The Mexican Mission, founded in 1919, attended to the socioeconomic needs of the Mexican Community in the Garden City area. Along with the local grade school, the mission was largely responsible for breaking the cycle of illiteracy that had plagued the Mexican people for generations.
The Mexican American Community in Garden City, Kansas, 1900–1950

Interest in the story of Mexican migration to Kansas has found its way onto the pages of various journals and dissertations. This heightened awareness has been expressed through two types of works relating to the Mexican experience in the Sunflower State. The first kind of study extracts the similarities of the Mexican story in Kansas and synthesizes them into a collective whole. These generalized accounts have as their objective the exposition of the largely neglected story of the Mexican people in Kansas. The second type of study includes a small corpus of local histories, which focuses on the specific content of Mexican life in selected Kansas cities. Although most of these local studies are justified on the grounds that the Mexican experience in the Plains states has been neglected, their focus has been limited to the industrial areas of Emporia, Kansas City, and Topeka, Kansas. In actuality, the Mexican experience in rural areas and small towns in such places as the High Plains region is conspicuously absent among these studies. Yet, a vibrant

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Mexican community emerged in the rural environs of Finney County and the small town of Garden City.¹

In contrast to life in the eastern part of the state, the story of southwestern Kansas is very much one of water. The area's harsh climate has exacted its toll from its inhabitants resulting in periods of in-and out-migration of people.² Wet years brought boom times, irrigation, immigration, and agricultural expansion, while dry years lead to crop failure, bankruptcy, and emigration. For those willing to stake out a living in the region, the vicissitudes of the weather called for different responses, especially among marginalized persons such as Mexicans.

The objective of this article is to provide a historical overview of the migratory process that induced Mexican immigrants to leave their homeland and settle initially in rural Finney County and later in Garden City. The study will analyze the preimmigration conditions that caused Mexicans to depart their homeland, discuss the transition period in which Mexicans were hired to meet the labor needs in the United States, and describe the settlement process that extended throughout the immigrant's life and affected the subsequent generation as well. Central to Mexican life in Finney County and Garden City was the experience of racial discrimination. Because this exclusionary practice was the most persistent obstacle to Mexican integration into the larger society, this article will be largely concerned with the dynamics of institutional discrimination.

Scholars of the migratory process have advanced the “push–pull” model as a basis for explaining the causes of human migration.³ This approach attributes human migration to a combination of “push factors,” impelling people to leave areas of origin, and “pull factors,” attracting them to receiving countries.³ Push factors include demographic growth, low living standards, lack of economic opportunities, and political repression, while pull factors are a demand for labor, availability of land, good economic opportunities, and political freedoms.⁴

The principal factor that drove Mexican workers from their homeland to the United States at the turn of the century was a level of grinding poverty, largely attributable to regressive monetary wages and reinforced by factors such as high rates of illiteracy. Among those who explored the conditions of the Mexican worker in the early part

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³. Throughout this article the term “Mexican community” is used when the author is referring mainly to the immigrant generation. Later, when referring to the American-born element of the population, the term “Mexican American community” is used.

of this century was the rural sociologist Nathan Whetten. His work reveals the most distressing features of Mexican life before the Mexican Revolution (1910–1919). Whetten found that during the years 1907–1910 the average daily wages of Mexican farm laborers was ninety centavos, or an American equivalent of about forty-nine cents. In the central states, home of many Mexican migrants, daily wages were even lower, ranging from twenty-nine to fifty-one centavos, or about fourteen and twenty-five cents, respectively. Looking at wages over a longer period of time, Professor Eyler Simpson’s findings were even more disturbing; he discovered that agricultural wages of the Mexican worker remained relatively stationary from 1792 to 1908. Moreover, while wages remained nominal during this 156-year period, the price of corn rose by approximately 170 percent, rice 75 percent, flour 711 percent, wheat 465 percent, beans 565 percent, and chile 123 percent. Caught in a cycle of falling wages and escalating prices, Mexican workers were forced to borrow from their oppressors, the hacendados (plantation owners), who had usurped most of the land under the rule of Porfidio Díaz (1876–1911) and who through bookkeeping machinations of the hacienda system trapped poor Mexican workers and their heirs into a life of debt. So deeply had workers incurred debt that one Mexican historian reported instances of families who had labored more than one hundred years to repay a debt of fifty dollars! It was also this impossible situation that led the American journalist John Kenneth Turner to ask rhetorically, “can a hungry baby learn to read and write? What promise does study hold out for a youth born to shoulder a debt of his father and carry it to the end of his days?”

If oppressive wages kept the Mexican worker in a constant state of penury, the failure of the Mexican government to provide the necessary resources to educate its poor rural citizens proved equally devastating. This neglect of the educational needs of poor Mexicans has been shown by data compiled by Mary Kay Vaughan. Her study indicates that in 1907 per capita expenditures for primary education in Mexican states ranged from $1.12 (about fifty-six cents) in Coahila to 12 centavos (about six cents) in Michoacán, the place of origin of many Mexicans in Garden City. Michoacán also ranked next to last among Mexican states with only 14 percent of its school-age children enrolled in primary school. Vaughan further notes that even where education was available, most schools lacked the most basic supplies such as books and pencils. In addition, the curriculum designed to provide children with a scientific-based education was poorly implemented due to the indifference by some governors.

Without the most basic resources for even a rudimentary education, the Mexican masses were relegated to a life of illiteracy. Here too, the work of various scholars reveals much about the government’s lack of attention to the educational needs of its least fortunate citizens. Writing about this subject, Carlow Newland notes that in 1900 only 5.3 percent of the total population in Mexico was enrolled in school. Whetten’s work for that same year disclosed similar findings with illiteracy rates of 74.2 percent among the Mexican population more than ten years of age. Ten years later, in 1910, literacy rates had not shown much improvement, ranging from a high of 38.9 percent in the state of Colima to a low of 8.3 percent in Guerrero. Michoacán again did not fare well, ranking fourth from the bottom with a 14.2 percent literacy rate.

In contrast to a life of misery and deprivation in the homeland was the reality of a vastly different life...
north of the border. Unlike in Mexico, prices in the United States remained stationary or increased very slowly while wages rose steadily. These vast wage differences were underscored by the Mexican economist Francisco Bulnes, who estimated that the purchasing power of the Mexican worker in the latter part of the nineteenth century was 1,400 percent less than that of the American farm laborer of the same class and time. Little wonder then that Mexican workers began migrating to the United States in search of a better life. In the United States, Mexican workers could earn a daily wage of $1.40 to $1.50 for railroad labor and at least fifteen cents an hour for sugar beet labor. Later, the social upheaval caused by the Mexican Revolution would induce others to follow their compatriots to the United States. These interactive “push-pull” forces were the principal reasons Mexicans left their places of origin and migrated to the United States. For some their migratory journey eventually would lead them to southwestern Kansas.

The story of the Mexican community in Finney County begins with two unnamed male Mexican railroad workers identified by U.S. census takers in 1900. During 1900–1910 the nation experienced a substantial increase in the Mexican population. In Kansas the immigrant population increased from 71 in 1900 to 8,429 in 1910. Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, who studied Mexican migration to the United States, attributed this growth to the fact that Kansas City was a temporary stopover and important distributing center of immigrants going to the eastern and midwestern states, where there was a demand for Mexican labor. Initially, railroads hired Mexican workers on a short-term basis to repair and lay new track. Upon completion of their labors workers returned to their homeland to await rehiring the following spring. This pattern eventually was broken when Anglos began to abandon common track labor for less demanding work. As one newspaper pointed out, “the American had deemed common track labor as below his grade of day work—it is impossible to find enough white men to maintain the service.”

With fewer Anglos to perform common track labor, the railroads turned increasingly to a Mexican

20. U.S. Department of the Interior, Twelfth Census: Population, 1900, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Office, 1901), 754. Eleno Torres was believed to have been the first Mexican to have arrived in Garden City. He arrived in Finney County in 1896 and immediately went to work for the railroad. Juan Robles, interview by author, May 26, 1995. Prior to the turn of the century, Mexicans also were recorded in the state census. The 1885 state census records at least two persons residing in Garden City who had come from Mexico. One individual was listed as a professional cook and the other was a twelve-year-old boy whose occupation was given as a herder. These two individuals apparently left the area during the economic bust that occurred about 1887. See Kansas State Census, 1885, Finney County, Garden City.
work force. By 1913 Mexican workers had largely replaced Anglos. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company even published a Spanish dictionary that contained track-laying related terms to be used by Anglo foremen to assist them in giving instructions to Mexican workers.23

Initially, most Mexicans migrated for railroad jobs but turned to agricultural labor once they learned that crop growers would employ women and children.24 In 1901 the Kansas legislature enacted legislation to support a floundering sugar beet industry in southwestern Kansas. Encouraged by the establishment of a sugar beet factory at Rocky Ford, Colorado, and by a state bounty of one dollar per ton on every ton of sugar beets produced within the state, growers entered into contracts to grow sugar beets for the Colorado sugar factory. The expansion of this industry created a demand for workers to thin, hoe, and harvest sugar beets. In 1905 and 1906 the Kansas City Journal, Kansas City Star, and Topeka Daily Capital alluded to Mexican and other ethnic workers who were recruited to perform the labor. The Daily Capital also pointed out that all family members, including children, worked during the thinning and weeding season.25 Mexican workers also were hired in 1906 to help construct part of the Garden City sugar factory completed in 1907. The few Mexicans who arrived in Finney County apparently lived in rural areas of the county. The 1907 local directory lists only three Mexican males residing in Garden City. The occupation of the three men is given as “sugar makers.”26

Observers of the migratory process point out that young men usually are the first to leave their places of origin. The 1910 Finney County census indicates that many of the first arrivals were young men listed as “roomers” or “lodgers.”27 The terms “roomer” and “lodger” apparently were designations used by census takers to describe temporary living arrangements of these men. Although many roomers were unmarried, some purportedly had wives in Mexico who sometimes joined them in the United States. A number of the men were employed by the railroads and lived nearby the railroad tracks on Maple Street while others resided on the outskirts of the city. The year 1910 also was when Mexican families moved into rural areas of Finney County.

By 1915 census enumerators listed several Mexican families as residents of Finney County, many with children born in Kansas. The state census tallies 134 Mexicans in Finney County of whom 84 resided in Garden City. The occupation of the men is given as “Laborer” or “R.R. Empl.” and the women are listed as “wife.” The beginnings of an education for the children also can be inferred from the state census, which shows designations of “student” or “schoolboy.” A few families also purchased homes as noted by the census category “owner” of a dwelling.28

Because single young men generally preceded families to Finney County, much of what is known about early Mexican life relates to these individuals. Knowledge of the kind of lives they led can be gleaned from scattered references in local newspapers and from immigrants’ conversations as remembered by Mexican Americans. Based on these sources it appears that a number of roomers were engaged in bootlegging activities. These illicit activities also were believed to have been connected to a certain Sebastian Carrillo, who ostensibly came to Garden City as a contractor of Mexican sugar beet workers. In 1910 Señor Carrillo, perhaps sensing an opportunity to make money from an increasing number of Mexican migra-

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27. The author’s hand tally of the 1910 U.S. census showed that about sixty-five roomers were in Garden City or just under one-half of the recorded Mexican population of Finney County.
tory workers, erected Casa Carrillo.29 Hazel Callison, who kept an account of much of the Finney County story, described the activity of the Carrillo place:

Gambling was a favorite pastime and knife fights occurred frequently. Men entered the building and were never seen again. After the building was deserted a tunnel was found. People had thought before that there was a tunnel, but they were never quite sure. After the front entrance was found people refused to explore the tunnel [sic]. The back entrance was never found. There are two stories concerning the length of the tunnel. One is that the tunnel extended to the Arkansas River which was then full of water. Whenever a man was knifed, he was taken to the river by means of the tunnel and let float away. Another story was that the tunnel was very short and was a hiding place for liquor.30

With this reputed notoriety it was not long before local law enforcement officials were summoned to Casa Carrillo. In 1911 Señor Carrillo was ordered by the District Court of Finney County to close his estab-

ishment, the casa having been adjudged a public nuisance. That same year Carrillo reportedly was sentenced to 360 days in jail and given a six-hundred-dollar fine. These sanctions, however, did not deter or end the Carrillo establishment because two Anglo women, Mary Callahan and Maud Gray, continued operating the place.31 In 1917 the district court issued another order commanding the sheriff to take possession of the premises and oust all persons therein. As for Señor Carrillo, Callison tells us that he was sent to prison on a bootlegging charge.32 In 1919 the relatively short but controversial life of Casa Carrillo finally was laid to rest when the structure was leveled as part of an Armistice Day celebration.

Despite the passing of Casa Carrillo, its memory haunted the Mexican community long afterward. Many years later María Rodriguez, an early immigrant, indicated in an interview to a local newspaper reporter that she believed the reputation of Casa Carrillo was largely responsible for negative perceptions Anglos held toward the Mexican community.33

In contrast to the colorful tales of the roomer were the common struggles of Mexican families. The arrival of families to perform railroad labor at this time was encouraged by railroads due to problems experienced with single Mexican men. As one Santa Fe division engineer observed, “young Mexicans developed into a vagrant class . . . and [a] steadier class of laborers [is needed and] efforts are [being] made to locate men with families.”34 The engineer noted, however, that “this requires housing [for] these laborers in a way not before attempted to

30. “Casa Carrillo,” in “scrapbook,” comp. Hazel Callison, Finney County Historical Society, Garden City. The spelling of Carrillo’s name appears both as “Carrilla” and “Carrillo.” However, Mexican Americans in Garden City remember the spelling as Carrillo.
31. “To Clean Up the Old Sr. Carrillo Nuisance,” Evening Telegram (Garden City), September 5, 1911.
any extent by the Santa Fe.” Without permanent living quarters, the few families employed by the Santa Fe lived in dugouts or tie houses. In southwestern Kansas Mexican families came to rely on tents as shelter. One couple, Hesiquio and María Rodriguez, lived for two years in a tent they moved between Dodge City and Garden City. This manner of living, however, was certain to bring misfortune. During the winters of 1910 and 1912 two of the Rodriguez infants fell victims to the harsh elements of southwestern Kansas. As Sue Rodriguez, sister of the two infants, recalled, “We knew they died from exposure because the doctor told my mom.”

Once families settled in Finney County, living conditions improved only slightly. During sugar beet season Mexican families moved into houses furnished by local farmers. These structures consisted of two small rooms, hardly enough space for large families. One farmer used the houses during the off-season to house chickens or store grain, both of which required thorough cleaning and airing before they could be made livable.

The hardships associated with migratory life and a small established Mexican community in Garden City eventually convinced Mexican families to settle in southwestern Kansas. In addition, a World War I boom economy created a continuous need for Mexican labor. In 1917 the Kansas State Board of Agriculture reported that World War I prices were largely responsible for record values of Kansas farm products during 1915–1916. The Kansas Labor and Industry Department also reported high labor earnings during 1917, 1918, and 1919, noting that 1920 was “a most prosperous year,” adding “there was a job for every man and a man for every job.”

In Garden City, the sugar factory employed 240 persons, by far the city’s largest employer. Mexicans, although on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, also shared in local prosperity. In 1920 the Garden City Telegram informed its readers that the sugar factory paid Mexican workers thirty-five cents an hour with a bonus of five cents an hour extra if they worked until Christmas. The Telegram pronounced these wages just, considering that Mexicans workers had “been accustomed to working for next for nothing” and “seemed very well satisfied with the proposition.”

Mexican progress, however, was effectively thwarted by racial discrimination. At this time Kansas had no law to protect minorities against discrimination. As a result, Anglos were free to engage in institutional discrimination without fear of legal reprisals. In addition, because discrimination was practiced by respected institutions it did not incur criticism of the larger public. In Garden City discrimination against Mexicans was not readily apparent. For instance, no signs with bold letters were displayed by public establishments warning Mexicans they were not welcome. Nor did city ordinances mention such practices. The section of the city ordinance relating to the municipal swimming pool contained no language that expressly prohibited Mexicans or African Americans from using the pool. Most Mexicans, however, came to understand through humiliating encounters that public facilities such as the swimming pool were not open to them. As Holly Hope notes in her book about Garden City: “[I]n 1922 a swimming pool was opened. . . . [N]o fence surrounded the pool; you could swim any time of the day or night—as long as you were not Mexican.”

Perhaps owing to their isolation many Mexicans yearned to return to their homeland. As seasonal sugar beet field workers, many departed for the motherland upon completion of their work. In 1920

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40. Revised Ordinances, City of Garden City, Kansas, 1924 (Garden City, Kans.: 1924), for example, makes no mention of discriminatory practices against either Mexicans or African Americans. Some years later, in 1930, discrimination was referred to as a “policy” by one city commissioner in confrontation with African Americans who followed Mexican Americans in attempts to end exclusion from the city pool. See “Negroes Renew Demand to Use City Swim Pool,” Garden City Daily Telegram, July 12, 1930.
about one hundred Mexican sugar beet field workers were reported departing Garden City for Mexico. The number was substantial enough for the Garden City Telegram to have remarked that “It looked as though the Santa Fe railroad company was about to depopulate this county last night.”

The return to Mexico for some also was influenced by political events in the homeland. In 1919 the Mexican Revolution ended bringing with it many changes. Among the reforms ushered in by the revolution was the policy of redistributing land to Mexican workers. The dream of owning land was an attractive inducement to some families in Garden City to return to Mexico, and in 1921 two brothers, Precilliano and Hipólito Ávila, gathered their families and belongings and returned to their home state of Michoacán. Filled with renewed hope, the families began a readjustment process with younger children attending school and older siblings assisting the elders. Complex problems associated with the redistribution program, however, led to disillusion with the Mexican government’s promises. By 1924 the Ávila families came to realize that their future no longer existed in Mexico and decided to return to southwestern Kansas. This finality of preference for life in Kansas was expressed by Precilliano Ávila when with light-handed wit he observed, “Here, God descends closer to us.”

In their study of human migration, Stephen Castles and Mark Miller point out that in the settlement stages of the migratory process discrimination often compels immigrants to turn to cultural traditions as a way of organizing against their isolation. In Garden City, Mexicans often sponsored cultural festivities that brought members of their community together from the region and reinforced their cultural moorings. An example of this solidarity occurred in 1922 when more than four hundred Mexicans from the region gathered in Garden City to celebrate the birth of Benito Juárez, national hero of Mexico. Three years later “Little Mexico” engaged the public in an even grander event: the Mexican Fiesta. As the Garden City Herald noted, “Little Mexico did not make a half-way celebration of her national holiday. Band concerts, addresses, plays, recitations, instrumental music, a parade, orchestra music, dances, forty-four program numbers... made up the Fiesta.” The event also attracted Mexicans from Oklahoma and Colorado and nearby cities.

While adults derived certain pleasure from replicating traditions of the homeland, Mexican American children were beginning a process of assimilation through schools and the Mexican mission, established in 1919 by various church groups to minister to the Mexican community. At these institutions children were well received and provided with positive learning experiences. In the long term Mexican Americans also profited much from church missionaries and teachers. Because of peda-

43. For a discussion of restoring lands to villages, see Whetten, Rural Mexico, 120, 124–51. Whetten points out that initially the procedure by which villages could acquire land was made so complicated that few could hope to qualify for receiving it.
gogical efforts of church and school, Mexican Americans were spared the illiteracy problems that had plagued their fathers and forefathers for generations.\textsuperscript{49}

The elimination of children's illiteracy, however, still left the problem of poverty of Mexican families. With job opportunities limited largely to seasonal sugar beet field labor, Mexican incomes depended on cooperation of entire families to eke out a living. Thus, when sugar beet season began entire families moved to rural areas to work the beet fields. Unfortunately, sugar beet work conflicted with the greater part of the academic year resulting in prolonged absences of children from school. Because of these disruptions most Mexican American children never progressed beyond grade or middle school.\textsuperscript{50}

J. Milton Yinger has argued that assimilation is a process of boundary reduction between groups that include small interactions and cultural exchanges. He also points out that a group can be almost totally assimilated on one dimension, partially assimilated on another and virtually unassimilated on yet another.\textsuperscript{51} In Garden City most Mexican Americans were partially assimilated, but Mexican immigrants remained largely unassimilated. Nonetheless, in 1922 two immigrants, Eduardo and Florentina Rodríguez, managed to circumvent cultural barriers and enter into a business venture with an Anglo couple to purchase a hotel business.\textsuperscript{52}

As for young bilingual and bicultural Mexican Americans, assimilation that began through church and school continued during this period. In 1918 a preteen Mexican American girl, Mercedes Ramírez, was hired at a local dry goods store as a shipping and receiving clerk. Bright and capable, the young lady eventually moved into sales, a position she held until her untimely death in 1928. In addition to her job, Ramírez was involved in school and civic activities, and her personal demeanor won over many Anglos.\textsuperscript{53} Her fine example also was emulated by her younger sister María, who landed jobs in three department stores, including the dry goods store that had employed her older sister. Both sisters also addressed their educational needs and in 1924 were awarded certificates of promotion to attend high school, a rare accomplishment given the high illiteracy rate of the Mexican American community at that time.\textsuperscript{54}

The same year, 1926, that Mercedes and María Ramírez were helping customers at local businesses, the Ávila brothers formed Orquesta Mutualista Jazz. The designation of the group as a jazz band (the Orquesta later added an African American banjo player) clearly connotes a level of acculturation of the young musicians. With the ability to play Anglo tunes the group received invitations to provide music at various Anglo social functions in Garden City and surrounding communities. At these social gatherings the Orquesta often took requests to play popular Anglo tunes such as “Ain’t She Sweet,” “Four Leaf Clover,” “June Night,” and “Baby Face.”\textsuperscript{55} The Ávila brothers’ familiarity with popular Anglo music also was shared with the Mexican American community.

In addition to these limited contacts, Mexicans and Mexican Americans began viewing themselves as

\textsuperscript{49} Jessie Robles Ávila, interview by author, August 21, 1995. A barely readable entry in the 1925 state census also indicates that Mexican Americans could read and speak English. See Kansas State Census, 1925, Finney County, Garden City.

\textsuperscript{50} Kansas State Census, 1925, Finney County, Garden City.


\textsuperscript{52} Anita Valenzuela (untitled manuscript, Finney County Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{53} Garden City Directory, 1927 (Kansas City: R.L. Polk and Co., 1927), 56; Garden City Telegram, April 19, 1928.

\textsuperscript{54} Garden City Telegram, May 21, 1930.

\textsuperscript{55} Jess B. Ávila, interview by author, January 10, 1994.
citizens of the local community. In 1928 the Garden City Herald reported local Mexicans had met with the Garden City Chamber of Commerce to protest the sugar factory's practice of importing temporary workers from Mexico. In response to this practice, a group of local Mexicans approached the chamber urging it to use its influence to persuade sugar factory employers to give job preference to local taxpaying Mexican and Mexican American workers. The group, led by a young English-speaking Mexican American, Juan Ávila, made efforts to appeal to the business sense of the chamber pointing out that imported workers were spending locally earned money elsewhere. Although the chamber took no immediate action on the matter, it invited members of the Mexican community to a future meeting with a sugar company representative.

What concessions, if any, sugar factory employers made to local Mexicans and Mexican Americans is not known. Of more significance, however, was a willingness of the Mexican community to register its concerns with the local power structure. Also noteworthy was the fact that the spokesman was a Mexican American. During the upcoming 1930s it would be members of this group who would assume leadership roles and push for change. Still, it would be at least twenty years before young Mexican Americans would emerge to challenge the established order. In the meantime, the Mexican community would have to weather two major events: the Great Depression, which would severely disrupt and scatter its members, and World War II, which would unite and point them to a better future.

Legal scholar Gerald P. López has asserted that this country's attitude toward Mexican immigrants was that they were useful but not the kind of people one would want for permanent members of a community. During the depression years Mexicans would discover the full force of López's assertion. In Kansas regional droughts compounded the problems of the depression as Mexicans came to be viewed as part of the problem. To Anglos, Mexicans were foreign, short-term laborers who held jobs needed by native-born workers and had no rights to welfare benefits. As unemployment pressures mounted, employers yielded to demands that jobs held by Mexicans be given to Anglos. In 1932 the Garden City Company, which had employed Mexicans since 1907 to work in sugar beet fields, largely eliminated them from its payroll. Those who appeared for work simply were told they were no longer needed. For those


who managed to keep their jobs, working amid endless dust storms made this stoop labor all the more disagreeable. "We hoed beets in the dark," remembers Manuel Robles, a retired construction worker and World War II veteran. Some Mexican workers supplemented their incomes by breaking lime at the sugar factory, a back-breaking job few wanted. Sue Rodriguez summarized the predicament of families without jobs: "Many of us needed money to buy necessities, and without money we were forced to go into debt." Other Mexican families received WPA cans of meat which they referred to as Cachú.

The Mexican community fared no better with their traditional employer, the railroads. In 1930 J.F. Lucey, the southwest regional director of President Herbert Hoover’s Emergency Committee on Unemployment, wrote to Kansas governor Clyde Reed requesting that railroads discontinue hiring Mexican labor in railroad shops and other industries. Governor Reed agreed to Lucey’s request and directed a letter to six major railroads in Kansas urging the employment of native-born labor only. Among supporters of this proposed policy was the Topeka Federation of Labor. In a letter to the governor the federation expressed the following sentiments:

The Topeka Federation of Labor in its recent meeting voted unanimously to extend to you our hearty thanks and commendation for your recent action in requesting the railway companies in this state to return to their native country the Mexican labors brought here under contract to do railroad work. It is our belief that Mexican immigration has been one of the major contributing causes of our present condition of unemployment and that the steps you suggest to the railroad companies would aid materially in the restoration of prosperity.

The railroads’ response to Governor Reed’s request ran from total acquiescence to a measured reluctance. The president of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway Company, in particular, politely refused to replace Mexican workers, noting that these workers had been with the company for some years and had performed work that in good times was not acceptable to Anglos.

Criticism of Mexican workers also was tempered by the Morris Land Company of Lawrence, Kansas, which had business interests in Colorado’s San Luis Valley. In a letter to Governor Reed the company cautioned the state’s chief executive about possible economic repercussions of his request to railroads, stating that “there is apt to be a closing down of sugar factories, which will further increase unemployment, and eventually result in the increased price of imported sugar.”

Whatever self-serving support Mexican workers had among certain sectors, it was not enough to calm the fears of the local populace as droves of Mexicans were forced to depart the county. Population figures cited by historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg for 1930–1940 show a dramatic Mexican population decrease in Finney County of 71 percent. Surrounding counties also experienced similar Mexican population losses.

For the few families that remained, life in southwestern Kansas meant coping with extremely limited resources. Movies, dances, and the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez baseball team helped people momentarily forget their problems. Some young men took up boxing and brought a measure of pride to the Mexican community. In 1932 sixteen-year-old Juan Robles won Golden Glove medals, a feat he repeated in 1938. Robles was joined by another young boxer, Ignacio “Buck” Ávila, who won the Golden Gloves in 1938, 1939, and 1940 in Garden City, Hutchinson, and Wichita.

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60. Sue Rodríguez interview; Jessie Robles Ávila interview, June 12, 1994. Reference to Cachú is tongue-in-cheek as it refers to a meat delicacy.
62. Topeka Federation of Labor to Governor Clyde M. Reed, November 30, 1930, Correspondence, Clyde M. Reed Administration, Records of the Governor’s Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.
64. Topeka Federation of Labor to Governor Reed.
65. Riney-Kehrberg, Rooted in Dust, 136.
The emergence of younger Mexican American men such as Robles and Ávila marked the beginning of a new group of Mexican Americans. One notable characteristic of this young group included an unwillingness to acquiesce to forms of institutionalized racism. To show their disdain for the established order, young Mexican American men began engaging in various acts of defiance. One frequent target of their annoyance and a constant humiliating reminder of their inferior social status was the huge swimming pool in the barrio area. A cat and mouse game began between Mexican American young men and the local police with the pool as the center of action. As Pedro Sandoval remembered:

As we were not allowed to use the pool at any time, there were many nights we would climb the fence to sneak a swim, only to be interrupted by our local police department who gave us chase out of the pool. I want you to know that we became professionals at being the fastest on foot and the fastest at dressing while on flight! Not only were we professional night stalkers, but we also became professionals at spotting police cars.67

The young men, however, did not always laugh their way into the night. On a warm summer night in 1933, Juan Robles and a buddy from Dodge City decided to sneak into the pool and cool off. Their fun was cut short when the police arrived on the scene and unceremoniously escorted them to the local police station. The following morning they were brought before the local judge. Recalling the incident Robles stated, “the judge told us ‘don’t do it again or I won’t be so lenient the next time.’” In spite of warnings to the contrary the young men continued their surreptitious swims in the pool. Other acts of discrimination were met by Mexican Americans with verbal insults and threats of fisticuffs against their perpetrators. In one incident Frank Nava tried to initiate a fistfight with a soda jerk who insisted Nava leave the store to eat an ice cream cone he had purchased.68

In spite of problems the Mexican American community faced during this period, a few Mexican Americans planned for the future by furthering their education. In 1934 and 1938 Lucille Ramírez and Lorena González became the first two Mexican Americans to graduate from high school in Garden City. In 1936 Lucille Ramírez also became the first person of Mexican heritage to graduate from Garden City Junior College.69

Most Mexican Americans tend to agree that World War II was a turning point in their lives. Like many major historical events, the war had unforeseen social consequences. For Mexican Americans the war did more than any previous event to enhanced their collective self-esteem. Unlike other minorities such as African Americans and Japanese Americans, Mexican American inductees were not assigned to segregated

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68. Manuel Robles interview.

units. For many this was the first time they had come into contact with large numbers of Anglos from various parts of the country. In addition, the military environment was the first place many of the young men had experienced equal treatment.26 The effect of these men's participation in the war effort also was visited on the Mexican community as proud immigrant parents displayed photographs in their homes of sons dressed in army, navy, or marine uniforms. The young servicemen would not disappoint their community as they adjusted quickly to the armed forces, often fighting with valor in Europe, Africa, and the Pacific.

On the home front, Mexican Americans worked at the Garden City Army Air Field established in 1943 east of town.71 Besides training pilots, the base exposed Mexican Americans, especially young women, to nonagricultural and nondomestic work opportunities. Kathleen Robles, Genevieve Hernández and Virginia Ramírez were among those provided with new job opportunities. A high school education likely enabled Hernández and Ramírez to obtain their jobs. Office work at the air base also may have instilled in Robles an appreciation of a formal education. After the war she returned to school and completed her high school education.72

Mexican American contribution to the war effort, however, did not alter the Anglo community's discriminatory practices. Keenly aware that their compatriots were risking their lives for freedoms most of them had never known, Mexican Americans became highly resentful of this egregious contradiction. These tensions inevitably lead to a confrontation between proud young Mexican American men and the old Garden City order. The situation came to a head when a young Mexican American man was refused service at a local bowling alley. The tense situation quickly escalated leading to an altercation in which the insulted and angry young Mexican American drew a knife and assaulted the owner, injuring him badly. Forced to flee, the young man jumped a train and made his way to California where he enlisted in the navy.73 This incident became the talk of the Mexican community and reminded Mexican Americans that for all of their patriotism, the Anglo community still did not perceive them as Americans. For matters to change the Mexican American community would have to await the return of its young servicemen.

When the war finally ended, the Mexican American community shared in the excitement of welcoming home its veterans. Ethnicity was temporarily ignored as the heroes of servicemen such as Sergeant Ignacio "Buck" Ávila received favorable notice in the local press, which reminded its readers that "the Sergeant was involved in some of the hardest fighting of the famed 32d (Red Arrow) Infantry Division."74

Other servicemen such as Ezequiel Ledesma and Manuel Robles also came home as highly decorated veterans. Nick Ortiz earned five Bronze Star decorations for combat in North Africa and Italy.75 With this record of military combat achievement, Mexican Americans were not reluctant to remind Anglos of their war service. An esprit de corps among Mexican Americans was summarized by army veteran Mike Guadian who stated, "When I fought in the War, I fought as an American." Manuel Robles added that "there was no discrimination in the Army; we were White."76

Robles's assertion, however, did not extend to life outside the military. Upon returning home from the armed forces, Mexican Americans were confronted with old reminders of their second-class status whenever they attempted to be served at local establish-

73. Jess B. Ávila and Jessie Robles Ávila, interview by author, January 10, 1994; Ignacio "Buck" Ávila interview; Mike Guadian, interview by author, January 1, 1994; Sue Rodriguez interview; Juan Robles, interview by author, March 23, 1994; Manuel Robles interview; Pete Sandoval, interview by author, January 10, 1994.
74. Garden City Telegram insert, April 1988, private collection of Irene Hernández, Garden City, Kans.
76. Mike Guadian interview; Manuel Robles interview.
In spite of their service to the country during World War II, young Mexican Americans still encountered prejudice after their return. Gathered here are the returning servicemen from Garden City who worked to eliminate discrimination against Mexican Americans. (Standing, left to right) Zeke Trevino, Eliseo Mújica, Rudy Ramírez, Jesse Aguilar, Manuel Rosiles, Zeke Ledesma; (kneeling, left to right) Mike Guadian, Emilio Ávila, Ignacio “Buck” Ávila.

ments. To make matters worse, a rumor surfaced that Mexican veterans were not welcome at a local V-J Day parade. Denials of the rumor quickly appeared on the front page of the Garden City Telegram as the newspaper explained to its readers that “this ugly rumor got started thru a very unfortunate misunderstanding—that the local Spanish-American vets were not wanted to show up for this parade! . . . By all means we want every single veteran . . . to show up for this V-J Day Parade.” The Telegram went on to reassure the community that “Surely every single Mexican in this area realizes that the folks here at home knew they were in uniform—knew they did a grand job as fighting soldiers because their brilliant performances were reported from time to time.”

But young Mexican American veterans wanted more than to participate in a ten-minute parade; they wanted basic civil rights. To further their social and political ends, the young men formed the Latin Youth Club. With these objectives in mind, club members set out to right some long-standing wrongs. One of the first targets of the club was the municipal swimming pool. At a city commission meeting club members approached the city fathers and demanded that the pool be opened to Mexican Americans. City commissioners balked at this demand and instead offered club members individual passes. After decades of discrimination club members were not readily amenable to this counter-proposal and rejected the commissioner’s overture. “We said that we were veterans and taxpayers, and all should be entitled to use not only the pool but all public facilities,” remembers veteran Mike Guadian. These pressures eventually lead to the opening of the pool to the Mexican American population. For many, however, this change came too late, and few Mexican Americans actually used the facility. Felicia Guadian offered a practical explanation: “Because of past discrimination I never learned how to swim.”

Mexican Americans also made inroads into Garden City’s hiring practices. Prior to the war the majority of Mexican Americans were employed as sugar beet field laborers. After the war, however, many were hired by Garden City merchants in a broad range of occupations. The 1948 Garden City directory lists them as clerks, secretaries, elevator operators, student nurses, photo finishers, and musicians. One notable success was Tony Mesa, the owner of a local motel.

77. “Around Town,” Garden City Telegram, August 31, 1946.
78. “Mexican Veterans Form Youth Club,” Garden City Telegram, March 29, 1946.
The gains made in hiring practices were realized because these discriminatory practices were controlled by the local polity which had immediate ability to alter policy. With education, however, progress depended on a complex set of historical, economic, and individual influences. Thus, advancement on the educational front, especially of men, continued to lag behind other achievements. This was compounded by past experiences with discrimination that had convinced many young Mexican American men that a formal education often did not result in better job opportunities. Gregory Mújica Jr., who graduated from high school in the early 1950s, remembers applying for a job only to learn later that his application had been promptly discarded. It was not until 1950 that Frank Rodríguez became the first Mexican American man to graduate from high school in Garden City. Young women, however, appeared undeterred and continued furthering their education. During the war years Genevieve Hernández, María Louisa Hernández, Sarah Hernández, and Connie Sánchez graduated from high school, and Lorena González and Isabel Hernández graduated from the community college.

As the 1940s drew to an end, Mexican Americans had set in motion the process of integration into the larger community. For most Mexican Americans the postwar years would be a period of adjustment. Many would marry, start families, and begin training for or working in new jobs previously unaccessible to them. Occasional marriages between Anglos and Mexican Americans also occurred during this time. In terms of social progress, the lack of a high school education precluded Mexican American veterans from taking advantage of the GI Bill to attend college. Progress also was hampered by lingering racial attitudes in some sectors of the Anglo community. Discrimination persisted in barbershops, some food service establishments, and in one movie theater well into the 1950s. Still, Mexican Americans could proudly assert that they had transformed, largely on their own terms, the community that many of them had fondly come to regard as home.

82. History of Finney County, Kansas, 295, 289, 291, 299.