

Mario Jimenez Sifuentez. *Of Forests and Fields: Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest*. Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States Series. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 264 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-7689-3.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Mario Jimenez Sifuentez's *Of Forests and Fields* provides a detailed and fascinating account of Mexican labor in the Pacific Northwest between the 1940s and the mid-1990s. In crafting his narrative, Sifuentez relies primarily upon oral histories, which he supplements with newspapers, government reports, and union records. In examining the labor of ethnic Mexican workers in the Pacific Northwest, Sifuentez provides important context to the larger history of Chicana/o history by showing that "Mexicanization" of rural communities occurred much *earlier* in places like Oregon. By exploring the bracero program, Tejano culture, and farmworker unionization efforts in the Northwest, he convincingly argues "that place matters" (p. 3). Interestingly, Sifuentez demonstrates that ethnic Mexican farmworkers found unique allies in the Northwest, ranging from anti-capitalist reforestation workers to Nisei onion growers who provided year-round work. By engaging with several fields of scholarship, Sifuentez has written a richly textured history of ethnic Mexican laborers in the Pacific Northwest.

The opening chapter details the bracero program, which brought over forty thousand workers to the Pacific Northwest between 1942 and 1947. Sifuentez shows that braceros in the Northwest went on strike more often and received better

wages than their counterparts elsewhere in the United States, in large part due to their geographic isolation and distance from Mexico. Additionally, braceros in the Northwest engaged in a range of occupations, including agricultural labor, railroad work, and a variety of tasks for the National Forest Service. One of the most interesting sections of the book is drawn from oral histories that Sifuentez uses to explore bracero social life, which gives readers a vivid depiction of workers's life outside the fields. The bracero program ended in the northwest in 1947, but the program led to large-scale immigration of Mexican and Mexican American immigrants to the region following World War II.

After exploring the bracero program, Sifuentez turns his attention to the Texas-Mexican diaspora in Oregon. Like the braceros before them, Tejanos created a vibrant social culture in the Northwest by holding dances, founding businesses, and fighting for their own public spaces. Fascinatingly, Japanese American farmers became one of Tejanos' strongest allies, providing year-round work in Oregon's onion fields. Nisei growers also provided housing and recreation for Tejanos in the region.

The remainder *Of Forests and Fields* details the establishment and growth of the labor move-

ment among ethnic Mexican workers in the Northwest. The roots of labor resistance in the Northwest began with the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP). In particular, the WVIP worked with ethnic Mexican workers in their dealings with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). As the INS stepped up deportations, the WVIP provided legal assistance, successfully advocating for clients under the Fifth Amendment right to “due process” in all criminal and civil cases at the federal level.

In their work advocating for workers facing deportation, WVIP became involved in labor organizing. Activists in WVIP first became involved in labor organizing by working with ethnic Mexicans who labored for the National Forest Service’s reforestation programs during the late 1970s and 1980s. White environmental activists initiated reforestation efforts in the region, and for many years, received the best contracts from both federal and private contractors. Over time, however, competition came from contractors who employed undocumented workers, who faced low wages (or none) and horrendous working conditions. While white environmentalists working in reforestation programs initially supported and advocated for ethnic Mexican’s rights, they came to resent use of immigrant labor, severing the possibility of an interracial labor movement in Oregon’s reforestation industry.

The WVIP’s work with immigration reform and reforestation workers laid the groundwork for the establishment of the *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos Noroeste* (PCUN)—the most successful union in the region’s history. By using the Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, PCUN developed a highly efficient program for immigrants to apply for—and in many cases obtain—legalization in thousands of cases. As a result, PCUN gained immediate traction with immigrants, and union membership grew rapidly. While PCUN never won union recognition early

on, the union won ethnic Mexican farmworkers better wages, among other concessions from growers. Like the United Farm Workers, PCUN worked with unions and progressive organizations—including the LGBTQ community—to create strong opposition to growers who mistreated farmworkers. To this day, PCUN has continued to maintain a progressive labor movement in the Pacific Northwest, although immigrant laborers still face low wages and poor living conditions.

Of Forests and Fields provides a new and detailed history of ethnic Mexicans’s lives and labor patterns in the Pacific Northwest following World War II. Sifuentes has paved the way for scholars to more readily engage with the ways in which Mexican and Mexican American labor fits into a larger environmental history of the United States.

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