

By the Kansas Historical Society

Seeking a Better Life

The Mexican Revolution changed history for both Mexicans and Americans. Begun in 1910, the war resulted in many Mexicans losing their jobs and their farms. Life in Mexico was hard for other reasons. The average daily wage was only \$.49. Men left their home and country and immigrated to Kansas because they could get jobs working for the railroad or on sugar beet farms. They needed the money to support their families back home.

The railroads were glad to get Mexican laborers. During the first half of the 20th century, before the Mexican Revolution, Mexico had built an extensive national railroad system. Many Mexican workers therefore had experience working on the railroad. When they came to the U.S., discrimination played a role in what jobs were available to them. Mexican immigrants were largely restricted to manual labor jobs.

In the early 1900s railroads in the U.S. were expanding rapidly and companies were laying new track throughout the southwest. Often a representative of a railroad company would be at the U.S. – Mexican border to offer jobs to the men. Sometimes the companies paid immigration fees for these men to cross the border into the United States. Men were paid on average \$1.40 a day.

The first Mexican immigrants to Kansas were men who took advantage of seasonal work with the railroad. They worked during the spring and summer and returned to Mexico during the winter to be with their families. In the spring they returned to their railroad jobs. Before long Mexican men began bringing their families with them to settle in Kansas.



Mexican families immigrated to Kansas where men found work for the railroads or on sugar beet farms.

Other job opportunities became available for Mexican laborers as the need for sugar beets increased. Sugar can be produced from sugar cane or from sugar beets. Until 1887 most sugar was made from sugar cane that was grown outside of the U.S. When Congress increased taxes on imported cane sugar this created a market for sugar made from sugar beets.

Sugar beets are a very labor-intensive crop. Workers had to “bunch and thin” sugar beet plants three or four times before harvest. Laborers would then “pull and top” the sugar beets to harvest them. Men, women, and children worked together in the fields from June until November. This was backbreaking labor for which they were paid \$.15 an hour. Sometimes they worked for 12 hours at a time.

After the harvest was finished the men would shift to working in the factories where they produced sugar from the beets. This meant year-round employment for Mexican workers who made up almost half of the field crews. Harvesting of sugar beets is now done entirely with machines.

Mexican laborers were the backbone of the railroad and sugar beet industries in the U.S. Their hard work resulted in the growth of the Kansas economy.



Railroad jobs paid much higher wages than those in Mexico.



Mexican families worked together in the sugar beet fields.