La Prensa and the Mexican Workers of Bethlehem Steel

by Melissa M. Mandell

San Antonio, TX, April 4, 1923: “The Time for Mexican Laborers Has Arrived”
San Antonio, TX, April 12, 1923: “Mexicans Awaken Jealousy of Pennsylvania Workers”

These two headlines were published a little over a week apart in the Spanish-language daily La Prensa, published out of San Antonio, Texas. An independent daily founded in 1913 and the paper of record for the Southwest’s Mexican community, La Prensa is part of the extensive collection of ethnic and non-English language periodicals in the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies collection at HSP. The Balch collection documents the immigrant and ethnic experience in North America with a focus on Pennsylvania, and by the 1920s, La Prensa’s readership had extended to the Lehigh Valley’s new Mexican community. Taken together, the two headlines appear to tell a story of ethnic and labor conflict sparked by the 1923 emigration of Mexicans recruited to work at Bethlehem Steel. The text of the articles recounts both the facts and the fictions surrounding the Mexican “colony” of Bethlehem: in the spring of 1923, six transports of Mexicans totaling almost 1,000 individuals did travel to Bethlehem to work in the steel plant; but the labor unrest implied by the second headline never happened. In 1923—as in 2006—the reality of the immigrant experience is often lost amidst the emotional and often polarizing media hype.

Federal immigration restrictions enacted in 1921 virtually stopped the flow of Eastern European immigrants who had traditionally filled the hottest, dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs at the Steel. Bethlehem Steel Corporation president Eugene Grace shrewdly observed that the immigration restrictions did not apply to Mexicans, who could be found in abundance in Texas and the Southwest, and who were willing to leave the instability of postrevolution Mexico in search of steady work. When a 1923 Department of Labor report detailed the labor shortages plaguing industries across the nation, including Big Steel, a familiar debate ensued between big business and Congress. Industry leaders lobbied to repeal immigration restrictions, citing the shortage and productivity slowdown. Congress accused corporations of lamenting the loss of cheap, easy exploitable labor. Grace nonetheless managed to secure an exemption from the 1885 ban on contract labor to negotiate a contract with the Mexican consulate. The time for Mexican labor at Bethlehem Steel had indeed arrived.

The first La Prensa article reports that on April 4, 1923, 200 Mexicans departed San Antonio for Pennsylvania as “the vanguard of a great contingent” headed for the Steel. The article details the Mexican Consulate’s contract with Bethlehem Steel Corporation, which guaranteed minimum wages, protections against exploitation, and provided for the treatment of work-related injuries and schooling for laborers’ children. Some of the Mexican men brought their families, but most traveled alone, responding to an ad placed in La Prensa by Bethlehem Steel: “we will leave in special trains on Friday. . . . come ready to leave if you are a good worker.”

La Prensa linked the Mexican communities in Texas and Pennsylvania. Mexican readers of the April 12 article reporting threats to the newly arrived workers would have been disturbed but not surprised. Since the dawn of industrial America, newcomers and immigrants have been threatened, intimidated, and accused of driving down wages and breaking picket lines. La Prensa relayed a Universal News Service dispatch reporting widespread resentment at the “veritable
invasion” of Mexican laborers imported to break an ongoing strike. The wire dispatch went on to report that several Mexicans had been hospitalized.

But *La Prensa* revealed that the “authenticity [of the reports was] not certain,” and the dispatch “appear[ed] to be propaganda aimed at diverting more workers” from traveling northeast for work. Upon investigation, *La Prensa* confirmed that Universal News’s claims were in fact fabricated. The Mexican Consul affirmed his satisfaction with the transport and settlement of the Mexican workers; Bethlehem Steel representatives reported that there was no strike to break and that the “hospitalized” Mexicans were being treated for common colds.

Contemporaneous reports in Bethlehem’s local paper, the *Globe*, affirm the relatively uneventful arrival of the Mexicans. Both *La Prensa* and Bethlehem Steel executives theorized (and scholars later confirmed) that the alarmist reports were instigated and planted in the press by agribusiness interests in the Southwest. The San Antonio–based paper debunked the manufactured news, thereby assuring Mexicans in the South that their brethren in Bethlehem were safe and that industrial work was still a viable option.

Despite a pervasive belief that Mexican workers were inherently transient and migratory, by 1929 Bethlehem’s Mexicans established a permanent, if small, community that included Mexican-owned businesses and homes. And although racism did not define the Mexican experience in Bethlehem, stereotypes persisted that affected workers at the Steel. Mexicans were assigned the plant’s hottest and dirtiest work in the coal ovens, the traditional entry-level position for unskilled workers. But by citing the supposed Mexican tolerance for extreme heat, management justified keeping Mexicans in the ovens well after European employees would have been promoted. Bethlehem Steel executives subscribed to an elaborate hierarchy of ethnically assigned characteristics: the Irish were tough, but not intelligent; Hungarians were dependable; Mexicans were not as reliable as Hungarians, but were smarter than the Irish, and more dependable than African Americans. Mexicans reliably performed the jobs that the local men “wouldn’t do.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, today Lehigh County is 14 percent Hispanic, including 24 percent of Bethlehem and 34 percent of nearby Allentown. In 1923, the fear and tensions surrounding Mexican immigrants to Bethlehem were manufactured; in 2006, postindustrial Pennsylvania is grappling with very real issues regarding Latino immigration. Decades after the decline of coal- and steel-fed prosperity, second- and third-generation Americans—descendants of European immigrants—are struggling to reconcile deindustrialization and a changing economy with the growing populations of Latino immigrants in their towns.

Translations of these articles can be found on our Web site with our lesson plan, at www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=74 under work.