immigrants viewed the CIO's promise, one historian argues that "it is perhaps necessary to see it not just as a union movement trying to increase the wages of workers but as something of a civil crusade, a movement that promised a sense of dignity and empowerment to a great number of people previously excluded from full participation in American life." In this manner, the CIO functioned as much more than a union; indeed, it served as a rallying point for

⁹⁵ Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 24, 27-9, 164.

unskilled, exploited ethnic laborers who wanted to create bonds with their fellow workers irrespective of cultural orientation.⁹⁶

Another organization that aided working-class Mexicans in San Antonio was the Workers Alliance (WA). The WA emerged from the wreckage of the West Side Unemployment Council and acted on behalf of workers seeking coveted jobs administered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Labor organizers Emma Tenayuca and Manuela Sager started the San Antonio chapter of the WA in 1934 and immediately became involved in workers' issues on the west side. At its height, as many as 10,000 workers sought assistance from the WA. According to the openly-communist Tenayuca, the group was forced into double duty as both a union and "a social service organization." Tenayuca hoped that the WA would eventually represent all of San Antonio's industrial and manufacturing workers and provide critical educational, health, and social programs to the poor. Those dreams never reached fruition, however, and by mid-1937 local law enforcement considered the organization part of a communist conspiracy seeking to overthrow the city government. Working from that assumption, local police raided the WA's meeting hall in July 1937, destroying furniture, seizing records, and arresting Tenayuca. Nevertheless, the alliance remained popular among Tejano workers. By the end of 1937 many Mexicans were so loyal to the WA that UCAAWA's initial efforts to organize the pecan shellers struggled for lack of interest.

⁹⁶ Thomas Gobel, "Becoming American: Ethnic Workers and the Rise of the CIO," *Labor History* 29 (Spring 1988): 196 (third quote); Menefee and Cassmore, *Pecan Shellers*, 17; Douglas Monroy, "Anarquismo y Comunismo: Mexican Radicalism and the Communist Party in Los Angeles during the 1930s," *Labor History* 24 (Winter 1983): 51-2; Ruiz, *Cannery Women*, xviii (second quote), 41 (first quote); TCLU, *San Antonio*, 7; Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 114.

That situation reversed, however, when Tenayuca and other leaders realized the futility of communist-led organizing efforts in the political climate of the late 1930s.

Accordingly, they encouraged their members to join the CIO.⁹⁷

In addition to early iterations of the shellers' union and national labor organizations, Tejanas brought solidarity formed during work stoppages in other light manufacturing jobs with them to the pecan industry. The west side housed dozens of businesses that employed Mexican women, including garment manufacturers, cigar factories, meat packing plants, bakeries, and other food processing facilities. Workers in several shops militantly engaged their employers over wages, hours, and working conditions, particularly after unemployment rates began receding from the highs reached in 1933. Striking cigar workers forced their employers to adopt federal regulations in July 1933, foreshadowing a succession of strikes that lasted several years. The following year pecan shellers walked out for the first time, as did the Latin American bakers' union. In 1935 the cigar rollers struck again, this time with considerably less success. Members of the city's International Ladies' Garment Workers' Unions (ILGWU) picketed several employers in 1937 and 1938 with mixed results. The

⁹⁷ Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Emma Tenayuca: Vision and Courage," in *The Human Tradition in Texas*, ed. Ty Cashion and Jesus F. de la Teja (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 198; Chad Alan Goldberg, "Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal: The Workers Alliance of America and the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1941," *Social Science History* 29 (Fall 2005): 338; Gabriela Gonzalez, "Carolina Munguia and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," *Frontiers* 24 (2003): 212; Patricia E. Gower, "Unintended Consequences: The San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938," *Journal of South Texas* 17 (Fall 2004): 91-2; Monroy, "Anarquismo y Comunismo," 56; Geoffrey Rips, "Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells Her Story," *The Texas Observer*, 28 October 1983, 10 (quote); TCLU, *San Antonio*, 5-6; Emma Tenayuca, "If the Principles Are Gone," interview by the Institute of Texan Cultures, University of Texas at San Antonio (online at http://www.texancultures.utsa.edu/memories/htms/Tenayuca_transcript.htm), 14.

cacophony of labor strife in San Antonio finally reached its crescendo in 1938 with the pecan shellers.⁹⁸

Few Tejanas during the 1930s worked in the same job for a long period of time, but they did not have to begin the process of solidarity formation anew each time they changed employers. Rather, these women continued to accumulate solidarity while circulating from one shop to the next. As several scholars have pointed out, “while workers bring different backgrounds and histories of activism to the workplace, a history of conflict in a particular work setting is often shared informally across different cohorts of workers and may provide a basis for collective action.” Moreover, historian Richard A. Garcia argues that “the strikes served to crystallize the fragmentation of the Mexican community” along class lines, demonstrating that working-class Latinos came to identify themselves first and foremost as laborers. This solidarity, forged in the fires of labor turmoil, gave shellers a fighting chance against pecan magnates who possessed almost infinitely more resources.⁹⁹

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While solidarity formed through labor organizations and in the workplace contributed to the pecan shellers’ victory in 1938, ideological solidarity played an

⁹⁸ Blackwelder, “Emma Tenayuca,” 194-8; Richard A. Garcia, “Class, Consciousness, and Ideology,” 48-51; *Ibid.*, *Rise*, 60-3; Thomas Guy Rogers, “The Housing Situation of the Mexicans in San Antonio Texas,” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1927), 4; Vargas, *Labor Rights*, 66, 80-1, 83; Francis Jerome Woods, *Mexican Ethnic Leadership in San Antonio, Texas* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 20; Zamora, *World*, 67, 162, 191; Miss Gonzales, interview, 6 October 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as CAH-UT); Raul P. Sifuentes, interview, 6 October 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH-UT.

⁹⁹ Marc Dixon, Vincent J. Roscigno, and Randy Hodson, “Unions, Solidarity, and Striking,” *Social Forces* 83 (September 2004): 14 (first quote); Richard A. Garcia, “Class, Consciousness, and Ideology,” 52 (second quote); Jamison, *Unionism in Agriculture*, 16.

important role as well. Elite exiles who escaped Mexico's 1910 Revolution settled in San Antonio while awaiting the return of friendly conditions in their homeland. They remained active promoting their ideology, establishing one of the most influential Spanish-language newspapers in the United States. Similarly, socialists, communists, and those sympathetic to such philosophies congregated in San Antonio. Others who intended to make the city their permanent home also formed organizations designed to improve conditions for Latinos and secure their rights as American citizens. These different groups drew the support of many workers on the west side who yearned for more social and political advocacy. These issues and ideologies formed another avenue of solidarity formation down which working-class Mexicans traveled in the 1920s and 1930s.

As Mexico's 1910 Revolution raged, elites loyal to President Porfirio Díaz sought refuge in the United States. Rather than passively waiting for peace in Mexico those exiles worked on gaining converts to their political ideology. The most visible example of their proselytizing was the daily newspaper, *La Prensa*. Ignacio E. Lozano founded the publication in 1913 after fleeing Mexico five years earlier. From the outset, several respected Mexican expatriates and intellectuals wrote for the paper. Whereas *corridos* and other oral traditions purveyed Mexican culture to the masses, *La Prensa* created a written record of the events and issues affecting Latinos in the U.S. Most of these individuals, like Lozano, were conservative political refugees. Unlike those who

founded LULAC, *La Prensa*'s architects wanted to preserve Mexican culture in the U.S.¹⁰⁰

Initially the newspaper focused on events in Mexico, often to the exclusion of local news. As exiles resigned themselves to a longer stay in San Antonio than originally expected, they took greater interest in Latinos living north of the Rio Grande. *La Prensa* reached a wide audience, circulating across South Texas and in major cities throughout the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico. Although the newspaper started as a vehicle for elite intellectuals, its viewpoint quickly spread to the masses. One contemporary scholar examining the publication's role in San Antonio's Mexican community noted that even the poor and unemployed gathered in Milam Park, where some read the newspaper aloud to others and then followed with discussion. Over time, *La Prensa* became a uniting force within the community and was one of the few institutions that consistently and unwaveringly supported San Antonio's struggling working class. Sociologist and Mexican national Manuel Gamio considered *La Prensa* one of the few quality Spanish-language newspapers in the U.S. on the basis that it promoted Mexican culture and activities, defended Latinos against all forms of discrimination, and provided a concrete link to Mexico.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Richard A. Buitron, Jr., *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20-1; Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The Mexican Revolution and the Spanish-Language Press in the Borderlands," *Journalism History* 4 (Summer 1977): 42; Gamio, *Mexican Immigrants*, 136-7; Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 34-5; Zamora, *World*, 74-8.

¹⁰¹ Buitron, *Tejano Identity*, 22; Richard A. Garcia, *Rise*, 33; Kathlene May Gonzales, "The Mexican Family in San Antonio, Texas" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1928), 3; Nora Rios McMillan, "The Immigration Issue between 1929 and 1954 as Seen Through *La Prensa*," *South Texas Studies* 6 (1995): 21, 25; Perry, "Cities of America," 113.

Many of the intellectuals featured in *La Prensa* were either socialists or advocated socialist policies. Racism within the Socialist Party of Texas precluded Mexican participation, so Tejanos formed their own groups. In September 1905, a Federal Labor Union (FLU) local formed in Laredo. This umbrella organization used the local Spanish-language newspaper to prepare for class warfare, which it believed would incidentally occur along racial lines. In 1911, El Primer Congreso Mexicanista met for a week of speeches, presentations, and workshops, as well as poetry readings and musical performances. According to one scholar, the meeting promoted unity through nationalism, but also on the basis of “a radical working class ideology.” By the 1930s Tejanos had established a tradition of socialism that incorporated cultural and ethnic unity.¹⁰²

The labor leadership that developed on the west side in the 1930s lured followers by highlighting the tradition of socialist, working-class ideology that existed on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border for decades prior to the Depression. The CP-USA attracted many qualified Mexican leaders because the organization had resources and an ideology that appealed to minority groups. Moreover, communists routinely worked to end discrimination and police violence against Tejanos. The pecan workers followed a variety of leaders who espoused socialist arguments, the most prominent being Emma Tenayuca. An avowed communist and wife of CP-USA gubernatorial candidate Homer Brooks, Tenayuca worked diligently on behalf of the west side’s working class. She

¹⁰² José E. Limon, “El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Contemporary Chicanism,” *Aztlán* 5 (Spring/Fall 1974): 93-5 (quote); Emilio Zamora, Jr., “Chicano Socialist Labor Activity in Texas, 1900-1920,” *Aztlán* 6 (1975): 223, 229-30.

directed her efforts at organizing labor rather than recruiting communists, but the socialist literature she read and the meetings she attended influenced her worldview. The CP-USA struggled to organize workers, however, possibly because they refused to evoke Mexican history, culture, and heritage that would have attracted Tejanos. The Party halted organizing efforts when most of its labor leadership left to join the CIO in 1935, but its philosophy continued to influence working-class ideology on the west side until the beginning of World War II.¹⁰³

Other groups designed to promote the interests of working Tejanos also appeared in San Antonio prior to the Depression. One that enjoyed some longevity was the Pan American Round Table of San Antonio (PART). Florence T. Griswold founded the organization in October 1916 to aid refugees, regardless of class, escaping Mexico. The Round Table strove to reshape identities by promoting a vision of hemispheric unity that specifically excluded Europe. The organization adopted a decidedly anti-socialist stance and encouraged “recognition of the indisputable truth that as other nations and peoples look first after their own, so the people of the Americas should think first of the preservation of the heritage that has come down to them through the labors and sacrifices of Washington, Lincoln, Juarez, Simon Bolivar, and San Martin.” This message, which implicitly denounced discrimination against Mexicans, found a

¹⁰³ Griffin, “Opportunity, Mobilization, and Movements,” 147 (quote); Monroy, “Anarquismo y Comunismo,” 54-7; Vargas, *Labor Rights*, 64; *ibid.*, “Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement During the Depression,” *Pacific Historical Review* 66 (November 1997): 556, 567; *Daily Worker*, 28 June 1938.

receptive audience on the west side, where workers fought for fair treatment from their employers.¹⁰⁴

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One scholar has suggested that “in developing solidarity and organizing spontaneity among the poor and the powerless,” organizers “must directly link the goals and activities of the movement to the cultural, tangible symbols of solidarity and empowerment commonly accepted among the members.” By 1938, Tejanas on the west side had developed a sense of togetherness through a wide range of organizations and activities. This unity, although substantial, would not have resulted in victory for the pecan shellers by itself. Even coupled with grossly substandard living conditions on the west side, the solidarity that Mexicans forged through the years would have been wasted if not for a favorable political climate. The Depression prompted many Americans to reconsider the proper relationships between capital, labor, and the government. Like many workers in other places and industries, San Antonio’s Mexican population took advantage of changing attitudes by challenging the city’s pecan operators.

¹⁰⁴ “Outline of Pan American Activities Under Direction of Pan American Round Table of San Antonio, TX, 1916-1936,” 6 June 1936, Pan American Round Table of San Antonio Collection, Institute of Texan Cultures, University of Texas at San Antonio.

CHAPTER V

OPPORTUNITY

The absence of a successful pecan shellers' strike prior to 1938 suggests that the combination of poverty and solidarity do not fully explain the workers' victory. To understand why the work stoppage occurred at the beginning of 1938 and why labor prevailed, it is necessary to examine the political environment in San Antonio at the time. At the federal level, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal included legislation that afforded American workers previously unknown freedoms in organizing and collective bargaining. In Texas, James V. Allred earned a reputation for fighting big business as the state's attorney general, and he used it to court labor during his two victorious gubernatorial campaigns. San Antonio's political machine had dominated municipal elections for decades, but even there outsiders made inroads by 1939. Poll taxes prevented most Tejanos from voting, although several organizations fought to end that method of disfranchisement. Election results from the period, therefore, offer clues about Anglos' evolving thoughts on labor and race issues. In this atmosphere of political and social upheaval, San Antonio's pecan shellers found an opportunity to challenge their employers.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Stuart Marshall Jamison, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, Bulletin 836, U.S. Department of Labor (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 270-1; National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, "Poll Tax Fact Sheet," Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as CAH); National Intercollegiate Christian Council, "The Poll Tax and Democracy Cannot Exist Together," Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH; Southern Conference for Human Welfare, "An Appeal to the Senate for a Free Ballot," Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH; Texas Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, "Price Tag on the Ballot," Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH.

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The Great Depression remains the greatest economic catastrophe in U.S. history, and its impact on American government was immense. Millions lost their jobs between 1929 and 1933 as banks and crops failed. The stock market struggled to regain investors' trust after the great crash in October 1929, and debate raged over the merits and drawbacks of gold-backed American dollars. Texans regretted making President Herbert Hoover the first Republican to carry the state in 1928, but few had direct outlets for their frustration until November 1932. That year, Hoover's administration became another casualty of the Depression.¹⁰⁶

In the presidential election of 1932, Hoover faced New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt. The two candidates offered the public a sharp philosophical contrast. Hoover believed that the U.S. could not afford government spending so long as the Depression restricted federal income generated by taxes. Moreover, he thought American citizens should take care of themselves and their neighbors, as their pioneering forefathers had done, without depending on federal assistance. As for labor, Hoover wanted to maintain the status quo. He applauded employees and employers for agreeing to static wage levels and minimizing conflict while waiting for the economic downturn to end. Conversely, Roosevelt promised a more active executive branch. He told an audience in Boston days before the election that "the American working-man, the mill-worker of New England, the miner of the west, the railroad worker, the farmer, and the white collar man" should vote against the business friendly Republican Party and for his

¹⁰⁶ Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 375-6.

plan to save the economy with an infusion of federal spending. Furthermore, he wooed laborers with the observation that they were overdue for “a reduction of the hours of work and the number of working days per week,” and argued that only the federal government could ensure employers would adhere to such regulations. Of particular interest to shellers in San Antonio, Roosevelt declared that while he favored restricted immigration to protect American wages and employment, he also recognized that “in the enforcement of the immigration laws serious abuses have been revealed.” Americans voiced their support of Roosevelt, or rejection of Hoover, by electing him president by substantial majorities across the nation. San Antonians joined in the landslide by casting twice as many votes for FDR than for Hoover.¹⁰⁷

At least one historian has charged that Roosevelt did little to aid Mexican workers or protect their unions, but evidence suggests that the president had concern for residents, including pecan workers, on the west side. Father Carmelo Tranchese of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish cultivated a relationship with FDR during his first term in office through San Antonio’s U.S. Representative. Tranchese worked tirelessly to secure better housing and jobs for his flock, and implored Roosevelt to address living conditions in the barrio. The two regularly corresponded with one another, and, in the early 1940s, Tranchese eventually secured federal funding for low-rent housing in San Antonio that replaced many *corrales*. Beyond the president, other members of the executive branch expressed support for pecan shellers and other Mexican workers, both directly and indirectly. J. Warren Madden, chairman of the National Labor Relations

¹⁰⁷ *San Antonio Express*, 30 and 31 (quotes) October 1932, 2, 5, 6, 8, and 10 November 1932.

Board, testified before the U.S. Senate that “the right of workmen to organize themselves into unions has become an important civil liberty. . . . It would seem that if an American Government, State or Federal, were to enact a statute forbidding workmen from organizing unions, that statute would be declared unconstitutional as a deprivation of liberty or property.” Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins focused more specifically on the plight of pecan workers. Upon learning how little shellers earned for each pound of nuts they picked clean, she pointedly asked the city’s operators, “do you in San Antonio call that wages?”¹⁰⁸

Entering the 1936 election season, President Roosevelt faced Republican Alfred Landon, governor of Kansas. Landon’s attack on FDR picked up where Hoover’s left off four years earlier. The governor accused the president of usurping power from Congress to orchestrate a massive spending campaign that put the nation in considerable debt without curbing unemployment. In addition, Landon charged, Roosevelt violated the principles of federalism by funneling authority away from local governments toward the White House. The Republican candidate then offered voters a choice by promising to dismantle the bureaucratic behemoth created under the New Deal and to close the Social Security Administration before it deducted any money from their paychecks. Although Landon referred to his blue-collar background in portraying himself as the

¹⁰⁸ Green Peyton, *San Antonio: City in the Sun* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1946), 162-6; J. Gilberto Quesada, “Toward a Working Definition of Social Justice: Father Carmelo A. Tranchese, S. J., and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 1932-1953,” *Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 4 (1993): 51; Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 248-9; Congress, U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Education and Labor, *Violations of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with Rights of Labor, 74th Cong., 2nd sess.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 2 (first quote); *San Antonio Evening News*, 29 March 1938 (second quote).

labor candidate, his message focused on peaceful resolutions to labor strife and the importance of unions remaining politically independent of any party. At the same time, Roosevelt padded his own credentials by forging a personal relationship with long-time labor leader John L. Lewis. In a speech the week before election day, the president also resolved to “improve working conditions for the workers of America – to reduce hours over-long, to increase wages that spell starvation, to end the labor of children, to wipe out sweatshops.” These issues formed the core of workers’ problems, and they likely took note of Roosevelt’s position.¹⁰⁹

Since passage of the Wagner Act, which codified workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively, secured FDR most of the labor vote, he reached out to other previously neglected groups just prior to the election. The president told a crowd assembled at Howard University that “among American citizens there should be no forgotten men and no forgotten races.” Two days later, Roosevelt commented on immigration in terms relevant to Tejanos on the west side. “I am inclined to think,” the president stated, “that in some cases the newer citizens have discharged their obligations to us better than we have discharged our obligations to them. . . . we have, for too long, neglected the housing problem for all our lower-income groups. . . . But we have not yet begun adequately to spend money in order to help the families in the over-crowded sections to live as American citizens should have the right to live.” Roosevelt’s ideas

¹⁰⁹ *San Antonio Express*, 13 July 1936, 30 October 1936, and 1 (first quote) and 4 November 1936.

resonated with a majority of Texans, as well as most other Americans. A tally of votes in San Antonio revealed that FDR outpaced Landon there by a three to one margin.¹¹⁰

San Antonians expressed their attitudes about increased federal involvement in their lives by aiding Roosevelt's election efforts, but also by sending a U.S. Representative to Washington, D. C., whose agenda matched that of the chief executive. Maury Maverick came from a ranching family that was among the best-known in the San Antonio area. The Mavericks arrived in Texas before the state won independence from Mexico, and the family contributed men to both that effort and the Civil War. Maverick had served in the Army during World War I, where he saw combat and earned a purple heart. Neither his family's reputation nor his service to his country spared him from the brutal honesty observers employed when describing his physical appearance, however. "Rotund, small, and olive-skinned," wrote one observer, "with massive shoulders and a big head growing out of them. Maury looks rather like a bullfrog sitting on a damp rock." Another described Maverick as a "squat, broad-framed, bench-legged man about forty years old with the general appearance of a bulldog." As for temperament, many agreed with the characterization that Maverick was "brusque, aggressive; some say bull-headed and add something about a china shop." After serving as the Bexar County Tax Collector and organizing charitable events for underprivileged children during the early 1930s, Maverick elected to run for U.S. Congress.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *San Antonio Express*, 27 (first quote), 29 (second quote), and 30 October 1936, and 4 November 1936.

¹¹¹ Richard B. Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 63 (second quote); Maury Maverick, to Guests, November 1932, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Peyton, *San Antonio*, 25-30, 184 (first quote); Oswald Garrison Villard, "Maury Maverick: A Texas Norther in Congress," *Forum and Century* 95 (June 1936): 354 (third quote).

Texas, like all southern states, was dominated by the Democratic Party in the 1930s, hence, the Democratic primaries held each summer during election years invariably determined who would win the general election the following November. In July 1934, Maverick faced Charles K. Quin for the Democratic nomination to the state's newly created 20th Congressional District. Quin had been elected mayor of San Antonio in 1933 with backing from the city's political machine. The mayor attacked Maverick in the press, claiming the former was a communist, as evidenced by his membership in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Maverick launched a counter-offensive against Quin, accusing him of fear mongering, and asked his fellow veterans to put him in office. The first primary in July failed to produce a simple majority for either man, but Maverick won the runoff election weeks later, capturing 54 percent of the vote. The newly-elected congressman then left for Washington promising to represent all San Antonians, including Tejanos, and fight for working Americans.¹¹²

President Roosevelt could always count on Maverick's vote concerning New Deal legislation, but the representative's deepest passions centered on civil liberties. Historian Charles Beard praised Maverick for insisting that the legislative branch, the most responsive to public opinion, maintain the war-making authority stipulated in the U.S. Constitution. In addition, Roger Baldwin, director of the ACLU for more than three decades, lauded Maverick for standing "at the center of all efforts for the civil liberties legislation." Baldwin continued that "among the handful of civil rights champions in Congress over the years, Maury stands out as the most devoted." Anti-

¹¹² Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 68; Stuart L. Weiss, "Maury Maverick and the Liberal Bloc," *Journal of American History* 57 (March 1971): 881; *San Antonio Express*, 27 and 29 July 1934, 27 August 1934.

lynching legislation provides one example of Maverick's values. As a freshman representative he drew attention for supporting such legislation, and, by one contemporary account, was the only congressman from a southern state to take a stand against the racially-charged form of violence. When questioned about his motivations for outlawing the vigilantism, he replied, "I want the law passed because I don't want Negroes to get lynched." Maverick's greatest crusade, however, was the protection of free speech. He believed all Americans had the right to voice their opinions, regardless of popularity. The congressman often found himself in the unenviable position of defending communistic speech, which allowed political adversaries and other critics to portray him as a sympathizer. Ultimately, that dedication to the cause of free speech proved to be Maverick's political undoing.¹¹³

Maverick lent more ammunition to his anti-communist adversaries with his pro-labor rhetoric. In one speech given while he was tax collector, he argued that "human rights shall always be superior to property rights. . . . To be specific, this rule of humanity places all machines, all factories, all property, secondary and subordinate to the people and not at the whim of a few selfish ones who by their selfish and unregulated profit system, bring misery to millions." Maverick also railed against monopolies, particularly in utilities, and wanted the government to "go on a trust-busting expedition like Theodore Roosevelt did, only about ten times as strong." The representative

¹¹³ Hamilton Basso, "Maury Maverick: A Portrait," *New Republic*, 21 April 1937, 316; Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 87-9 (first and second quotes), 100; L. Patrick Hughes, "Beyond Denial: Glimpses of Depression Era San Antonio," *Journal of South Texas* 14 (Fall 2001): 238-9; Maury Maverick, Untitled Speech, May 1932, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; *ibid.*, "The Battle Against Industrial Reaction," 3 March 1936, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Weiss, "Maury Maverick," 880.

championed a minimum wage as well, and was one of only three Texas congressmen to support the National Labor Relations Act.¹¹⁴

Maverick also believed that constitutional amendment offered the best avenue for working Americans to protect their rights as laborers. He argued that members of the ruling class had convinced most voters that the Constitution was a sacred document, while simultaneously using it to protect their fortunes. Any meaningful change, he advocated, would require an overhaul of the government's founding charter. In the meantime, the congressman believed that unions provided workers the most protection against abuses. "I am for any labor organization which dominates a particular field and serves justly the members of that particular craft or industry," Maverick stated in 1937. "For that reason," he continued, "I approve of *all* labor organizations, and when I say all, I mean *ALL* of them; and that means the American Federation of Labor . . . the Committee for Industrial Organization, and the Rail Brotherhoods. If there are any more I am in favor of them, too." Thus, San Antonio's shellers had ample reason to believe that their congressman would support efforts to organize and bargain with pecan operators.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 145, 173; Maury Maverick, to Jouett Shouse, 8 January 1932, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH (second quote); *ibid.*, Untitled Speech, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH (first quote).

¹¹⁵ Maury Maverick, "Union Labor," [ca. 1930], Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Maury Maverick, "The Declaration of Independence in 1935," 28 June 1935, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Maury Maverick, "The Battle Against Industrial Reaction," 3 March 1936, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Maury Maverick, "Congress and the Labor Problem," 16 July 1937, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Maury Maverick, "Labor Problems from the Supreme Court on Down," 21 September 1937, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH (first and second quotes).

Maverick addressed labor issues in a manner that Mexican workers, including pecan shellers, likely found appealing, but he also reached out to San Antonio's Tejano community in other ways. As the county tax collector, he questioned the mayor's decision to extend services, such as garbage collection, to homes that laid outside of the city limits, particularly when west side residents lacked those same services. He speculated that race and class drove city hall's actions in the matter, and promised the Mexican community that they would receive better treatment while he was in office. The congressman also worked to provide legal assistance to jailed Tejanos, including Emma Tenayuca. The relationship Maverick developed with Mexicans in San Antonio partly explains his political success. He consistently won large majorities on the west side that helped him overcome the city's political machine, but, more importantly, he convinced Anglos that they should care about the barrio as well. His message of cleaning the city's image by fixing problems on the west side resonated with voters over several election cycles, suggesting that a wide range of San Antonians bought into his pro-labor and pro-Mexican stances. Anglo willingness to support the New Deal and its disciples provided pecan workers their first glimpse of opportunity to challenge area businesses. To force meaningful change, however, they had to both wait for and recognize deeper fissures in the extant political landscape at the state and municipal levels.¹¹⁶

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¹¹⁶ Basso, "Maury Maverick," 315; Maverick, "Union Labor," [ca. 1930], Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; *San Antonio Express*, 8, 21, and 22 July 1938.

Although residents of San Antonio offered insights into their thinking about labor, poverty, and immigration through their voting in federal elections, results of state and local contests filter out much of the pro-Democratic sentiment that skewed national election outcomes in the region. A legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Texans had consistently voted for Democrats in national elections for more than half a century by the 1930s. The party also dominated in state elections, and politicians across Texas with aspirations of winning office typically ran as Democrats. Although the governor of Texas wielded less power than in many other states, the chief executive's office retained symbolic significance and offered an unparalleled pulpit from which to influence the legislative agenda. The results in the Democratic primary elections for governor indicate that San Antonians welcomed expanded rights for both labor and Tejanos, giving shellers further reason for optimism.

The two leading candidates for the Democratic nomination for governor in 1932 were incumbent Ross Sterling and former governor Miriam "Ma" Ferguson. Although each had a track record as governor upon which to run, both opted instead to expend their energies attacking the other. Ferguson charged Sterling with mishandling the chaotic oil boom in eastern Texas that resulted in the governor declaring martial law in several counties, a move eventually deemed unconstitutional by the state's Supreme Court. In addition, she emphasized Sterling's personal wealth, estimated at \$50 million, and ties to big business. Sterling countered that his opponent's husband, James "Pa" Ferguson, actually masterminded her campaign, and that Miriam was merely his puppet. This was problematic, Sterling insisted, because "Pa" had been impeached during his

second term as governor and banned from holding state office. The two camps traded barbs while running on similar platforms of fiscal responsibility highlighted by small government and low taxes. “Ma” Ferguson garnered more votes than Sterling in the July primary, but her lack of a fifty percent majority set the stage for an August runoff election. Sterling used the extra time to court labor in Houston, women in Waco, and Mexicans on the west side. His efforts proved futile, however, as Ferguson defeated the incumbent in both Texas and in San Antonio.¹¹⁷

Another Democratic hopeful, James V. Allred, ran for reelection to the state attorney general’s office in 1932. He faced no serious challenges from other candidates that summer, but the state’s burgeoning oil industry inundated voters with anti-Allred propaganda. During his first term, the attorney general had worked to prevent monopolization of the state’s oil deposits, and he promised more of the same for his second term. Allred won reelection easily, and two years later set his sights on the state’s highest office. He ran for governor in 1934 against a bevy of contenders, most notably Tom F. Hunter. Allred told voters they could expect less corporate influence in the statehouse with him in office, and made one controversial decision that intimately affected the Mexican community. The state congress passed a white primary law, which barred African Americans from voting in primary elections, in 1923, but the statute’s applicability to Tejanos remained unsettled going into the summer of 1934. Acting as attorney general and just days before the election, Allred declared that “the common usage of the term ‘white person’ as it is generally understood by the people of this State

¹¹⁷ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 352, 381; *San Antonio Express*, 19 and 25 July 1932, 23, 25, 27, and 28 August 1932.

includes those persons who are commonly designated as ‘Mexicans.’” Whether this decision resulted in a net gain or net loss of votes for Allred remains undetermined, but the symbolism likely resonated with shellers. The attorney general finished as the top vote getter in the July primary, although by an insufficient margin to avoid a runoff. The following month, Allred defeated Hunter by more than forty thousand votes to become the 34th Governor of Texas.¹¹⁸

Allred entered office free from the scandals that plagued the Fergusons during their terms in office and without the ties to business that cast suspicion on Ross Sterling. To the contrary, according to one biographer, Allred had “a sympathetic understanding of the every-day life of the humble family, and a zeal to lend a helping hand to those who have to fight along the way of life.” During his first term, the governor developed a friendly relationship with President Roosevelt and worked to implement public works projects, a state equivalent to social security, an employment agency within the Texas Department of Labor, and procure additional funds for education. To pay for these measures, the governor shifted the tax burden from individual property holders to companies that extracted the state’s natural resources, particularly oil. By the summer of 1936, Allred’s accomplishments earned him the support of labor, and he made efforts to reach to Mexican community, as well. In the first speech of his reelection campaign in Waxahachie, the governor expressed his “fond hope and fervent wish that every citizen will, in the language of the President, continue to be a ‘good neighbor,’” a clear reference to Roosevelt’s attempt at respectful foreign policy toward Latin America.

¹¹⁸ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 369, 475-6; *San Antonio Express*, 19 July 1932, 24 and 26 (quote) July 1934, 27 August 1934.

With broad support, Allred won the Democratic primary in July, and secured his second term in office the following November.¹¹⁹

The governor's posture toward labor was tested early during his second stint in office. The newest weapon in labor's arsenal against capital, the sit-down strike, alarmed many Texans. In April 1937, Allred publicly denounced sit-down strikes as a violation of property rights, and promised to use the law enforcement personnel under his charge to stop any such action. Many viewed this as a new stance for the governor, who had openly courted union members in each of his gubernatorial campaigns. The misgivings of labor proved unfounded only months later. In August 1937, several Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) recruiters suspected of promoting communism were beaten and kidnapped by mobs in Dallas over the course of several days. When municipal authorities reacted slowly to the situation, Allred sent the Texas Rangers to restore order. Many workers lauded the governor's decision, although he insisted that support of free speech, rather than the CIO, guided his actions. Residents of Dallas similarly thanked the chief executive, with the Dallas County Law Enforcement League formally commending Allred "for his timely and decisive action in sending in the Texas Rangers to Dallas, to protect the persons and lives of our local people from a condition of violence bordering on anarchy." Physical intimidation and violence at the

¹¹⁹ James V. Allred, "Opening Speech of Governor James V. Allred in Campaign for Reelection at Waxahachie, Texas," 30 June 1936, Speeches – 1936, Records, Texas Governor James V. Allred, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission (hereafter referred to as TSLA), (second quote); Raymond Brooks, "He Knows Where He Is Going – A Biography of 'Jimmy' Allred, Top West Texan," *West Texas Today* 15 (January 1935): 7, 18 (first quote); Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 388; "The Press Reviews . . . The Steady March of James V. Allred to a Second Term and Governor and the Completion of an Enlightened and Progressive Platform for Texas," *S. W. Railway Journal* (June 1936), Publicity – 1936, Records, Texas Governor James V. Allred, TSLA; *San Antonio Express*, 12, 18, 23, and 26 July 1936.

hands of local law enforcement often dissuaded workers from striking in cities such as San Antonio. Governor Allred sent a clear message in the late summer of 1937, however, that he would not tolerate the use of force against law-abiding citizens. This message found an audience on the west side, where pecan shellers had reason to believe the state would come to their aid if the local police acted against them.¹²⁰

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While the voting patterns of San Antonians at the state and federal levels indicate openness to change, municipal election returns paint an even more vivid picture of the city's shifting mood. Party affiliations mattered little at the local level, where the political machine ran candidates on the People's Ticket. To win public office in San Antonio meant joining the machine or overcoming the manifold problems outsiders faced when challenging the establishment. Unlike more famous machines in Jersey City and Kansas City, the People's Ticket had no single boss, but rather a "composite bossism made up of the city's commissioners." Machine politics in San Antonio functioned much as they did elsewhere, however, with patronage exchanged for votes. The mayor had 1,800 jobs to offer compliant and loyal underlings, and could influence close elections by issuing poll-tax receipts to voters who had not actually paid for their

¹²⁰ Thomas E. Alexander, to James V. Allred, 24 August 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; J. R. Barrett, to James V. Allred, 23 August 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; George Clarke, Secretary to the Governor, to Thomas E. Alexander, 24 August 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; Harvey Family, to James V. Allred, 4 April 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; Gene Howe, to James V. Allred, 7 April 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; C. V. Varner, to James V. Allred, 5 April 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; Dallas County Law Enforcement League, "Resolution," 24 August 1937, Garment Workers Strike – Dallas – August 1937, Records, James V. Allred, TSLA; *Dallas Morning News*, 23 August 1937.

right to cast a ballot. Most who received municipal jobs from the mayor worked in departments that afforded opportunities to supplement their incomes with graft. The city's Health Department, according to one observer, was "an agency through which collectors shake down that poor, miserable class of females who make their livings as members of the world's oldest profession." Other illegal ventures, such as gambling halls and unlicensed saloons, could also persuade officials to overlook their indiscretions with bribes. The San Antonio Police Department, which was "regarded with mild contempt by a large contingent of the populace" according to one resident, acted as the machine's enforcement arm, intimidating those who sought to challenge the existing order. When patronage and threats failed, the People's Ticket resorted to its most insidious tactic to win elections. The machine convinced San Antonians that communists sought to destroy their way of life, then red-baited the opposition.¹²¹

The city's Mexican voters, few as they were, felt the machine's full force. One San Antonian testified before the U.S. House of Representatives in 1930 that Tejanos, "dependent on their jobs as city or county employees . . . follow the commands of bosses at elections. They are so closely watched that they cannot do otherwise." Even when those bosses paid poll taxes for Mexican voters, the barrio remained underrepresented. Of the estimated 100,000 Tejanos living in San Antonio in 1939, for example, only 9,374 paid the tax required to vote. Shellers and other west side residents who chose to

¹²¹ Hughes, "Beyond Denial," 235-6; Ralph Maitland, "San Antonio: The Shame of Texas," *Forum and Century* 102 (July-December 1939): 55 (third quote); Maury Maverick, "Phil Wright," 13 April 1933, Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection 1769-1954, 1989, CAH; Owen P. White, "Machine Made," *Collier's*, 18 September 1937, 32 (second quote); Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 11 (first quote), 13.

take action formed the Association of Independent Voters. The Association articulated seven demands and aims in 1932, which included supporting candidates who demonstrated willingness to work with Latin Americans, working to secure Mexican participation on juries, increasing the number of eligible voters, and educating Tejanos on participation in a representative democracy. Yet, throughout most of the 1930s Mexicans in San Antonio either declined to vote or were legally and economically disfranchised.¹²²

The stranglehold that the People's Ticket placed on city politics in the 1930s ended abruptly at the end of the decade. Election outcomes, moreover, suggest that San Antonians abandoned the machine just after pecan shellers gained critical support from the CIO. In the 1933 city elections, however, the machine fired on all cylinders. Sitting mayor Charles K. Quin had entered the office only months before the May contest as an interim replacement for his longtime friend, C. M. Chambers, who died before his term expired. Quin, running for the People's Ticket, garnered 9,580 more votes than his three opponents combined. The election's outcome was so predictable that the city's leading newspaper, the *Express*, chose not to cover the race in preceding weeks. Two years later Quin ran unopposed, but he managed to accumulate even more votes than he had in 1933. The mayor faced some competition in 1937, although he safely outdistanced runner-up George R. Thompson by a margin of nearly four to one. The People's Ticket

¹²² Selden C. Menefee and Orin C. Casemore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 50; Association of Independent Voters, "Aims and Purposes of the Association of Independent Voters," 1932, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as BLAC); Menefee and Casemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 50 (quote).

so thoroughly dominated the election that Quin won a majority in each of the city's 197 voting precincts. The results prompted Frank Bushick, who won reelection as Tax Commissioner, to insist that "they can't talk about the machine any more because everyone in the city seems to belong to it." The People's Ticket had once again dominated city elections, but Quin, Bushick, and their cronies failed to recognize the tide of public opinion rising against them.¹²³

Midway through Quin's third full term in office, San Antonians voted in the Democratic primary for the U.S. House seat held by Maury Maverick. In that contest, the incumbent faced People's Ticket candidate Paul Kilday, brother of the city's police chief. In the weeks leading up to the July, 1938, election, Maverick endured a barrage of red-baiting from the machine. When the congressman reminded the Mexican community that he worked to free jailed Tejano leaders, Kilday quickly suggested that those leaders, including Emma Tenayuca, were communists intent on overtaking city hall. The challenger then went after Maverick's voting record in the U.S. House, claiming that the incumbent opposed expanding the navy because he wanted to make America more vulnerable to foreign attack. Kilday's cleverest tactic, however, targeted Maverick's staunchly pro-labor orientation. "No one was surprised," Kilday claimed, "when he got on the bandwagon of the CIO because it was the most radical organization in the country." At the same time, Kilday appealed to workers with his own endorsement from American Federation of Labor president William Green. The two candidates battled, Maverick as a man of the people and friend of Tejanos and Kilday as

¹²³ *San Antonio Express*, 10 May 1933, 15 May 1935, 12 May 1937 (quote).

defender of capitalism and liberty, until election eve. When the last vote was counted, Kilday began packing his bags for Washington, and Maverick suffered his first loss in five elections.¹²⁴

The former representative recovered quickly and decided to again challenge San Antonio's political machine by running for mayor in 1939. Maverick promised meaningful change on the west side, a theme he developed while in congress. For years he had called for "at least ordinary, low-cost, sanitary and healthy housing for every single citizen." He implored his fellow San Antonians to place high priority on "improving living conditions, assisting in employment, and raising the general standard of the people in our city." Maverick collected endorsements from several prominent Tejanos, including Tenayuca, and the pecan shellers undoubtedly remembered the moral support he lent them during their strike. As always, the aspiring mayor kept an office on the west side, and his commitment to the barrio eventually forced Mayor Quin to campaign in the neighborhood as well. One of Quin's west side rallies included Mexican music, and he promised the crowd that, if reelected, he would work to get a public swimming pool constructed for the community. Despite the incumbent's charges that Maverick's disparaging public remarks accounted for the west side's dismal reputation, the city's Mexicans again supported the challenger. The former congressman, who had lost his seat less than a year earlier to the machine, avenged himself in May 1939 as he was elected Mayor of San Antonio.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8, 14, 21, 22 (quote), and 26 July 1938.

¹²⁵ Maury Maverick, *Untitled Speech*, [ca. 1937], Maury Maverick, Sr., Collection, 1769-1954, 1989, CAH, (quote); Patricia E. Gower, "Unintended Consequences: The San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938," *Journal of South Texas* 17 (Fall 2004): 100; Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, "The Mexican

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Maverick's victory over Quin punctuated a massive shift in public opinion in San Antonio. In 1928, the city had helped elect Herbert Hoover, the first Republican to carry Texas since Reconstruction. Just over a decade later, San Antonians elected Maverick, an unabashed New Dealer widely considered more liberal than even FDR, as their mayor. The Great Depression led to political turmoil that opened doors for politicians, such as Roosevelt, Allred, and Maverick, who advocated more and stronger support for both labor and Tejanos. Yet, poll taxes restricted the flow of Mexicans to the ballot box. The electoral success of men who wanted to change the status quo, therefore, rested largely on the shoulders of Anglos. That such reform-minded individuals won office testifies to the desire Anglos had to see workers, particularly those exploited to the degree of the pecan shellers, acquire more leverage against their employers. By the beginning of 1938, the shellers had ample reason to want change in both their home and working lives, and they had developed the solidarity required to mount a sustained attack against pecan operators. Moreover, the new political environment signaled that public sympathy to their plight had reached an all-time high. From their contemporary vantage point, Mexican leaders may not have completely understood how well the table was set for a successful strike, but one fact remains certain. The operators' decision to cut shellers' pay by a single cent on January 31, 1938, provoked a motivated, organized, and opportunistic union into waging the longest strike in San Antonio's history.

Question in the Southwest," *Communist* 1 (March 1939): 265; Contact Committee, Association of Independent Voters, Untitled report, 11 June 1932, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, BLAC; *San Antonio Express*, 5, 7, and 9 May 1939.

CHAPTER VI

THE STRIKE

On Thursday, January 27, thousands of workers congregated in the west side's Casiano Park to hear James Sager speak. Sager, head of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) in Texas, urged pecan workers to strike if operators refused to restore six-cent (for pieces) and seven-cent (for whole kernels) wages. Shellers had endured pay cuts in the past without striking, but by the beginning of 1938 a walkout seemed to hold more promise than in earlier years. Sager's efforts paid off, as droves of workers walked out of pecan plants across the west side on January 31. Approximately two-thirds of the city's twelve thousand pecan workers partook in the strike's first day. The shellers peacefully protested their pay cut, and the only arrests involved individuals who did not work in the pecan industry.¹²⁶

Most prominent among those arrested was Emma Tenayuca. Labeled an agitator by the business leaders and local politicians who constituted San Antonio's establishment, Tenayuca offered pecan workers her considerable talents and dynamic personality. Despite being a twenty-year-old woman in a male-dominated society, she earned the respect of Mexican workers across the city with her efforts on behalf of impoverished laborers. Tenayuca sympathized with the pecan shellers, and more than three hundred workers repaid her efforts by protesting outside the police station where

¹²⁶ *La Prensa*, 1 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 1 February 1938.

she was held. San Antonio's police released her on February 1, and the pecan workers rewarded her sacrifice by electing her the strike's honorary chair person.¹²⁷

Tenayunca's role as lightning rod had just begun, however. Her political leanings were well known throughout San Antonio, and the city's establishment quickly linked Tenayuca's ideology with the strike. Knowing the public took a dim view of communism, Mayor Charles Quin and Police Chief Owen Kilday portrayed the strike as a red plot to infiltrate the west side and, eventually, the city government. By her own admission Tenayuca knew little of Marxist doctrine, but it contained labor-friendly notions that appealed to her as well as other Tejanos who perceived societal inequities in the U.S. After just one week Tenayuca recognized that her reputation could ultimately undermine the strike, so she relinquished her leadership role. Nevertheless, she continued to work on behalf of pecan shellers by attracting national media attention to their fight. Most notably, she garnered attention from *Time* magazine in a late February issue that described her as "a slim, vivacious labor organizer with black eyes and a Red philosophy."¹²⁸

The city government wasted no time in showing its support for the pecan operators, and on February 2 Police Chief Kilday denied that the strike existed. His officers disbursed several small bands of protesters whom Kilday claimed violated the law by blocking sidewalks and impeding the flow of traffic. Moreover, he contended

¹²⁷ Ibid.; Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66 (November 1997): 555.

¹²⁸ Geoffrey Rips, "Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells Her Story," *The Texas Observer*, 10 October 1983, 10; Vargas, "Tejana Radical," 556; *San Antonio Express*, 7 February 1938; "La Pasionaria de Texas," *Time*, 28 February 1938, 17.

that communists had illegally organized and instigated the workers. Mayor Quin further discouraged pecan workers from striking the following day. In surprise visits to two shelling plants, Quin told workers that “I am convinced that you will not be able to receive a fair and calm and dispassionate hearing if you permit Communistic Leaders to excite and agitate your people.” Perhaps this message would have been more effective if shellers had been allowed to stop working while the mayor spoke, but, in any event, James Sager proved more persuasive. He told more than one thousand workers assembled at the union hall the evening of February 2 that he would “send a delegation of workers to Governor James Allred so they can explain conditions in the city, the causes of the workers’ movement, police intervention.” He went on to state that the pecan workers walked out of their own accord, not as the result of the communist influences alleged by Kilday and Quin.¹²⁹

The city’s elected officials predictably denounced the strike, but charges of communism subverted support from quarters where the workers should have expected the most help. More than ninety percent of the pecan workers were Catholic, yet the Church opted to oppose the strike. Father Juan Lopez of the National Catholic Welfare Council arrived in San Antonio several weeks prior to the strike, and he acted as a spokesman for the shellers during the conflict’s opening days. Lopez believed that there were “communists in the CIO . . . and it is our job to get them out.” When the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) assumed control of the walkout just days later, Lopez took the popular position of supporting the workers but opposing the strike. Although

¹²⁹ *La Prensa*, 4 and 5 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 4 and 5 February 1938 (quote).

Lopez considered conditions among pecan shellers “the most disgraceful among Mexicans in the United States,” he promoted local leadership and a direct charter for pecan workers with the CIO, rather than membership under UCAPAWA. Lopez combated allegations that the Church failed the picketers by pointing out that Catholicism had been there for Mexicans since the time of the conquistadors, when friars gave the indigenous people not only religion and God, but also civilization. Similarly, Arthur J. Drossaerts, archbishop of San Antonio, told one crowd that “the conscientious citizens of this city deplore the terrible living conditions in which many people on the city’s West Side reside,” but that the public must support the police department’s fight “to exterminate the most dangerous of all doctrines: atheist Communism.”¹³⁰

Like the Catholic Church, many local organizations chose not to support the picketers due to perceived communist influences. The Mexican Chamber of Commerce and the League of Loyal Latin Americans issued a joint statement explaining that they were “deeply interested in seeing that every worker of Mexican descent receives a living wage,” but that they also wanted “to make absolutely certain that in throwing our moral support behind the present pecan shellers’ strike we are not furthering communism.” More surprisingly, the pecan shellers failed to gain the support of International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) locals in San Antonio. One representative of that union, Maxwell Burkett, initially denied that the CIO sanctioned the shellers’ strike. Rebecca Taylor, ILGWU manager in San Antonio, expressed that the garment workers sympathized with the pecan workers, but that they refused to join the picket lines due to

¹³⁰ *La Prensa*, 14, 19 and 28 February 1938 (third quote); *San Antonio Express*, 2, 3 and 16 February 1938 (first and second quotes).

the communist leadership provided by Tenayuca and UCAPAWA. The Mexican Commercial Grocery Workers Union of San Antonio assumed a similar stance, and the shellers found themselves virtually without institutional support in San Antonio throughout the entire strike.¹³¹

The CIO, unwilling to let Tenayuca's vulnerability to red-baiting derail the strike, hastily moved in and took control. On the strike's fifth day, UCAPAWA president Donald Henderson arrived in San Antonio, and he established official demands on behalf of the workers on February 6. The four demands he outlined before two thousand picketers congregated in Casiano Park included a wage hike to seven and eight cents a pound for shelled pecans, sheller participation in all weightings, recognition of the union as the workers' sole bargaining agent, and additional compensation to offset the expense of mandatory health cards. Henderson brought considerably more resources and experience to the strike than did Tenayuca or any other local leader. That external support lent vital confidence to the shellers and fundamentally altered the conflict's dimensions. To counter this new threat, Chief Kilday stepped up efforts to discourage picketers from participating in the walkout.¹³²

Beginning on February 7, Kilday's police force intimidated, harassed, beat, and arrested thousands of Mexicans on the west side. On the strike's eighth day, the San Antonio police attacked a group of three hundred who had gathered in front of a pecan plant in protest. Most of the crowd escaped unharmed, but several of the less fortunate were beaten and incarcerated. Kilday claimed that rumors of protestor violence justified

¹³¹ *La Prensa*, 3 and 14 February 1938 (quote); *San Antonio Express*, 3 and 16 February 1938.

¹³² *La Prensa*, 6 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 7 February 1938.

his use of force, and that he was prepared to use tear gas to keep the peace. A man of his word, Kilday tear gassed 75 strikers outside of another pecan shellery two days later. This pattern of picketing, police violence, and arrest continued almost daily for the next two weeks.¹³³

Henderson denounced the police chief's tactics and insisted that pecan workers would not cower before such oppression. He requested that Governor James Allred intervene in the conflict and protect the strikers' civil rights. At the same time, pecan workers combated Kilday on their own terms. Although Henderson led the strike, the shellers determined each morning which plants they would picket. In other instances they resorted to illegal tactics. Some strikers knifed the tires of police cars, and those who gained access to pecan inventories vandalized shipments, costing operators thousands of dollars. The city's Tejano workers gladly accepted the CIO's leadership in their struggle but also retained some autonomy in deciding how to combat operators.¹³⁴

By the strike's third week, Allred recognized that the operators, the union, and the city had each entrenched themselves to a disconcerting degree. Chief Kilday maintained that no strike existed and that only about five hundred workers had walked out. In addition, he called up 125 firefighters to stand in reserve for his fatigued police officers. Mayor Quin held that the walkout was a local issue, and that he was "not interested in discussing the strike with anyone who did not live in San Antonio or was a member of the Communist Party." Henderson stated that the union would not accept

¹³³ *La Prensa*, 8 and 9 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 10 February 1938.

¹³⁴ Vargas, "Tejana Radical," 573, Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio – The Cradle of Texas Liberty, and Its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), 6; *La Prensa*, 11 February 1938.

any arbitration scenario that included the city government as either a party or an arbiter, and that negotiations could only take place after police violence ended. He suggested the governor send Texas Rangers into San Antonio to ensure the peace. Southern Pecan's founder, Julius Seligmann, said that he was prepared to relocate his business to an area with a more docile labor force, and that the U.S. Labor Department should examine rural employers before attacking his business.¹³⁵

Allred's greatest headache came from Washington, D. C., however. The Mexican government contacted the U.S. State Department in regard to sixty-three Mexican nationals illegally held in Kilday's jail. The State Department, in turn, pressured Allred to find a solution to the problem, marking the first time a foreign government became involved in an American labor dispute. With the situation spiraling out of control, Allred elected to send Everett Loony, head of the Texas Industrial Commission, to San Antonio to investigate charges of civil liberties abuses. Although the investigation fell short of UCAPAWA's request to replace San Antonio police officers with Texas Rangers, it symbolized the governor's desire to see the shellers treated fairly and his willingness to actively pursue an end to the strike.¹³⁶

The Looney Commission convened on February 14 and 15 in San Antonio. On the first day, Looney concentrated on questioning city employees and officials. William Christoph, Kilday's second in command and officer in charge of patrolling the west side,

¹³⁵ *La Prensa*, 10 February 1938.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 12 February 1938; George Lambert, "The Jersey City of the South," Unpublished article, 4 July 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, Special Collections, Central Library, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter referred to as SC-UTA).

charged that Tenayuca still wielded considerable influence among the city's Mexican population. He testified that "she has been saying that if the Communists get control they are going to destroy the churches and murder the priests like they do in Russia." Similarly, San Antonio's Police and Fire Commissioner, Phil Wright, defended the use of tear gas against picketers, contending that "sometimes we have riots . . . and this tear gas, as I understand it, makes a combatant unable to fight." The day's most sensational testimony came from San Antonio's chief of police. Kilday began by explaining that there was "no such thing as peaceful picketing," and that the pecan shellers' strike was illegitimate because fewer than half of the workers participated. Looney then questioned Kilday about communism. When pressed to define the doctrine, Kilday responded that "a Communist is a person who believes in living in a community on the government and tearing down all religion." Later in the day, Edwin A. Elliott of the National Labor Relations Board refuted Kilday's testimony. Elliott explained that according to federal law, even a single employee had the right to go on strike without interference from municipal authorities.¹³⁷

On the second day of testimony, Looney interrogated union leaders and pecan company owners. He started by asking for Henderson's response to continued red-baiting, including charges by a representative for the League of Loyal Latin Americans who told Looney that he had "irrefutable proof" of Henderson's communist leanings. Henderson explained that "I have never been a communist, and moreover, I believe that the communist form of government can never replace our democratic government." He

¹³⁷ *La Prensa*, 15 February 1938 (third and fourth quotes); *San Antonio Express*, 15 February 1938 (first and second quotes).

further told Looney that many accusations against him stemmed from his participation in an organization in 1932 that lobbied on behalf of American businessmen for expanded trade with the Soviet Union.¹³⁸

At the end of the day, Looney examined Seligmann. The pecan magnate argued that Southern Pecan had only minimal influence over industry wages since, under the contract system, it only employed about three hundred shellers directly. Indirectly, however, the company utilized about five thousand pecan shellers during the peak season. Looney asked Seligmann if he adopted the contract system to avoid paying Social Security and other payroll taxes. Seligmann replied that if labor costs in San Antonio were any higher he would have to relocate, and suggested that a tariff on imported nuts, such as cashews, would allow pecan operators to increase revenue. Looney inquired whether that meant a tariff would also increase wages. Seligmann responded, “I don’t know, but it would help the situation,” to which Looney quipped “it would help somebody’s situation.” In the end, city leaders believed the hearing hurt their credibility, prompting Kilday to surmise that “it looks like Looney is doing all he can to assist the communistic elements.”¹³⁹

On February 16 Looney filed his preliminary report with Allred. He concluded that the San Antonio police department violated the civil rights of many strikers. Mayor Quin and others expected the ruling but planned to continue their tactics, as Looney’s commission possessed no enforcement mechanism. The report did change the attitudes of the strike’s principals, however. Seligmann and Henderson both understood that a

¹³⁸ *La Prensa*, 16 February 1938 (quote); *San Antonio Express*, 15 February 1938.

¹³⁹ *La Prensa*, 16 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 16 February 1938 (first and second quotes).

negotiated end to the walkout would benefit each party and met for several hours on February 16 and 17 to discuss arbitration.¹⁴⁰

As the two sides inched toward an agreement, Kilday and his men continued harassing picketers. The local police arrested thirty-two more pecan workers during the Looney hearings. Unlike previous strikers who were arrested for blocking sidewalks, law enforcement detained these protestors for carrying signs in public without permits. At the same time, the city's health department, suddenly concerned about the well being of west side residents, shut down three soup kitchens that fed picketers each day for being unsanitary. Henderson renewed his request to Allred for Rangers, but the governor replied that even though the strikers did "not violate the law . . . I do not have the authority to replace the police force with state 'rangers'." Allred then encouraged the union to pursue protection for the shellers in court.¹⁴¹

Henderson took Allred's advice, and on February 18 Manuel Martinez and Pedro Ruiz sought an injunction against Kilday, Commissioner Wright, and Officer Christoph in federal district court. During the first nineteen days of the strike, the San Antonio police department arrested 326 striking pecan workers. The plaintiffs asked the court to prevent local authorities from "arresting, molesting, harassing, and interfering" with peaceful picketers. Judge S. G. Tayloe presided over the case, and he demanded that the police not act against strikers during the trial. In accordance with Tayloe's request, Kilday reduced police presence on the west side.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *San Antonio Express*, 17 February 1938.

¹⁴¹ *La Prensa*, 18 and 19 February 1938 (quote); *San Antonio Express*, 18 February 1938.

¹⁴² *La Prensa*, 19 and 20 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 19 and 20 February 1938 (quote).

The injunction trial opened on February 22 with Harry Freeman, attorney for the plaintiffs, introducing photographs depicting police abuses. Freeman then called the photographer, Cassie Jane Winfree, to the stand. Winfree worked for the Women's International League for Peace, one of the few groups that supported the strikers. She testified that police officers chased picketers off the streets, used tear gas against women and children, and that Kilday told her he could "arrest a Communist any time he cared to, and would hold him as long as he wanted to, whether charges were filed or not." The next day, seventeen Mexican picketers took the stand and related their personal experiences with police misconduct. One woman said that Kilday threatened to physically assault her, while others told stories of being chased into their homes, sworn at, and beaten.¹⁴³

On February 26, Judge Tayloe heard closing arguments, then immediately handed down his six-page ruling without taking a recess. Tayloe explained to the stunned attorneys that he awoke at four o'clock that morning and wrote his opinion with the idea that he could revise it if anything in the closing arguments changed his mind. He ruled that, although the pecan workers had the legal right to strike, "a large number of pickets incensed by a spirit of resentment to grievances . . . tends to produce disorder and become a menace to the public peace." Despite believing that "the average wage of these workers is so small as only to provoke pity and compassion," Tayloe decided that public order superseded the shellers' right to demonstrate. The pecan workers found

¹⁴³ *La Prensa*, 24 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 23 and 24 February 1938 (first quote).

little solace in Tayloe's opinion, although the judge did admonish Kilday and warned that the police department was under close scrutiny.¹⁴⁴

Incidents of police violence dramatically declined after the ruling, but scores of Tejanos continued to suffer in the city's overcrowded jails. From the strike's onset, Kilday's policy of arresting picketers en masse tested the physical limitations of the San Antonio city jail. Overcrowded cells often held two or three times more picketers than their design capacities allowed. A small group of San Antonio's most prominent women visited the female lockup and were so disgusted that they wrote letters to Mayor Quin, Governor Allred, and Representative Maverick. They witnessed eighteen prostitutes forced into a cell designed for six that already held more than a dozen strikers. The visitors claimed that "our local physicians declare that at least ninety percent of these prostitutes are suffering from highly infectious venereal disease; when we realize that one toilet and one drinking cup had to be shared by women workers and prostitutes alike; the full horror of the incident becomes apparent." Conditions in the men's jail were no better. On February 25, the police moved ninety men into a section of the jail that already held one hundred and fifty, and had a design capacity of sixty. The prisoners retaliated by making noise, throwing objects, and threatening guards. Kilday ended the quasi riot by turning a fire hose on the inmates. Relief finally arrived a few days later, as the city began releasing picketers once the strike's end seemed eminent.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *La Prensa*, 27 February 1938; Harold A. Shapiro, "The Pecan Sheller of San Antonio, Texas," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 32 (March 1952): 238 (quotes).

¹⁴⁵ Pecan Workers Relief Committee and Pecan Workers Local No. 172, "America's Lowest Paid Workers: San Antonio's Pecan Shellers Present Their Case," 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA (quote); *La Prensa*, 26 February 1938; *San Antonio Express*, 26 February 1938.

The union and the operators spent the last days of February and the first week of March verbally sparring with one another in anticipation of final negotiations. Pressure mounted on both parties as Governor Allred, still feeling the State Department's anger regarding the imprisoned Mexican nationals, vowed to exercise the full power of his office, if needed, to end the strike. J. Austin Beasley, appointed by Henderson to lead the strike on February 22, announced his intentions to file a grievance with the NLRB over Southern Pecan's disregard of the Wagner Act. At the same time, he worried about maintaining control over the increasingly weary and desperate strikers. The impoverished shellers had not received a paycheck in four weeks, and only their sense of unity prevented them from caving to the industry's terms. Kilday similarly fretted over the emotional state of his overworked officers, and resorted to relieving them with San Antonio firefighters.¹⁴⁶

With all sides worn down by more than five weeks of intense conflict, the workers and operators agreed to arbitrate on March 9. The terms of arbitration were simple. The union and the operators each selected one arbiter, and those two selected the third. The workers agreed to return to work at five and six cent wages until the hearings concluded, and the city reciprocated by releasing all incarcerated picketers. Furthermore, the union agreed to drop its case to the NLRB in exchange for recognition of the Pecan Workers Local No. 172 as the shellers' sole bargaining agent. With those

¹⁴⁶ *San Antonio Express*, 3, 4, and 8 March 1938; *La Prensa*, 3, 6, and 8 March 1938.

concessions in place, the pecan workers ended their thirty-seven day walkout and awaited the arbitration board's verdict.¹⁴⁷

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The arbitrators met for several weeks before rendering their decision on April 13. They concluded that the union exaggerated poor working conditions, but believed that operators could afford to raise wages. The board ruled that wages of five-and-a-half and six-and-a-half cents per pound would take effect on May 1. These wages were to continue until November 1, when the union and operators would sign a longer agreement. Both sides claimed victory after the decision. In the fall of 1938, the union and the operators hammered out terms for the November 1 pact. The agreement included a raise to seven- and eight-cent wages, made pecan shelleries closed shops, allowed for automatic deductions of union dues from employee paychecks, and put a formal grievance process in place.¹⁴⁸

Before the new contract took effect, however, the federal government dropped a bombshell that significantly altered the landscape of American business. On October 24, 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act became law. The FLSA's most important provision mandated a minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour. San Antonio's pecan operators, which paid workers less than ten cents an hour, claimed they could not remain solvent paying the minimum wage. They first tried to persuade the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division that pecan shellers were agricultural workers, and thus

¹⁴⁷ *La Prensa*, 9, 10 and 11 March 1938.

¹⁴⁸ "Decision of the Board of Arbitration in San Antonio Pecan Strike," 13 April 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America Records, 1937-1947, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA; Shapiro, "Pecan Sheller," 239.

exempt from the FLSA. When this argument failed, Southern Pecan and the rest of San Antonio's operators decided they had no choice but to mechanize their facilities. They requested a three month exemption from the minimum wage while they installed new equipment and trained their employees, but again the Wage and Hour Division denied their appeal. One reporter believed these hearings over the training period "degenerated into an attempt to convince the principal pecan operator that San Antonio, being part of the United States, should pay an American level of wages." The CIO, having just reached milestone agreements with the operators, joined in efforts to exempt pecan workers from the minimum wage. Northern operators based in St. Louis proved the most formidable obstacle to San Antonio's operators and shellers, however, as they had long resented the cheap hand labor that drove down pecan prices across the industry. The St. Louis operators mechanized prior to the Depression, and they testified to the Wage and Hour Division that their employees made more than twenty-five cents an hour even prior to the FLSA. Moreover, they claimed, employees needed only a few hours of training on the shelling machines to become competent. Seeing no other options, San Antonio's operators shut down over the winter of 1938-39 and installed the equipment that would allow them to remain in business while paying the federally mandated minimum wage. The era of hand shelling pecans in San Antonio was over.¹⁴⁹

When the pecan operators closed to mechanize in October 1938, thousands of shellers became unemployed. Churches and civic organizations opened soup kitchens to

¹⁴⁹ Audrey Grannberg, "Maury Maverick's San Antonio," *Survey Graphic*, July 1939, 424 (quote); Selden C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassemore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Division of Research (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), x-xi, xv-xvi, 19-20.

keep families from starving, but their efforts often proved inadequate. The local, state, and federal governments helped only slightly more. The City-County Family Welfare Agency attempted to feed more than eight thousand families with a staff of six. Although most found enough food to survive, the Mexican community desperately needed cash to purchase other essential items. The state of Texas stopped paying unemployment benefits in 1936 and provided little relief to laid-off shellers. The federal government tried to provide alternative employment, but Tejanos claimed fewer than half of the 1,800 jobs offered to former pecan workers because most could not demonstrate American citizenship. Furthermore, the federal government approved only sixty percent of Mexican unemployment claims in 1938, and the average payout was twenty dollars over a three to six month period.¹⁵⁰

The pecan operators re-opened their doors in March 1939, and about three thousand shellers returned to work. Those who previously shelled around six pounds of pecans per day by hand could shell more than thirty pounds per day using the new machines. The equipment eliminated nine thousand jobs, although the standard of living improved for those who remained employed. Operators tired of constantly training new employees, so the work became less seasonal. Working conditions steadily improved, as did wages. At the same time, however, the number of pecan workers dwindled, and by 1941 Southern Pecan needed only six hundred shellers. In the mid-1940s only a few hundred pecan workers remained in San Antonio. National and regional CIO leaders focused their efforts elsewhere, and their inattention to the Pecan Workers Local No. 172

¹⁵⁰ Menefee and Cassemore, *Pecan Shellers*, 37-42.

allowed the chapter president and secretary to embezzle the entire treasury. Unable to raise enough interest to rejuvenate the union, the CIO pronounced it defunct in 1948. By that time, the pecan shellers' strike was a distant memory.¹⁵¹

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In the past twenty-five years, scholars have developed explanations for the emergence of group actions that reveal a multitude of factors responsible for events such as the pecan shellers' strike. Sociologists, in particular, have developed useful frameworks that reveal the powerful coupling of grass-root solidarity formation and a favorable political climate, as well as key roles played by external allies who lend important resources to challengers. Historians researching the pecan shellers' strike have typically characterized it as a spontaneous reaction to the industry-mandated pay cut, but evidence suggests that the work stoppage had antecedents reaching back decades into San Antonio's history. The city's pecan workers had legitimate complaints about conditions in both their workplaces and their neighborhoods. They forged unity internally, but also received substantial support from outsiders, such as Maury Maverick and the CIO. Moreover, the shellers benefited from the public's acceptance of politicians who protected the rights of labor. On the surface, the shellers' victory seems miraculous because of its spontaneity. A deeper look reveals the convergence of poverty, solidarity, and opportunity that accounted for the strike's timing and its success.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Ibid., xvi, 11, 56, 58; Shapiro, "Pecan Shellers," 242-4.

¹⁵² Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5-59; Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9-30, 81-99, 118-34.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Just weeks after taking office as Mayor of San Antonio in the summer of 1939, Maury Maverick received a seemingly routine inquiry from a member of his constituency. "The Communist Party requests the use of the East Wing of the city auditorium for Friday August 25," Emma Tenayuca wrote. One year earlier, Mayor Charles Quin had received a similar request from visiting labor leader Vincent Lombardo Toledano. Quin, by then a seasoned red-baiter, responded that "Toledano is a communist, and there will be no city property available for him." Unlike Quin, Maverick fancied himself a champion of civil liberties, particularly freedom of speech. He believed that the Communist Party had a constitutional right to use the municipal auditorium and granted its wish for the East Wing. On the night of August 25, about seventy-five members met at the appointed time on city property. Word of the gathering spread quickly, and before the group adjourned a mob of 8,000 formed outside the auditorium. The heterogeneous group of protestors was led by a Catholic priest, the Jewish commander-elect of the local American Legion post, a Klansman, and a former Republican gubernatorial candidate. After rousing the crowd with speeches and hanging Mayor Maverick in effigy, the mob stormed the auditorium. They destroyed the building's interior but failed to capture any of the communists, all of whom escaped out

a back door moments earlier. Although physical injuries were minor, the damage done to both Tenayuca and Maverick's reputations proved irreversible.¹⁵³

The fallout from the riot lasted years. Tenayuca, exasperated with a local populous that alternately sought her help and attacked her beliefs, left San Antonio within days. She spent time in Houston before moving to the San Francisco area, where she enrolled in college and earned a degree in education. Tenayuca returned to San Antonio in the late 1960s and taught elementary school until retiring in 1982. She never resumed her role as a labor organizer. Maverick, elected mayor just three months before the riot, completed his term and ran, once again, against People's Ticket candidate Charles Quin in 1941. Despite changing business-as-usual in city hall, Maverick's decision to allow the Communist Party to meet on city property haunted him during the race. His mantra of free speech fell on deaf ears, and organizations as diverse as the Catholic Church, the Elks Club, the Ku Klux Klan, and, most personally disappointing, veterans groups opposed him. Even with continued support from the west side, Maverick lost a close election to Quin. Only months later, the U.S. entered World War II, and the former politician found work with President Franklin Roosevelt's administration assisting with the war effort. After the war, Maverick returned to San Antonio and opened a private law practice. He never ran for public office again.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Richard B. Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 214 (first quote); George Lambert, "Maverick Defies the Mob," *Nation*, 16 September 1939, 287; *ibid.*, "Toledano Speaks in San Antonio," 2 July 1938, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union of America Records, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA.

¹⁵⁴ Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 225-36; Lambert, "Maverick," 287; Geoffrey Rips, "Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells Her Story," *Texas Observer*, 28 October 1983, 7.

The riot that occurred in August 1939 illustrates the thin line upon which the pecan shellers' strike balanced the previous year. San Antonians had come to believe in expanded workers' right but were wary of supporting communism. The shellers and their leadership managed to walk that line well enough to wear down the city's operators and leave a legacy that, while mixed, was greater than any of its principals. To begin, working conditions improved for pecan shellers. The state government instituted rules in late 1940 that mandated shelleries have solid floors, adequate ventilation and lighting, screened doors and windows, and hot and cold running water. Perhaps more importantly, the strike demonstrated to both Mexicans and Anglos, and both labor and capital, the power that laid within the barrio. By 1945 the west side played a pivotal role in municipal elections, and local politicians could no longer afford to ignore Mexican voters. Moreover, the shellers' strike punctuated years of labor strife on the west side, and some have suggested that such unrest prepared Tejanos for and anticipated civil rights movements in later decades.¹⁵⁵

Yet, gains in civil rights did not translate into gains for labor. In 1965, while organized labor in the U.S. at-large reached a peak, unions in San Antonio remained weak. Fewer than ten percent of the city's workers belonged to a union, the least of any major city in a right-to-work state. In later years, the events that immediately followed the strike, particularly the lost jobs and untimely demise of both Tenayuca and

¹⁵⁵ Gabriela Gonzalez, "Carolina Munguia and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," *Frontiers* 24 (2003): 216; George Sessions Perry, "The Cities of America: San Antonio," *Saturday Evening Post*, 24 November 1945, 110; "Regulations Governing Pecan Shelling Plants in Texas," *American Pecan Journal* 1 (November 1940): 8.

Maverick's public careers, overshadowed the workers' hard-earned victory. Some of the strike's participants even considered the walkout a failure years after it ended.¹⁵⁶

Regardless of the strike's aftermath, the circumstances that led to the work stoppage deserve examination. When operators chose to reduce wages for shellers in early 1938, they underestimated their employees' ability to fight back. Yet, the operators were not uninformed, nor did their past experiences lead them to believe the shellers could sustain a strike for more than five weeks. After all, previous strikes had been undermined by co-opting union leadership, and it seemed clear that the Mexican workers, living in abject poverty, could ill afford to miss a payday. Operators believed they had little to fear from shellers, but processes outside their field of view and beyond their control conspired to form a nearly ideal situation for the pecan workers to strike.

The shellers' poverty resulted from rampant discrimination in and around San Antonio during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Political turmoil in Mexico provided Texas's farmers with an inexpensive, seemingly inexhaustible labor force. Those workers took little interest in domestic affairs, as most expected to return to their home country someday, and lacked the tradition of representative government fundamental in forming American notions of civic duty. Moreover, poll taxes, white primaries, and an inability to demonstrate American citizenship disfranchised most Tejanos. Unable to protect their interests with the ballot, Mexicans in San Antonio fell

¹⁵⁶ Richard Croxdale, "The 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike," in *Women in the Texas Workforce: Yesterday and Today*, ed. Richard Croxdale and Melissa Hield (Austin: People's History in Texas, 1979), 24; Robert Garland Landolt, "The Mexican American Workers of San Antonio, Texas" (Ph.D. diss. at the University of Texas at Austin, 1965), 111; Ruben Munguia, "The Nuecero Spoke," 1982, Texas AFL-CIO Miscellany Collection, 1888-1985, Texas Labor Archives, SC-UTA.

victim to a dual labor market that devalued their work and trapped them in low-paying occupations. Low wages forced Mexicans to live in poorly constructed shacks in areas of town that lacked water, sewage, electricity, and paved streets. Airborne diseases such as tuberculosis thrived in homes and workplaces that offered poor ventilation and decimated the city's Tejano population. Substandard educations in segregated schools further ensnared west side residents. By all measures, Mexicans in San Antonio struggled just to survive.

The poverty endured by shellers gave them reason to resent and distrust the city's establishment, but it was far from crippling. West side residents used existing institutions, including the Catholic Church and *mutualistas*, to develop leadership and organizational skills, then used those tools to create advocacy groups. Those groups complimented cultural and social activities that constituted the foundation of solidarity formation in the community. By the mid-1930s, Tejanas on the west side carried that unity with them into the city's garment factories, cigar-rolling plants, and pecan shelleries. Solidarity allowed shellers to overcome poverty during the strike, as they drew support from other Mexican workers when nearly everyone else had abandoned them.

Nevertheless, that solidarity would have eventually run dry if not for help from external allies. Tenayuca played a key role in organizing and energizing the pecan shellers, but the liabilities created by her communist reputation threatened to suffocate the strike in its early stages. Demonstrating uncommon selflessness, she stepped aside and allowed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) representatives to assume

ideological stances that seemed moderate relative to her more “radical” agenda. The CIO provided shellers with experienced leaders, increased publicity, and tangible resources that allowed them to prolong the walkout. Once the strike ended, moreover, battle-tested CIO negotiators probably secured better settlement terms for the shellers than they would have secured for themselves. The shellers may have achieved victory even without the CIO, but the union’s involvement likely shortened the conflict and resulted in a more attractive outcome.

While poverty-induced frustrations, webs of solidarity, and external allies help explain the strike’s conclusion, the political climate that emerged in San Antonio by 1938 accounted for the strike’s timing than any other factor. The Great Depression forced Americans to reassess the government’s responsibility in alleviating wide-scale financial hardship caused by economic catastrophe. In 1932, San Antonians joined the majority of Americans in electing Franklin Roosevelt, a move that signaled a significant change in the public’s expectations of government. In Texas, as in the rest of the South, that shift in attitude was more reflective of Anglo thought than of Mexican thought, simply because Anglos constituted an overwhelming majority of the electorate. For the remainder of the decade, San Antonians consistently selected public officials at the federal and state levels who supported labor rights and, to a smaller degree, rights for Tejanos. The city’s political machine subverted democracy by creating non-competitive elections, but Maury Maverick managed to topple the People’s Ticket, at least temporarily. By all indications, the public will as reflected in election results suggested that San Antonians would be tolerant of, if not sympathetic toward, a shellers’ strike.

Without poverty, solidarity, and opportunity, the pecan shellers would not likely have struck against the city's operators in January of 1938, and if they had the outcome might have been quite different. Indeed, a similar strike waged today would almost undoubtedly fail. Although poverty remains a problem in the U.S., particularly for minority groups and single mothers, the economy's generally good health for the past three decades has stigmatized those who have failed to prosper. If an economic calamity on the scale of the Great Depression occurred now, Americans would likely reevaluate the causes of poverty and become more aware of the manifold reasons why individuals struggle financially. Until then, poverty will continue to carry connotations of laziness, low intelligence, and irresponsibility. Solidarity on the scale pecan workers developed is also currently in short supply. Scholar Robert Putnam's recent work on the American trend of foregoing membership in traditional civic, interest, and hobbyist groups in favor of individualized activities highlights one major obstacle to solidarity formation.¹⁵⁷ Specifically, Americans now participate in fewer social activities that strengthen ties between neighbors who do not work together. Because most people now live in communities of strangers, they cannot rely on each other for support during financially trying times, such as the midst of a strike.

Similarly, the political environment, particularly attitudes toward labor, is much different now than during the 1930s. The percentage of Americans working non-governmental jobs who belong to a union hovers in the single digits with no signs of increasing, and many fail to see the necessity of paying union dues since the federal

¹⁵⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

government has passed laws designed to protect workers physically and fiscally. Furthermore, union membership is often considered a political statement, as one of the country's two major parties now insists that unions are antiquated while the other takes labor's vote, and campaign contributions, for granted. Favorable political conditions for labor militancy may someday return to the U.S., particularly in the wake of an economic downturn on the scale of the Great Depression. If they do, workers spurred by legitimate grievances who have firmly-anchored webs of solidarity formed inside and outside of the workplace will have the best opportunities to challenge their employers.

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