

SLAVES OF THE WEST: Exploitation, Struggle and Resistance Among Early 20th Century California Farmworkers

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Historical work on California farmworkers has often focused on the rise of the United Farmworkers Union and the battles their members fought, but this timeline overlooks previous generations of important organizers and conflicts across the state's agricultural lands. This paper, focused both on repression and resistance, engages with a variety of secondary sources as well as newspaper archives and contemporary farm records. It argues that at the turn of the 20th century, a diverse group of farmworkers endured economic, social, and political repression that, together, made for a situation ripe for forced labor. In the face of these circumstances, farmworkers united, sometimes across racial and ethnic lines, to organize against exploitation.

Introduction

Every March 31st, Californians celebrate Cesar Chavez, the labor giant who exposed exploitative farm working conditions to the wider public. The influence of Chavez and his collaborator, Dolores Huerta, on California labor history is immense; their battles and victories, including famous boycotts and strikes, merit celebration. However, many incorrectly believe that the United Farm Workers Movement was the first mobilization the California farmworker. The fight for a more humane farming economy has long shaped California's history. In another world, California might observe a J.M. Lizarras Day, in honor of another California labor leader of a different, forgotten generation that also grabbed the attention of millions of Californians through their activism.

Another misconception places larger-than-life figures and organizations at the forefront of California's farm labor activist history rather than individual farmworkers. Popular representations of 1930s California are often guilty of this, a landscape of recollection depicted by John Steinbeck and Dorothea Lange, who were among California's wealthiest residents speaking about the exploitation in the fields.¹

Perhaps foremost among these intellectuals was Upton Sinclair who, even today, finds himself hailed as a trailblazer of the 1930s California labor movement. At the turn of the 20th century, Sinclair personified muckraker journalism, publishing *The Jungle* (1904), *King Coal* (1917), and *Oil!* (1927), exposés of the meatpacking, coal mining, and oil industries respectively. After he established himself as a prominent leftist thinker, he ran for political office several times in California as a member of the Socialist Party. In 1933, Sinclair pushed his political presence into the mainstream and ran for Governor of California as a Democrat.² The announcement sent shockwaves through the state's political elite, who had discounted Sinclair's political ambitions as the pursuits of a hopeless radical. The most radical elements of

¹ Anne Loftis. *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement*. (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2014).

² "Sinclair to seek California Office," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 1933.

his movement concerned human rights abuses on California farms: Sinclair's proposition was that the State of California buy up agricultural lands and train unemployed Californians to work in them.³ Sinclair won the California Democratic Party's nomination for Governor, shocking observers around the country. However, a well-executed opposition research campaign and the lack of enthusiastic support from the Party (and perhaps his overconfidence) doomed Sinclair in the general election.

Sinclair's gubernatorial run influenced millions of Californians, but a focus on his campaign would obscure decades of organizing that had been done by farmworkers themselves in the state. Upton Sinclair's rise as an intellectual in mainstream California politics reflected what would become a common theme in California farmworker activism: wealthy intellectual backers masking the constant effort by the laborers themselves.

In 1935, Carey McWilliams published the legendary California farm labor exposé *Factories in the Field*. His book shocked many across the country and shifted conceptions of the labor movement beyond industrial work. He opens his book by saying it sheds light on "a hidden California."⁴ But the story was never hidden for California's farmworkers. They had been organizing and working to expose their enslavement for decades when McWilliams's book was published.

The following piece takes the reader back to a different, forgotten time in California's labor history—without famous supporters or enough media coverage to build a movement. This is the story of slavery in the California farmlands at the turn of the 20th century and the bravery of the farm laborers that experienced it and worked to end it. It is a story of massive potential and heartbreaking failure. In many ways, it is an analysis of what could have been—and how California's farmworkers refused to be silenced.

Most historical analyses of California farmworkers' movements have focused on the United Farm Workers (UFW), led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the mid-20th century. Other scholars, however, have also attempted to shift this historical narrative. For example, Dionicio Nodín Valdés's *Organized Agriculture and the Labor Movement Before the UFW* consciously aims to rewrite the timeline of farmworker organizing. Valdés's work aims to connect the struggles of farmworkers in Hawaii, California, and Puerto Rico as a broader fight against imperialism and settler colonialism. While "Slaves of the West" takes on a less ambitious project, it aims to add yet another voice to the historiography that has called for a reimagining of farmworker struggles beyond the UFW. In addition, "Slaves of the West" also seeks to transform the timeline of farmworker organizing that has been taken for granted for a generation. In Anne Loftis's *Witnesses to the Struggle*, she recounts the organizing of a later generation of farmworkers, whose work in the 1930s substantially impacted the progressive leaders of the day, such as Carey McWilliams. However, "Slaves of the West" takes a different approach, centering the labor organizers and workers in their own struggle, asserting its significance in their own lives, not just the lives of the elites.

In addition to highlighting the untold stories of California's farmworkers at the turn of the 20th century, this paper also makes two central arguments. First, it argues that the California agricultural capitalist economy—the land owners, labor contractors, and state—stripped farmworkers of their autonomy and treated them as slaves to their employers. Though a provocative claim, it spells it out with three characteristics of contemporary farm labor: (1) the living and working conditions on

³ S. Korman "Speakers Pay Labor Tribute at World's Fair," *Chicago Daily*, September 3, 1943.

⁴ Carey McWilliams and Douglas C. Sackman *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

SLAVES OF THE WEST

farms ignored workers' rights; (2) state actors, especially law enforcement, criminalized farmworkers when they were not on the farms providing cheap labor; and (3) contractors colluded with farmers to trap laborers in cycles of debt and criminally low wages. Second, this narrative expands the common periodization of California farmworker resistance to include the grassroots rebellions of the early 20th century. Moreover, it argues that this resistance, whether violent or nonviolent, organized or spontaneous, required solidarity across and along racial and occupational lines.

Beyond ideological concurrences and arguments, this piece also utilizes other histories of farmworkers for important contextualization. Foremost among these is Richard Steven Street's *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California's Farmworkers, 1769-1913*, which covers many of the events outlined in this article. Readers will notice, however, that this article utilizes many narrative pieces from Street's work in an effort to analyze these events in the framework of forced labor, a framework Street does not engage with nearly as centrally. "Slaves of the West" also draws from Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field*, which, due to its journalistic nature, is used much like a primary source in this work to enhance descriptions of the lives of farmworkers at the turn of the 20th century.

In addition to engaging with the secondary sources listed above, this piece also makes use of multiple bases of primary source documents. Primarily, this comes in the form of California newspaper archives (mostly the *Los Angeles Times*), which illustrate not only a recounting of events but also ideological responses to those events from members of the community. It also utilizes the records of George F. Johnston, housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. This collection includes payroll records and day-to-day work-logs and provides valuable context that illustrate the racial and class dynamics of life on a turn-of-the-century farm in California.

Writer's Note

In this piece, I chose to use the word "slavery." Modern discourse has often opted toward other phrases, such as human trafficking or labor trafficking. For many, this stems from a desire to avoid comparisons to the profound, systemic injustice that was chattel slavery in the American South. Avoidance of the word is often seen as a way to pay respect to the severe nature of that iteration of enslavement.

I do not take my choice lightly. Thus, it is appropriate to explain the choice. The United Nations defines slavery as something "identified by an element of ownership or control over another's life, coercion and the restriction of movement and by the fact that someone is not free to leave or to change an employer."⁵

The history in this piece reflects that many of California's farmworkers were never free from their labor and were often paid wages that essentially amounted to nothing. Moreover, refusing to work could have devastating and even deadly consequences. Farmworkers, many of whom were recent immigrants, endured all sorts of abuses to survive. In addition to abuses from labor bosses, growers, and landowners, these men also fell victim to widespread bigotry and an early version of California's prison-industrial complex. They were not only slaves of individuals but of a socioeconomic system. Thus, it is essential for this paper to attach a word with the weight of slavery to early 20th century Californian agricultural workers.

I find it also pertinent to assert that this is in no way a comparative piece. I do not wish to assert that this Western version of slavery was on par with the chattel slavery seen throughout the Southeast. In fact, there existed such chattel slavery in

⁵ "Slavery," as defined by the United Nations, accessed on April 15, 2019.

parts of the West as well. Rather, I intend to propose the dynamics of California's agricultural business as a *different* and *less violent* but still inhumane version of slavery that fits our modern definitions. I believe this is an important endeavor because expanding the framework of how historians imagine forced labor can lay bare the violence of racial capitalism in new forms, opening the scholarly conversation to new arenas of thought.

Part One: Slaves of the West

Fourteen-year-old Claude F. Hankins killed his foreman, George Mosse on a farm in Marysville, California in July 1904.^{6*} Hankins's sister sent him to work as punishment for befriending a rowdy crowd of young men. The practice of sending juvenile delinquents to work on California's farms had become commonplace by this time—until newspapers in San Francisco began to cover the arrest and prosecution of Claude Hankins. The trial shocked crowds of reporters, not because of the murder, but because of the horrific stories about the physical abuse, sexual assault, and psychological manipulation he endured at the hands of his foreman. Others corroborated the adolescent's claims. Charles N. Dray, a former coworker of Hankins, shocked the court when he said, "we were slaves on that ranch."⁷ Dray shared others' anecdotes of struggling to flee the farm and of his own experience earning one dollar for a year's work. Nonetheless, Hankins was found guilty of second-degree murder. Despite pleas for leniency from the jury, the judge sentenced the young child to 16 years in prison.

In the early 20th century, much like today, California farmers exploited the labor of migratory farmworkers, many of whom were newcomers to the region. For the first decades of the century, most of these laborers were poor Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, or White. Many were immigrants, documented and undocumented, and spoke only broken English.⁸ Farmworkers, already disempowered by their circumstances and poverty, were further denied agency when they suffered violent abuses like Hankins and when they were forced to endure dangerous and inhumane working conditions.

Poor quality housing made even basic human functions difficult for farmworkers. In the orange groves of Southern California, farmworkers were provided housing in the form of "plenty of clean hay to sleep on."⁹ Restroom and shower facilities were usually minimal or nonexistent. One laborer recalled a grower offering him "the side of a rail fence and a five-gallon coal-oil can to cook... meals on."¹⁰ One landowner, George Johnston, housed his workers in tents on his property. Although these tents were better for workers than forcing them to sleep without cover, they still required the men to pack in uncomfortably close quarters, with as many as ten men in a tent designed for four people.¹¹ Moreover, given the wages Johnston paid his

⁶ Richard Steven Street. *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769-1913*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 473.

* The reader will notice throughout the piece that I draw heavily upon Steven Richard Street's work, *Beasts of the Field*. Street's book on California farm labor is incredibly important for the study of this time period, as it recounts essential anecdotes discussed in few other places. I trust that the reader understands that while I respect the work of Street greatly, I believe my historical analysis adds layers of dynamics left unaddressed by Street in his massive project. For example, I choose analyze California farm work as forced labor in much more substantial and deliberate ways compared to Street.

⁷ Street, 474.

⁸ McWilliams and Sackman. *Factories in the Field*.

⁹ Street. *Beasts of the Field*, 504.

¹⁰ Street, 504.

¹¹ George F. Johnston Company Records. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

SLAVES OF THE WEST

laborers, it would have taken over 100 hours of work for the workers to purchase the tents in the first place.

Conditions of the job disrupted attention to human necessities, like sleep. Some apple farmers required workers to spend mornings sitting outside in freezing temperatures without pay while they waited for the frost to melt off the trees.¹² On some farms, growers made the pickers responsible for keeping the fruit from freezing overnight. Laborers did so by burning fires by the produce overnight, skipping sleep along the way. The next morning, they'd still be required to get to work on time to pick more produce all day.¹³ This environment led to frequent farm accidents, especially when ladders and other equipment could weigh upwards of seventy-five pounds. Farmworkers had little say in their labor—they either endured enslavement for survival or did not survive at all.

Japanese farmworkers in the early 20th century faced further layers of exploitation that compounded their hardships on the farm. Japanese laborers often had to work under *keiyaku-nin*, who were roughly equivalent to labor contractors, to get consistent work.¹⁴ The *keiyaku-nin* benefited the laborers as often as they exploited them. Usually English-speaking Japanese immigrants, the *keiyaku-nin* frequently negotiated labor contracts with local growers without consulting the workers they were bargaining away, sometimes agreeing to make them work longer hours for lower pay.¹⁵ After the work finished, they charged several expenses for translation, medical care, and office filing fees, even when such services never occurred. In all, *keiyaku-nin* could take between 20-40% of a worker's earnings. They also often took advantage of workers who had taken to gambling, operating makeshift casinos in Japanese settlements and profiting off of the workers' habits.

But the workers fared even worse when *keiyaku-nin* were not involved. In 1916, after *keiyaku-nin* influence had fallen considerably, grower George F. Johnston paid a white labor contractor for Japanese workers at a rate of around one-third of what he paid their white counterparts.¹⁶ The *keiyaku-nin* labor system forced Japanese farmworkers to accede to the demands of their wealthier co-ethnics or be forced out of labor altogether.

Even before they encountered the *keiyaku-nin*, Japanese farmworkers endured exploitative practices. Immigration companies gave working-class Japanese men empty promises in exchange for the purchase of a ticket to California. For example, the Meiji Emigration Company pledged upward mobility and \$2.50 per day working in the fields of California, but records show that no worker earned more than eighty cents per day. Those with enough money to return to Japan did so almost immediately—those without it had nowhere else to turn. Trapped in California with little English skills, Japanese laborers had little option but to accept any deal offered by predatory employers.

In the ensuing decade, Japanese labor was gradually replaced with a group that came to be known as bindlemen, or hobos. Bindlemen, mostly poor European white and Latino men, were migrant workers who rode atop train cars searching California for work.¹⁷ A transient lifestyle was foreign to many onlookers; the fascination with the isolating existence of bindlemen led to several tropes trying to explain their behavior. These tropes ranged from calling the men simple laborers to

¹² Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 504.

¹³ Street, 504.

¹⁴ Street, 436.

¹⁵ Street, 422.

¹⁶ George F. Johnston Company Records. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹⁷ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 529.

honoring them as folkloric workmen to warning against them as dangerous criminals.

While in some towns bindlemen were only curious characters, in others they were condemned and punished for non-normative behaviors. Law enforcement most commonly arrested and punished bindlemen under the guise of vagrancy charges.¹⁸ California's penal code defined a vagrant as "every person (except a California Indian) without visible means of living, who has the physical capacity to work and who does not seek employment nor labor."¹⁹ Someone could also be identified as a vagrant if they meandered without legitimate business, or if they rested or slept on a property without the owner's permission.

The migratory habits of bindlemen and loose definitions of vagrancy enabled local law enforcement to criminalize the bindlemen's existence. Law enforcement conducted frequent sweeps, leading to the frequent incarceration of bindlemen on vagrancy charges—sometimes up to one trip to jail per month. The *Sacramento Bee* once remarked that in places like Pomona, where vagrancy was the most common crime, "if Christ were to come to the Golden State, He could be and probably would be jailed as a tramp under our vagrancy laws."²⁰ During their trials, bindlemen were often denied a jury and could face sentences of up to six months in prison.

While bindlemen worked on farms between March and September, they were much less likely to encounter legal trouble. After the harvest had ended, however, many towns strengthened the enforcement of the law, arresting bindlemen with increasing frequency. During the week of November 24th, 1907 in Los Angeles, nearly five hundred bindlemen were arrested for vagrancy—only "five or six" had been wanted by the police for previous crimes.²¹

Once in state captivity, bindlemen could be forced to perform menial labor for the local community. At one point in Los Angeles, over 100 bindlemen were locked in a chain gang and forced to do hard labor.²² Bindlemen could be forced to break rocks, repair roads, and perform other infrastructure-related tasks. Some accounts suggest that towns might have leased incarcerated bindlemen to local farms during labor shortages, making them tend to the fields without pay.²³ Bindlemen were thus victims of state-sanctioned slavery in an early version of the Californian prison-industrial complex. In San Marino, a suburb of Los Angeles, City Marshall Porter did not make incarcerated bindlemen work—rather, he tied them to trees down Huntington Drive for days on end, vowing to keep them there "until they decide that San Marino is an unhealthful place for their ilk."²⁴

The criminalization of bindlemen points to a broader systemic issue of forced labor—a system not completely explained by isolated incidents of poor working conditions or low wages. Rather, bindlemen were only deemed tolerable by law enforcement and employers only as docile faraway laborers. Incarceration, state-sanctioned forced labor, and cruel and unusual punishments withheld the agency of bindlemen even outside of farm labor contexts; they were locked in a system of slavery. In fact, the Thirteenth Amendment, through its exemption for criminal punishment, had enshrined slavery in law, locking millions across the country in a similar state of involuntary servitude.

¹⁸ Street, 541.

¹⁹ Street, 541.

²⁰ Street, 541.

²¹ "To Drive Out All Crooks," *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1907.

²² "Those Hobos," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1903.

²³ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 556.

²⁴ "Hobos Tied to Saplings," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1915.

SLAVES OF THE WEST

Bindlemen were easy targets for this exploitation due a to variety of non-normative practices and behaviors. For one, their unique vernacular often confused those unfamiliar with them. In bindleman speak, “blinky” was a man missing an eye, “cans” were police stations, “punk” was bread, and “gay cats” were young bindlemen new to the trade.²⁵ They were also known as heavy drinkers when off duty and engaged in raucous, drunken assemblies in saloons that often broke out into fights. In December 1902, fourteen bindlemen were arrested in San Bernardino’s Chinatown after a massive brawl broke out. Once the men arrived at the city jail, they “knocked out the lights and started another fight.”²⁶ A few bindlemen abused opioids—however, local newspapers frequently exaggerated violence in their reporting of these events.²⁷

Most concerning to town officials, however, was their engagement in same-sex relationships. While certainly not all—or even most—bindlemen engaged in these relationships, enough did to be noticed by reporters and townspeople. Some of these relationships took the form of long-term companionship. For example, bindleman William Edge described in a memoir a romantic partnership with a man named Slim. For more than a year, they traveled together “sharing beds, jobs and saloons,” rejecting other partners in favor of one another.²⁸ Other relationships were more casual—for instance, men often told anecdotes to sociologists about “railroad bulls catching men making out in the bushes and throwing them into the slammer.”²⁹ This anecdote, in particular, draws a direct connection between the non-normative habits of bindlemen and their subsequent criminalization.

Historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez connects the criminalization of bindlemen to the creation and enforcement of a white settler colonial fantasy among Los Angeles boosters and officials.³⁰ Anti-immigrant politics, anglo-centric origin narratives, and the rise of human caging all enforced this settler colonial order—which consistently excluded bindlemen. The result of this framework, for Hernandez, was not only the oppression of nonwhite people but also the criminalization and demonization of non-normative white people within a framework of settler colonial norms and values. Bindlemen, through their untraditional language, raucous lifestyle, and male-male sexual relations, operated outside the boundaries of acceptable whiteness.

When bindlemen were not exploited by the state or on farms, they were exploited by urban labor contractors. In the off-season, bindlemen often made their way to so-called “skid rows”—downtown districts usually filled with inexpensive hotels, restaurants, and bars. When bindlemen arrived, they also became sources of inexpensive—or even free—labor. During times when it became difficult to find legitimate labor, bindlemen made their way to slave markets in town squares.³¹ In these slave markets, labor contractors charged bindlemen fees in exchange for finding them jobs. Because the bindlemen did not have access to funds before they worked for them, they were often forced to take out a loan from the contractor. Then, labor contractors would collude with growers to get bindlemen fired as soon as they had paid off their loans to the, forcing them into debt again to find more work.³² Thus, bindlemen would often find themselves in cycles of debt slavery, gaining no

²⁵ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 556.

²⁶ “San Bernardino,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1902.

²⁷ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 558.

²⁸ Street, 557.

²⁹ Street, 557.

³⁰ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

³¹ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 570.

³² Street, 571.

advancement from their own labor—and deprived of the agency to exit cycles of poverty entirely.

The bindleman-contractor relationship resembled the Japanese farmworker-*keiyaku-nin* relationship in many ways. There were differences, though. Because *keiyaku-nin* were often immigrants themselves, they were more likely to find solidarity with the workers—a historical trend that will be explored in more detail in Part Two of this piece. Thus, the *keiyaku-nin* operated not simply as a part of the established employer hierarchy, but rather as mediators between workers and farmers. The urban labor contractors, on the other hand, pledged their allegiance only to farm owners, with interests not in worker well-being but firmly in labor exploitation and profit maximization. Despite these key differences, however, both *keiyaku-nin* and urban labor contractors helped produce a system of enslavement on California farms for the benefit of themselves and farm owners—at the expense of workers from all backgrounds.

Whether through horrific conditions on the farm, abuse from growers, fraud from contractors, or criminalization from local law enforcement, California farm laborers were trapped in a system of poverty and slavery. For many immigrant laborers, these struggles were compounded by—indeed, intertwined with—hardships brought on by racism, xenophobia and other forms of bigotry. It would be inaccurate, however, to say California’s farmworkers passively accepted this treatment.

Part Two: Warriors of the Cause

If you walked through a farm in the California Central Valley at the turn of the 20th century, you might hear the workers belt into a song like this:

*There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,
A race that can’t stay still,
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain’s crest,
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don’t know how to rest.³³*

Bindlemen sang dozens of traditional songs during work, in saloons, or in chain gangs. In this song, the singers acknowledge feeling shunned for their lifestyle. They even separate themselves from others in ways beyond life choices, referring to themselves as a separate “race of men” cursed by “the g*psy blood.” This distance from normative behavior is acknowledged, but not bemoaned. Rather than focus on the burdens this separation places upon them, they focus on their own agency as “they roam the world at will.” Moreover, they shun common tropes about their “race.” While the rest of the world calls them lazy vagrants that must be handled by a local sheriff, they insist they still “don’t know how to rest.” Many songs were celebratory like this one. Others voiced deep frustration. All of them, though, represented small acts of rebellion against their bosses who abused them, the labor contractors who defrauded them, the sheriffs who arrested them, and the townspeople who shunned them.

Bindlemen rebelled in far more than songs, though. Many bindlemen, when forced to work under a particularly abusive foreman, pretended to be sick.³⁴ Once the foreman was transferred or fired entirely, the performed plague went away. Bindlemen would slow their pace of work, too, costing harsh growers enormous

³³ Street, 580.

³⁴ Street, 585.

SLAVES OF THE WEST

profits. They damaged equipment to provide fellow workers a respite from the abuses of a long day of labor.³⁵ In some cases, like Claude Hankins's, referenced earlier, bindlemen could only achieve justice through violence against authority.

The death of Francisco Torres, a bindleman in the late 19th century, exemplifies the dangers of resisting enslavement. In July 1892, foreman William McKelvey cut \$2.50 from Torres's paycheck, citing a "poll tax" charged by the county.³⁶ There was no such tax in existence. Torres protested his boss's lie and asked for his pay in full. When he was refused, Torres quit his job immediately. The following week, Torres returned to the ranch and asked for the money once more. After being denied again, the conflict escalated, until Torres allegedly dealt McKelvey a deadly blow and subsequently fled the scene (accounts vary on the weapon, location and circumstance of the crime).³⁷

After Torres was captured, he told investigators that he struck McKelvey in self-defense, a claim few newspaper reports mentioned without irony. For example, a headline in the *Los Angeles Times* after Torres's capture read, "Torres, the Murderer, and His Plea of Self-defense."³⁸ On August 10th, Torres was brought to jail to await his court date.

Torres never made it to trial. On August 20th, a mob of white townspeople stormed the jail in Santa Ana. The lone guard on duty called for the mob to halt but acquiesced when they began to use sledgehammers to break through Torres's cell door.³⁹ The crowd beat then dragged him out into the street toward a noose that hung from a telephone pole. After giving Torres time to pray his last rites, the mob executed him.⁴⁰ They hung a sign above Torres that read "Change of Venue."⁴¹

The lynch mob sent shockwaves throughout the local Mexican community. In an act of solidarity, the community came out in droves to pay respects to the tragedy. Over 3,000 people visited Torres's body on the day of his funeral.⁴² Many of his closest friends could not recognize his face because it had been beaten so severely.

While the Mexican community mourned, the rest of the town saw the incident as justice coming early. Several "prominent members" of the community were involved in the lynching, which effectively precluded calls for a thorough and fair investigation. After Torres was murdered, the *Los Angeles Times* aptly summarized the prospects for retribution best: "There have been no arrests made and there are not likely to be."⁴³

Some farmworkers resisted by reclaiming institutional space. As the years went on, many Japanese farmworkers transitioned from field hands to farm owners themselves. Street noted, "Japanese farmers climbed out of the fields by employing one of three methods: contracting, sharecropping or leasing."⁴⁴

Contractors negotiated deals for farms and workers to procure necessary supplies for farming, then received a fixed rate per acre they worked. This usually paid more money than traditional labor arrangements.⁴⁵ After contracting for a few years, many moved on to sharecropping, where farmworkers worked for the same

³⁵ Street, 585.

³⁶ "Lynch Law at Santa Ana," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1892.

³⁷ "Hanged in the Street," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 21, 1892.

³⁸ "Orange County," *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1892.

³⁹ "Hanged in the Street," *Chronicle*.

⁴⁰ "Hanged in the Street."

⁴¹ "Change of Venue," *Courier-Journal*, August 21, 1892.

⁴² "Lynch Law at Santa Ana," *Times*.

⁴³ "Lynch Law at Santa Ana.."

⁴⁴ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 515.

⁴⁵ Street., 515.

rates but then kept a certain percentage of their harvest to sell and make additional profits. Unlike the exploitative sharecropping system in the Jim Crow South, sharecropping in California was viewed as an arrangement with great flexibility and autonomy—especially when compared to regular field work.⁴⁶

Leasing was a more complicated process. Japanese farmworkers banded with the *keiyaku-nin* to form independent farming companies and take control of production. They controlled prices, labor arrangements, and crop production.⁴⁷ Once Japanese labor companies gained monopolies across the state, they began to have a more significant say in how farms ran.

This aroused anger and fear from white onlookers. One newspaper warned the masses of “little brown men crowding out white laborers and getting ahold of ranches.”⁴⁸ Because of these sentiments, many white workers refused to work for Japanese bosses, which required immigrant farmers to get labor exclusively from co-ethnics. According to one contemporary report, a full 96% of laborers on Japanese farms were Japanese.⁴⁹

The state government eventually pushed back against growing Japanese autonomy. In 1913, the State Legislature enacted the Alien Land Law, which prohibited residents ineligible for citizenship from owning land.⁵⁰ Though it was ostensibly a ban of “alien” land ownership, many contemporary commentators used “alien” and “Japanese” interchangeably in discussions regarding the law.⁵¹ In practice, the Alien Land Law of 1913 targeted the growth of a Japanese landowning middle class built by the *keiyaku-nin* and their workers.

The leadership of the *keiyaku-nin* did more than help Japanese workers own their own farms. Despite their exploitative behaviors, the *keiyaku-nin* could be fierce negotiators on behalf of their workers when they chose. During the last days before harvest, they worked with laborers to organize slowdowns, work stoppages, or mass walkouts.⁵² These tactics frustrated farmers and forced them to acquiesce to their workers’ demands during severe labor shortages. These tactics also afforded Japanese farmworkers better working conditions, better wages, and better lives. In one noteworthy instance, the *keiyaku-nin* forced one California farmer to raise wages repeatedly, eventually getting their workers an over 300% wage increase from eighty cents to four dollars per day.⁵³

Sometimes, though, *keiyaku-nin* pushed too hard, and farmers turned to other sources of labor. One example of this illustrates the ethnic conflicts that complicated the lives of farm laborers in California. In the early 20th century, a notable number of Sikh men from the Punjab area of northern India moved to California.⁵⁴ These men typically settled in British Columbia in Canada, but intense persecution forced many to move to places such as San Francisco.⁵⁵ From there, they often found employment on California farms. Many worked for less than other workers, which attracted the hostility of others in the farm labor economy—including the *keiyaku-nin*.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Street, 515.

⁴⁷ Street, 515.

⁴⁸ Street, 515.

⁴⁹ Street, 828.

⁵⁰ “Alien Land Law,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1913.

⁵¹ “Say California Demands Anti-Alien Legislation,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1913.

⁵² Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 485.

⁵³ Street, 437.

⁵⁴ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 481.

⁵⁵ “Hindoos Turn to San Francisco,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 1907.

⁵⁶ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 483.

SLAVES OF THE WEST

Sikh men filled positions when Japanese workers went on strike. In August 1908, a farmer named George Pierce decided to rid himself of frequent conflicts with the *keiyaku-nin* and fired all of his Japanese workers in favor of Sikh men who were willing to work for less in worse conditions.⁵⁷ Events like this caused Japanese farmworkers to view the Sikh men as a nuisance, shifting their workers' job sites to most effectively impede Sikh laborers' success.⁵⁸

Others took further action against the Sikh workers. A group of white field hands near Marysville resolved to exclude the Sikh men through violence. In January of 1908, they raided a camp of Sikh workers, severely beating and robbing them of thousands of dollars before they burned the camp to the ground.⁵⁹ Not long after, the Sikh men fled the town, forced to look for work elsewhere. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it the "Hindoo Riot" even though its perpetrators were white, and instead of emphasizing the violence against the Sikhs, it justified the actions as retaliations against alleged incidents of "indecent exposure" by Sikh men.⁶⁰ Though some Sikh men sought legal justice, the white jury absolved the perpetrators of the riot for any wrongdoing. No punishment came for the crime.⁶¹

Anti-Sikh violence is but one example of how narrow conceptions of identity fractured solidarity and stunted the building of a larger movement in the early 20th century. However, these moments of disunity are not the entire story. One episode of solidarity, the Oxnard Sugar Beet Workers Strike in 1903, suggests how workers united.

By 1902, the American Sugar Beet Company's leaders had struggled frequently with *keiyaku-nin* bargaining tactics. Together with other farmers, they formed the Western Agricultural Contracting Company (WACC), a contracting organization that brought labor negotiation under the complete control of farmers.⁶² WACC recruited workers around Oxnard from all backgrounds with the intent to artificially depress wages and oust the *keiyaku-nin* from the region. For a while, their strategy worked; they took over ninety percent of Oxnard's sugar beet labor that year.⁶³

Japanese workers had few options but to strike. Without the *keiyaku-nin*, they had no one to advocate for them in disputes with the growers. When WACC forced them to settle for lower wages, to pay arbitrary fees, and to purchase supplies from a company store, it became clear that action needed to be taken.⁶⁴ After much organizing, Japanese workers led a walkout of Oxnard's sugar beet fields on March 1, 1903.⁶⁵

Other farmworkers soon joined them. Local Mexican farmworkers organized alongside them to form the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) just weeks after the initial walkout.⁶⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* referred to the protest as peaceful, describing a scene in which "the greater portion of the [JMLA members] are spending the day playing handball on the vacant lots near Chinatown, and the nights parading with drum and flags." At this juncture, no violence had ensued "and none was

⁵⁷ Street, 487.

⁵⁸ Street, 487.

⁵⁹ Street, 483.

⁶⁰ "Prison Quarries Eclipse Siberia," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 2, 1908.

⁶¹ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 483.

⁶² Street, 447.

⁶³ Street, 447.

⁶⁴ Street, 448.

⁶⁵ Street, 448.

⁶⁶ Street, 449.

threatened.”⁶⁷ Fifteen hundred workers strong, the JMLA was an organization already built in unity and resistance, but its members soon had to prove their dedication to the fight for their collective human rights when the stakes were even higher.

Shortly after the strike began, WACC began attempts to break the strike, hiring crews of non-union affiliates to harvest produce. In retaliation, groups of JMLA members assembled to sabotage their camps. They cut down tents and vandalized supplies, forcing the crew to return to town without working the next day.⁶⁸ These instances became more frequent as the strike drew on, with WACC officials growing more impatient by the day. When the two sides met on March 21st, 1903, the threat of violence loomed over negotiations. WACC leaders insisted on their right to field a crew of nonunion workers and emphasized their intent to do so at all costs the following Monday. In response, JMLA members vowed to do everything necessary to prevent the crew from reaching the field. The stage was set for a standoff in Oxnard.⁶⁹

That Monday, the JMLA obstructed the street on which WACC’s crew wagons inched forward. As the tension built, one WACC member burst out of a company store with a shotgun to prevent JMLA ransacking. This precautionary measure only ignited a massive scuffle. Gunshots filled the air and confusion reigned while JMLA and WACC members became unsure of which side was shooting. After the fight, several JMLA members were severely wounded. One, Luis Vasquez, died from gunshot wounds.⁷⁰

According to various newspaper accounts of that week, Oxnard went quiet. Rain poured on the landscape and prevented further conflict while JMLA members tended to their wounded. On March 27th, the Japanese and Mexican communities of Oxnard gathered to mourn Luis Vasquez. Thousands assembled in what became part-funeral-procession and part-demonstration, waving flags behind a solemn drum line. The parade ended at a local Catholic parish, where Japanese workers sat beside their Mexican comrades to observe the mass and bury Luis Vasquez.⁷¹

Vasquez’s death added another layer of systemic resistance to the JMLA cause because activists believed the bullet that killed him was fired by the deputy sheriff. Suspicions heightened when the law enforcement began to investigate the shootings of JMLA protestors but neglected to include JMLA eyewitness testimony. In the end, law enforcement issued no indictments as the court determined that it could never know who shot who in the scuffle.⁷² To the activists, this represented the makings of a cover-up by the WACC and law enforcement officials.

JMLA, suspecting ulterior motives, organized further protests and even an assassination attempt on a WACC ally.⁷³ Support poured in from sympathizers around the state, putting pressure on the growers to accept the union’s demands. With tensions rising, an upcoming visit from President Roosevelt, and farmers starving for cash, the WACC finally settled its dispute with JMLA. The conflict ended with a resounding victory for the Mexican and Japanese workers. The WACC monopoly had been broken.⁷⁴

After the strike, JMLA assembled once more to petition for membership in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). After changing their name to the Sugar Beet

⁶⁷ “Oxnard,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1903.

⁶⁸ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 455.

⁶⁹ Street, 457.

⁷⁰ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 458.

⁷¹ “Oxnard,” *Times*.

⁷² Street, *Beasts of the Field* 461.

⁷³ Street, 461.

⁷⁴ Street, 463.

SLAVES OF THE WEST

Farm Laborer's Union (SBFLU), they met with AFL leaders to negotiate affiliation. The response of the AFL, which was a segregated organization at the time, tested their unity: the Mexican workers were free to join, but the Japanese men were not.⁷⁵ In his response, SBFLU leader J.M. Lizarras wrote:

We beg to say in reply that our Japanese brothers here were the first to recognize the importance of cooperating and uniting in demanding a fair wage scale. They were not only just with us, but they were generous when one of our men was murdered by hired assassins of the oppressor of labor, they gave expression to their sympathy in a very substantial form. In the past we have counseled, fought, and lived on very short rations with our Japanese brothers, and toiled with us in the fields, and they have been uniformly kind and considerate. We would be false to them and to ourselves and to the cause of unionism if we accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them... We will refuse any other kind of a charter except one which will wipe out race prejudices and recognize our fellow workers as being as good as ourselves. I am ordered by the Mexican union to write this letter to you and they fully approve its words.⁷⁶

Lizarras acknowledged not only the humanity of his Japanese brothers but also their foresight and intelligence in fighting against exploitation. The fledgling SBFLU found the bravery to chastise the AFL for putting prejudice over the larger labor struggle. Instead of accepting the backing of the AFL—the largest labor organization in America at the time—the Mexican workers chose not to leave their Japanese coworkers behind. The opportunity to be recognized by a major labor organization would have been rare for California farmworkers and especially rarer for non-white ones. Yet, the field hands of Oxnard chose solidarity with all workers instead of progress for a few.

The Oxnard Sugar Beet Strike of 1903 garnered tremendous support from Californians across the state but failed to make systematic change. Predatory labor contractors were not eradicated after WACC was disbanded in Oxnard, and conditions on the farms still were inhumane. However, the strike demonstrated that California farmworkers could create power in an economic system that operated on the removal of their liberty. The JMLA showed that solidarity in the fields of California was possible—and a force to be reckoned with.

Epilogue

Eventually, California farmworkers found help from the International Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW, commonly referred to as “the wobblies,” organized around tenets of free speech and socialist thought and embraced workers from all backgrounds.⁷⁷ IWW leaders would travel to town squares and set up soapbox speeches that warranted the ire of local officials resistant to their message and method.⁷⁸ This tension resulted in high-profile standoffs in cities such as San Diego and Fresno in the mid-1910s.⁷⁹

The IWW's radical stance for the redefining of labor itself in the California fields turned away many farmworkers whose primary concerns were living wages and decent conditions.⁸⁰ However, even when working with nonaffiliated farmworkers, the union worked tirelessly to improve their lives. Once, when workers rioted against a farmer in Wheatland, California, the wobblies mobilized to set up a support network

⁷⁵ Street, 464.

⁷⁶ Street, 464.

⁷⁷ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 592.

⁷⁸ McWilliams and Sackman. *Factories in the Field*, 152.

⁷⁹ McWilliams and Sackman, 152.

⁸⁰ Street, *Beasts of the Field*, 592.

for the men, spreading word of the issue so much that it made national news.⁸¹ This publicity inspired movements like Kelley’s Army, in which a labor activist known as General Kelley led thousands of migrant workers to the California State Capitol Building to express grievances with the Governor.⁸² The Wobblies not only helped to form Kelley’s Army but also helped plant the seeds that grew into a class consciousness seen among local intellectuals in the 1930s.

The condition of slavery that ruled the lives of California’s farmworkers at the turn of the 20th century inspired many cases of solidarity across racial lines. This fight provided a model for future generations of farmworkers and transcended the contemporary labor movement. The work of the SBFLU is just one achievement in an array of movements that spurred further imaginations of the farmworker’s rights, from the 1930s to the 1960s to modern times.

Organizing among farmworkers has never stopped. It has been done with varying degrees of success, meeting harsh resistance from industry leaders each time. After the 1930s, farmworkers rarely were able to take their cause to a national stage until the rise of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.⁸³

The coalition building, boycotting, and hunger strikes that created the UFW and made it the largest farmworker union in the country, and it continues to dominate Californian discourse on farm labor. The coalition’s work at Delano, in which they combined tactics of unionism and civil rights activism to win a contract for grape pickers, has proven to be a legendary example of organizing.^{84**}

Much work has been done to make life easier for today’s farmworkers, but it is not nearly enough. Despite progress among immigration issues regarding migratory farm labor, undocumented farmworkers still find themselves vulnerable to mistreatment from their employers, similar to the Japanese victims of fraudulent immigration schemes over a century ago.⁸⁵ Many growers still do not provide housing. Instead of sleeping in tents like their predecessors, today’s farmworkers might commute several hours home after work, getting little to no sleep before making the drive back the next day.⁸⁶

In 2016, the California State Legislature implemented a plan to guarantee overtime pay for farmworkers in the state.⁸⁷ This came after a hard-fought battle that is still ongoing, as California’s enforcement mechanisms for labor law violations are slow to act.⁸⁸ Prosecutors are beginning to pay attention again to California farm labor as a human rights issue. On that front, there is still much work to be done to improve the lives of laborers in the fields.

As the labor struggle pushes forward in California’s farmlands, it will not only owe its success to the UFW but also to the slaves of the West over a century ago, the warriors of their cause who fought tirelessly—even when no one was watching.

⁸¹ McWilliams and Sackman. *Factories in the Field*, 155.

⁸² McWilliams and Sackman, 165.

⁸³ “UFW History.” UFW. Accessed May 02, 2019.

⁸⁴ “UFW History.” UFW. Accessed May 02, 2019.

** It is important to note that despite the influence of the UFW in bringing the rights of farmworkers to the forefront of national discourse, the movement was not without troubling flaws. Politics of documentation and ethnicity, for example, reflect a UFW that was not as inclusive as it is often described. Readers interested in exploring these issues more can read Matt Garcia’s 2012 book *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Farm Worker Movement*.

⁸⁵ “Edgar Aguilachoso.” Telephone interview by author. March 27, 2019.

⁸⁶ “Edgar Aguilachoso.”

⁸⁷ “Stephanie Richard.” In-person interview by author. March 27, 2019.

⁸⁸ “Stephanie Richard.”

SLAVES OF THE WEST

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