

"Mexican Labor in the United States: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," from *Mexican Labor in the United States Vol. II* by Paul S. Taylor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931, 2-6.

they were drawn, was selected for special study. This monograph is the sixth of the published researches on Mexican labor in the United States executed on a grant from the Social Science Research Council. It is based upon data gathered during three visits to Bethlehem, the first early in 1928, the last early in 1930. Dr. Donald Anthony kindly permitted the use of some of his notes on interviews.

The movement of Mexican laborers out of the common reservoir of the Southwest had repercussions in Texas, Colorado, and Washington. When the shipments of Mexicans to Bethlehem were in progress they caused concern to both the sugar beet growers of Colorado¹ and the Texas farmers, because they reduced the available supply of agricultural labor and affected wages. For these reasons, and because of the characteristic heavy seasonal alternations of employment and unemployment, the transportation of Mexicans to Bethlehem and other parts of the North was at the same time hailed as a boon to unemployed Mexicans, and regarded as a cause of anxiety by Texas farmers. Said a San Antonio newspaper upon the occasion of the departure of the first train-load of Mexicans for Bethlehem:

That many Mexicans are in dire need of work is realized. . . . Some concern is being shown by local farmers and ranchmen over the large movement of laborers [to northern industry and the sugar beet fields].²

Later shipments of Mexican laborers to northern industries and beet fields, have remained a source of continual vexation to Texas farmers, not only because of competition for labor but also because by spreading Mexicans into new territory, they have augmented political agitation for the restriction of Mexican immigration. Finally, in 1929, Texas enacted its emigrant labor agency law to hamper as much as possible the shipment of laborers out of the state.³ The preceding quotation reveals a consciousness of this division of interest as early as 1923.

→ Prior to 1923 there were very few Mexicans in Bethlehem. For probably twenty years at least one Mexican had been numbered among the employes of the steel company, not always the same one, perhaps two or three of them, perhaps not continuously but at intervals. The recollections of an old pensioner testify to this; they are probably correct, for the wanderings from place to place through the North of some Mexican, more adventurous than his fellows and many years in

¹ Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican labor in the United States*, I, 141. Cited hereafter only by volume and page.

² *San Antonio Light*, undated clipping, probably April 4, 1923.

³ See I, 33; "More bars against Mexicans?" *Survey Graphic*, April, 1930, p. 26.

advance of them, was a number of times reported in other localities, either by the adventurer himself or by others. In May 1919 a nationality census of steel company employees revealed only six Mexicans. The great impetus which established the colony came four years later.

In the spring of 1923 industry was reviving from depression. Steel company furnaces which had been out of blast were again put in operation during March and early April. The company, searching for sources of labor to meet its expanding demand, turned its attention to the Southwest. President Grace of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation "pointed out that as there was no restriction on immigration from Mexico, that country was a potential source of supply of unskilled labor."⁴ His was not the first corporation in the East to observe this, however, for the Pennsylvania and Baltimore & Ohio railroads, as well as middle western railroads, steel companies, and tanneries had previously recruited Mexicans in the Southwest. In Bethlehem there was division of opinion concerning the advisability of securing Mexicans: some of the ordnance men of the company who had been in Mexico reported adversely on them as laborers, but one superintendent who "had heard that they were good for common labor" and had employed a few who "did good work" said he would take as many as he had places for. Since a fresh supply of labor was desired, the experiment of securing Mexicans was undertaken.

In five shipments arriving between April 6 and May 30, 1923, there were transported from Texas to Bethlehem 912 Mexican men, 29 women, and 7 children. Mexican laborers were sent also to the Lackawanna and other plants of the company. Recruiting was carried on through employment agencies in Texas, and in cooperation with the Mexican consulate-general in San Antonio. One of the Spanish employees of the company was taken to Texas to assist in securing and handling the Mexicans. Some families and a priest were among those who came north.

A contract covering Mexican nationals shipped out of San Antonio was signed by the Mexican Consul-General and a representative of the steel company. This procedure was new, but the consul-general desired to protect his countrymen departing to unfamiliar and distant industries. The fact that the departing Mexicans were largely illegally in the United States and therefore subject to deportation, was a lever used to aid in securing the signature of the company; local immigration officials permitted the men to leave, apparently satisfied that with

⁴ *Bethlehem Globe*, April 27, 1923, p. 30.

so many Mexicans already illegally in the country and with facilities for deportation and patrol of the border inadequate, it was best to permit the Mexicans to proceed northward under an agreement which protected them and assured their return to San Antonio at company expense if they became public charges.

According to the agreement, the cost of transportation was to be deducted from earnings in semi-monthly installments of \$3.50 each, but those who remained in the employ of the company one year were to receive back all deductions. The transportation of families was paid by the company without reimbursement. Quarters and board were provided in company houses for \$1.10 a day. Wages were to be a minimum of 30 cents per hour, for such hours as were permitted by Pennsylvania statute, and were to be the same as those of men of other nationality doing the same work. Mexicans were not to be discharged without just cause, and any who might become public charges for whatever cause were to be returned at company expense to San Antonio.⁵ Under the latter provision the company did return some injured Mexicans, not only to San Antonio, but to their homes in Michoacan.

In Bethlehem a commissary company ran the boarding house, using Mexican cooks. Some of the families did their own cooking. A Mexican with a small store provided groceries and other commodities desired by Mexicans, and at least for a time was protected against losses in collections by company deductions.

The attitude of those in charge of recruiting was expressed by two executives:

We took more pains with the Mexicans than with most labor. We wanted a good name in the labor market of the south should we ever go again.

We encouraged some families to come, but not all family men. We thought if there were families the Mexicans would be happier. One or two priests also came. We wanted the Mexicans to feel that they had a good community. We wanted them to be happy and feel that we were interested in them as human beings as a matter of good business and good morals.

The news item announcing the arrival in sleeping cars, of one of these shipments is of interest in this connection:

A train of Pullman cars carrying 400 Mexican laborers arrived in Bethlehem this morning at 6:50 o'clock for employment at the Bethlehem Steel Company plant. A number of them brought their wives. The train started at San Antonio, Texas. The train was met at The Heights by a number of company

⁵ *Manufacturers Record*, May 10, 1923, p. 73; also *San Antonio Light*, (probably) April 4, 1923; *La Prensa*, April 6, 1923.

officials and a detail of police under Lieut. Lucas. They were unloaded near the old Iron Valley Hotel and from there were conveyed to Shimersville, where a colony is being established for them.⁶

The arrival of the Mexicans was undoubtedly a shock to the population of Bethlehem. Their garments and their race marked them; they were picturesque—but possibly a menace as well. A press dispatch reveals the reaction:

This tranquil Moravian city has been surprised over night by a veritable invasion of Mexican and Indian laborers, who have been brought to this town in three long trains, exciting the curiosity of the local population with their characteristic clothing and their broad palm sombreros. This invasion of Mexican laborers has given rise to many comments, and the laboring element here is asking itself thoughtfully what will be the significance of this immigration to the industrial future of the city, the center of whose life is the gigantic metallurgical plant of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation.⁷

Alarming, exaggerated, and even inconsistent rumors were carried (although labelled as rumors and unverified reports) in the same dispatch—the Mexicans were brought in to take the places of Americans who refused to work at 30 cents an hour; the Mexicans were to receive \$5 a day while learning the rudiments of the steel industry, while the American laborers, their teachers, were to receive but 30 cents an hour; they were regarded as “strikebreakers” taking the places of Americans who were said to have left the plant demanding an increase in wages some weeks earlier; union labor leaders did not deny that there was “danger of grave labor disturbances” and that “the importation of Mexican laborers might precipitate events here.” The fact that ten Mexicans who had contracted colds or la grippe en route were given hospital care was the foundation for a rumor that 17 Mexicans were in the hospital, “wounded as a result of disputes arising among themselves which had been adjusted by resort to the supreme argument of the knife.”⁸

Rumors, exaggerated as were these, have been frequent accompaniments of the Mexican migration to the United States. A representative of the company attributed these reports to propaganda to dis-

⁶ *Bethlehem Globe*, April 25, 1923. Shimersville lies in the eastern portion of South Bethlehem, i.e., that part of Bethlehem south of the Lehigh River. Mexicans no longer reside there. A fairly large number of Mexicans were employed in 1929 at the coke works of Bethlehem Steel Corporation in the southeastern portion of South Bethlehem, in the direction of Hellertown. In 1929 the principal groups of Mexicans were living in South Bethlehem in the vicinity of the coke works and along the southern front of the steel plant.

⁷ Universal Service dispatch, quoted in Spanish in *La Prensa*, San Antonio; undated clipping, probably between April 6 and 11, 1923.

⁸ *Ibid.*

courage Mexicans from coming to Bethlehem and, correctly, denied the existence of any strike. The Mexican consul at Philadelphia investigated and found conditions satisfactory to his countrymen.

In 1929 a minor executive of the company, commenting on the attitude of other employees toward the importation of Mexican labor, said, "The other employees knew there was a shortage of labor, so they accepted the Mexicans." That they were not welcome, however, is clearly indicated by the dispatch previously cited, even when stripped of gross exaggeration. Even in 1929 a prominent American citizen of Bethlehem remarked, "Bringing in the Mexicans was just an idea to cut wages, and it did it, too." However, neither is this statement literally true. The claim of labor shortage is corroborated by a report of the Pennsylvania State employment office under date of March 15, that "in the iron and steel industry it is impossible to supply the needs for unskilled workers."⁹ Furthermore, President Grace stated that the Mexicans were "receiving the same wages as the Americans."¹⁰ Indeed, this had been specified in the contract of employment signed in San Antonio. To pay the same wages to all who hold a particular job has for some time been standard practice among large employers, and there appears to be no reason to doubt the statement quoted. How the wages of the Mexicans compared with those paid others doing similar work in the vicinity cannot readily be determined in retrospect. On the one hand, the contract of employment made in Texas called for a minimum of but 30 cents per hour at a time when the Lehigh Valley Railroad, which passes through Bethlehem, was raising its common labor rate from 37 to 40 cents per hour.¹¹ On the other hand, many common laborers employed by the steel company received a bonus on production in addition to the basic time rate, and about the time when the first shipment of Mexicans to Bethlehem was made, the company announced that it had "advanced wages 11 per cent to conform with the advances announced on Monday by other leading steel companies."¹² Except, therefore, as the addition of several hundred Mexicans increased the available labor supply, and so affected wage levels, the statement that it "was just an idea to cut wages" is not accurate. As an indication of opposition to the introduction of Mexican laborers, however, it is valid evidence.

⁹ *Globe*, March 21, 1923, p. 5. The United States Employment Service issued similar reports on the situation in Bethlehem between January and August, 1923. See *Industrial Employment Information Bulletin*.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, April 27, 1923, p. 25.

¹¹ *Globe*, April 28, 1923, p. 3.

¹² *New York Times*, April 11, 1923, p. 26.