

**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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Mario Jimenez Sifuentez's *Of Forest and Fields* analyzes Mexican labor's central role in the expansion of the timber and commercial agriculture industries within the Pacific Northwest from the mid-1940s to the early twenty-first century. The migrant workers' arrival followed massive federal water development projects along the Columbia River that added nearly three million acres of cultivated land in eastern Oregon, Washington, and western Idaho (p. 12). The book's chronological organization reflects the evolution of the region's dependence on three distinct types of Mexican-origin labor: temporary workers from the Bracero Program, Tejanos, and undocumented workers. Each cluster experienced unique workforce challenges and opportunities that influenced their quality of life. The strategies used to combat labor repression evolved from braceros incorporating work slowdowns and skipping out of contracts to farmworker unionization, which included undocumented and indigenous immigrants.

The arrival of forty thousand braceros from 1942 to 1947 marked the beginning of this region's dependence on Mexican labor. Braceros satisfied labor shortages in such areas as hop cultivation and fruit orchard harvesting. Despite traditional xenophobic opposition to their presence and growers' beliefs that their labor was only tempor-

ary, migrant workers "permanently changed the face of the Pacific Northwest" (p. 11). By the end of the war, Mexican labor had become the backbone of this region's expanding commercial agriculture, which included picking cherries and sugar beets. Nonetheless, growers frequently skirted their contractual responsibilities, going so far as to house workers in railroad cars without heating during the winter.

Braceros exploited the unique conditions in the Pacific Northwest, which were "often ripe for challenging the status quo and ... those challenges sometimes won the braceros concessions" (p. 11). Higher-paying defense industries employed mostly native-born workers, and the region's distance from the border made recruiting braceros time consuming and expensive. Consequently, employers were forced to concede to such demands as improved housing conditions and higher wages in order to ensure a sufficient number of farmworkers during harvesting seasons, which typically lasted 130 to 180 days. Within this context, braceros squashed the stereotype that Mexicans were powerless victims of oppression.

After World War II, the prohibitive cost of employing braceros and an inadequate number of returning veterans worsened the region's labor shortage. In response, growers recruited Mexican

labor from Texas (Tejanos), who subsequently became the region's primary source of labor through the 1970s. Tejanos challenged the myths that Mexican workers were primarily migrants by creating permanent spaces throughout the region. Their American citizenship and family migration patterns allowed them to claim formal and stable space in previously predominant Anglo communities. Rather than employing work stoppages or strikes, as would be the case later in the American Southwest, Tejanos established local businesses and fought for access to public facilities in order to hold dances, family celebrations, and leisure activities. Here Sifuentes convincingly demonstrates that the Mexican migrant stream in the Pacific Northwest began the "Mexicanization" process in the 1950s, which is much earlier than previous scholarship claimed.

Nisei (Americans born to Japanese immigrants) growers developed a mutually beneficial relationship with their Tejano workers, which led to year-round employment, housing, and access to public space for recreational activities. Nisei employers also offered higher wages, an essential factor in helping them draw workers away from large corporate farms. By establishing a monopoly on onion production, the Nisei community secured the means to purchase their own packing shed industry, which in turn provided year-round employment for Tejanos. Japanese growers, unlike Anglo business owners, rented spaces to Tejano families for dances, weddings, and quinceñeras. The growers also made available their baseball field, which led to traveling Tejano baseball teams playing against other camps, as well as Japanese and African American teams.

Over the course of the 1970s, well-meaning environmentalists, many of whom were college-educated leftists, developed financially successful cooperatives that planted millions of trees across the West. By the start of the 1980s, government contracts, which were worth up to 200,000 dollars per year were secured by unscrupulous labor re-

cruiters whose bids undercut the cooperatives by up to 150,000 dollars. To secure these contracts, labor recruiters hired undocumented workers who were severely underpaid or not paid at all. In addition, recruiters failed to pay the required "State Industrial Insurance premiums, which cost as much as \$29 for every \$100 in payroll" (p. 85). In retaliation, liberal environmentalists became outspoken supporters of expanded immigration enforcement throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Historically prevalent xenophobic fears blamed the individual Mexican laborer as the source of the problem, rather than identifying a systematic exploitation of laborers that benefited employers and contractors. The Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP) emerged as a grassroots movement in support of the Mexican community that would eventually evolve into the largest farmworkers union in the Pacific Northwest. By the mid-1980s, WVIP's members had become experienced immigrants' rights agents, but they felt that organizing farmworkers would be more proactive and would help develop more effective services for immigrant communities at large. Although its leadership was driven by experienced organizers, Cipriano Ferrel and Ramon Ramirez, the diverse membership included farmworkers, students, activists, and clergy. The first group that it unionized were undocumented reforestation workers who were "the most vulnerable group of workers in Oregon agriculture" (p. 83). Their level of systematic exploitation was more intensive than other agricultural sectors because of the work's isolated nature and the massive abuse on the part of labor recruiters. The belief was that if this group could be organized successfully, unionizing other agricultural workers would be much more likely.

The *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos Noreste* (PCUN) trade union emerged on the eve of the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which included an amnesty provision. The immigrants whose status was regularized

through this program became PCUN's initial membership base. The union also attracted a significant number of non-farmworkers, including students, activists, clergy, and laity, who were instrumental in its unionization efforts "in an antiunion decade and an antiunion industry" (p. 116). PCUN's most durable accomplishment can be seen in the confidence and experience of its members who have gone on to lead or form other unions and grassroots organizations. According to Manuel Rivera, a member of PCUN, "what we did ... made possible victories at many other farms because it showed workers that when we united and have support, we can defy grower power" (p. 134). A great debt is owed to the vision of Ferrel whose background included membership in the Brown Berets, observance of Sandanista electoral victories in Nicaragua, and membership in the United Farm Workers (UFW). His unexpected death from a heart attack at the age of forty-six was a great loss to the union and its cause.

This book's greatest strength is that it covers many different topics in a comparatively brief space. Consequently, it would serve as an excellent supplemental text for courses focused on the American West, labor, immigration, Chicana/o studies, and the modern US survey.

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