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Rethinking the urban and rural divide in Latino labor, recreation, and activism in West Michigan, 1940s–1970s

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ABSTRACT
During the 1940s–1970s, Latino labor experiences could not be confined to either urban and industrial or rural and agricultural settings. Unlike large metropolises, Grand Rapids, Michigan is a mid-sized, Midwest city wherein the urban center and industrial labor opportunities are located within thirty miles of agricultural areas. I argue that Latinos in West Michigan used both rural and urban areas for labor to meet their economic and social needs. Due to the gendered realities of labor from the 1940s to the 1970s, women played an instrumental role in planning and executing the movement of their families between spaces. In turn, this community’s activism was not limited to the boundaries of urban or rural space. This research shows how Latinos etched out an economic and social survival in places wherein they are not the majority or have a plethora of resources. As the Latino diaspora spreads into areas in the southern United States, we can look to how Latinos in Grand Rapids and the Midwest lived and worked to better understand the lived experiences of twenty-first century Latinos.

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Introduction

As a Mexican American teenager in the early 1960s, Lila Paiz Garcia would sneak out of her house on the west side of Grand Rapids. For religious reasons, her parents would not let her hang out with friends outside of church activities, though that did not stop her. During the school year, Lila’s friend Esther Martinez would drive to her house and the two clandestinely went off to popular dances located near downtown Grand Rapids. Though this type of subversive action would have been normal for a Mexican American young woman living in a city with plenty of entertainment options, Lila’s life differed from other young women her age living in Detroit or Chicago. Though she and her family had long settled in Grand Rapids since the late 1940s, every summer, instead of spending time with friends in the city, she, her mother, and two sisters packed clothes and a few household items to move into a one-room shack in Grant, Michigan, a rural town outside of Grand Rapids. As the Paiz women left behind the excitement of urban life for routinized fieldwork, Sotero Paiz, her father, would stay behind and work at an aluminum factory in Grand Rapids. The women picked celery,
onions, cherries, and other crops to help earn money to sustain the family for the following year. Though Lila enjoyed the recreational options she had in Grand Rapids, the school system there was not prepared to meet her needs as an English language learner. At the same time, she also experienced firsthand the devastating poverty in rural Michigan during the summer. Lila's life as a laborer, woman, and Mexican American was never firmly placed in either rural or urban settings. Instead she lived between and among these areas.

This article argues that Latinos, like Lila, used rural and urban spaces to meet their economic and social needs as a demographic minority in a Midwest, mid-sized city. The labor market and the prevailing racial hierarchies forced Latinos, specifically Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in this time frame, to move between urban and rural areas for both work and leisure. While the city offered more job opportunities than their places of origin, the pay rates for their jobs in urban, industrial work did not allow many Latinos to occupy just one labor sector. Instead, as families and sometimes as individuals, they moved between fields and factories. The gendered separation of labor often positioned women as a part of an expendable work force. Thus, Latinas found ways to creatively address their expendability by planning and completing months of rural work for themselves and their families while still maintaining homes in urban centers. Beyond work, Latinos found ways to maintain cultural identities and form networks through their use of both of these geospatial areas for their leisure practices. In the 1970s, even as some of the earlier migrants to the area maintained work and leisure in the city center only, the community at large and their grassroots organization utilized War on Poverty funds meant for inner city blight to address rural migrants' plight – once again defying the contrived border between urban and rural space in the context of activism.

Grand Rapids was unique in comparison to large, urban cities in the North. Situated on the west side of the state, about 150 miles from both Chicago and Detroit, organized labor did not have a controlling stake in the city. Instead, in this city of about 150,000 at the time, local business elites dominated and subscribed to a motto of, as Todd Robinson, historian of the black Freedom struggle in Grand Rapids has aptly stated, ‘what’s good for business is good for Grand Rapids.’ Indeed, this big business mantra worked well for many of the city’s European immigrants and their descendants. For the very small percentage of Latinos and African Americans in the city, 5% and 10%, respectively, however, these pro-business policies often came at their expense. The city upheld a de facto segregation that kept African Americans in the southeast side of the city, while Latinos often encountered similar housing restrictions. Though kept out of industrial jobs in the pre-World War II era, African Americans and Latinos entered industrial manufacturing via low paying jobs in the 1950s and 1960s. By the early 1970s, the city fell into urban crisis complete with deindustrialization, a public school system that failed Latinos and African Americans, white flight, and an urban uprising.

Studying a city the size of Grand Rapids allows for a more intimate view of the ways that Latinos used space and worked in a way that might be harder to discern in a large metropolitan area. As a mid-sized city, the 52nd largest city in the U.S., the short proximity between a furniture manufacturer, for example, and the farms surrounding Grand Rapids made regular travel between these areas feasible. Though Grand Rapids is not typically considered a rust-belt city in the way that Detroit or Gary, Indiana are, the area contained several auxiliary industrial plants that supplied automotive producers with needed materials. The rural farmlands of West Michigan were not too far removed from these types of areas. Unlike Chicago,
where multiple suburbs line the city’s periphery, Grand Rapids’ small suburbs East Grand Rapids, Wyoming, or Kentwood, for example, quickly give way to rural areas. Agricultural towns like Lowell, Grant, Zeeland, or Holland were situated within thirty to forty miles from Grand Rapids’ city center – a relatively short drive on two lane roads and highways. In the 1940s, when Mexicans and Puerto Ricans arrived in larger numbers on the fields, these small rural towns offered workers labor opportunities in not only planting or harvesting crops, but some also offered processing and canneries nearby. With these opportunities, Latinos had prospects in both urban and rural areas in West Michigan. There are other sites in the country, and specifically in the Midwest, that this urban and rural dynamic occurs, but this article focuses on the working-class lives Latinos lived and their relationship to space and labor in one of these cities.

Examination this population’s movements shifts the way that historians have understood and written about Latino laborers in the middle of the twentieth century. The literature on this subgroup usually recognizes two traditional frameworks for understanding labor. The first notion is based on the idea that Latinos have historically occupied the Southwest and the Northeast. The second major framework is based on the idea that Latinos worked in either agricultural or industrial work. These authors have intricately traced Latino labor migration to the U.S. and the various obstacles workers faced in either urban or rural settings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Labor history has no doubt been at the center of the historical examination of Latino lived experiences and activism. This article seeks to intervene in both Latino and labor history in three ways. This article thus makes three interventions in the field by first locating Latinos in the Midwest. Secondly, it highlights the experiences of Latinos in a smaller city and lastly, it focuses on how their lived experiences as laborers did not fit into the urban–rural divide. Studies on Latino laborers in the Midwest have largely excluded the narratives of people who worked in varying sectors and have not revealed the day-to-day movements of Latino workers from the rural to urban areas.

This article draws on various scholars of labor, gender, and space. I examine Grand Rapids’ Latinos using Matt Garcia’s scholarship and utilizing Edward Soja’s theoretical framework of geography and space. I question not only how Latinos moved in between spaces, but also how they impacted those areas. Similar to Mexican Americans in the San Gabriel-San Bernardino Valley, Latinos in Grand Rapids constructed an alternate social geography that allowed them to earn money and shielded them from the discrimination they certainly would have faced in some of Grand Rapids’ recreational spaces. In examining the ways in which women facilitated this movement between rural and urban space, this work adds to the depth of research on women who have perpetually played an integral part in their family economies. Moreover, I seek to expand on Carey McWilliams conclusion that the Mexican colonias in California in the early 1920s and 1930s were in many cases ‘neither urban nor rural’. Instead, in shifting the geographic location of Latino labor to the Midwest, I contend that West Michigan, like other Midwest areas, is both urban and rural at the same time and their lived experiences lingered between and among these spaces.

Through the voices of Latino migrants to Grand Rapids and reading text sources against the grain, this article reveals how Latinos in West Michigan made a living in multiple industries and the ways this labor arrangement dictated other aspects of their lives. Jail records, marriage records, city directories, and governmental records from the United States, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, show patterns of migration, settlement, and labor. However, these records do not tell us how people rode in the back of pickup trucks to with their families and friends.
to try to make a little extra money or how high school students did not look forward to summer break because it meant they worked 12- hour days in the fields. Instead, I turned to oral histories with Mexicans and Puerto Ricans who lived in Grand Rapids from the 1940s to the 1960s. Many of these participants were between 10 and 18 when they traveled back and forth from the city to the farms. These same oral histories describe baseball games and dances in rural and urban settings in West Michigan. I also examine the documents of the Latin American Council, a grassroots organization formed in the late 1960s, to elucidate the concerns over migrant workers and the lack of jobs in Grand Rapids for the area's Spanish-speaking. Oral histories with activist also clearly convey their concerns for workers both in the fields and factories. The following sections trace Mexicans' and Puerto Ricans' labor migration; the role women played in their family economies; how Latinos met their social needs; and how they positioned their activism to address rural and urban issues.

**Labor migration to Michigan**

Mexicans arrived in West Michigan in the late 1920s via the railroads or the migrant circuit, much like those that went to other Midwest locations. For many, railroads not only provided employment, but also transportation to new labor markets. They joined Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese, European immigrants, and native whites in constructing the second industrial revolution’s infrastructure. With the escalation of anti-Chinese sentiment and eventually the 1882 Exclusion Act, however, it was Mexican workers who largely replaced the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest. The earliest *traqueros*, or track workers, a virtually all-male workforce also contributed to the Southwest’s economic development. By 1920, 54,000 Mexicans went north, many of them either to build the railroads, ride them, or both.

Rail work and migrant farm work often shared the same geographical routes. Take for example Juanita and Luciano Cerda and their family. In 1923, they were in Mexico for their son Theodor’s birth, but by 1926, Juanita gave birth to son Octavio in Oklahoma. They arrived in Grand Rapids sometime in 1929, as illustrated by their daughter, Socorro’s, birth record. Though this was a popular rail route – Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Michigan – it was also a common migrant farm working circuit. The fact that the Cerdas had all their children with them in these areas could very well indicate that they were farmworkers as families were the preferred form of migrant labor in comparison to rail work. However, it was also likely that while the patriarch worked on the rails, women and children toiled on fields.

The first Mexicans to settle in Michigan regularly combined farm, railroad, and industrial labor. Companies in small and mid-size cities around Michigan recruited Mexican workers to replace Europeans who moved out of the fields and into industrial jobs during WWI and the early 1920s. While many migrants returned to Texas in the winter, the ones who stayed behind ventured outside of farming towns to Michigan’s larger cities. For example, Pedro López, a Mexican migrated from San Antonio, Texas to Saginaw, Michigan for agricultural work in January of 1930. According to arrest records, by September of 1930, he had arrived in Grand Rapids. Urban areas lured migrants with higher paying jobs and sustained them during the off-seasons. According to historian Kathleen Mapes, ‘sugar companies hoped that Mexicans would tend to the crop as needed and return south of the border when no longer wanted,’ yet many of them did not. Detroit and Grand Rapids were about 100 miles away from most of the sugar beet fields and much closer than Texas. Saginaw’s Chevrolet Foundry also provided work for some Mexican Americans close to their agricultural
employment. Michigan was not unlike the rest of the Midwest in this case. In fact, employers in cities across the Midwest like Kansas City, St. Paul, Des Moines, and Chicago facilitated this process when they arranged transportation for urban Mexicans to work in rural areas. Working in both sectors allowed these early pioneers with needed resources to stay north.

Grand Rapids before World War II did not have a plethora of options for Spanish-speaking people but still some came to the area. Unlike West Michigan, in much of the Midwest, various manufacturing industries attracted Mexican workers. In Chicago and Gary, Indiana, for instance, the steel industry employed thousands of Mexicans. Meatpacking plants also hired them en masse. Henry Ford utilized Mexican workers in his automobile dynasty in Detroit, as historian Zaragosa Vargas describes in detail. For those that settled in Grand Rapids, a limited amount of low-skilled jobs awaited them. The furniture industry anchored the city since the mid-1800s and native whites dominated the high skilled jobs. By the early 1920s, some European immigrants also moved into those coveted positions. As historian Randall Jelks points out, these companies excluded African Americans from skilled employment. If they did hire them, it was usually in unskilled positions as sweepers or janitors. These businesses also excluded Mexicans in the pre-WWII era.

During the Depression, many Mexican men in West Michigan stayed in their positions as agricultural workers, railroad laborers, and some took up service work. During this era, in other areas both urban and rural alike, Mexicans experienced repatriation. In Grand Rapids, however, Mexicans went largely unscathed. The small number of Mexicans in the area, comparatively, and the somewhat stable jobs in rail work and the service industry did not attract the attention of local welfare officials nor immigration authorities. Frank Arredondo, for example, who was originally from Texas, worked as a cook in a restaurant below his apartment after first working as a machinist, indicating that he may have lost his job during the Depression. Before American Excelsior hired Daniel Vargas, a Mexican American man from Texas who later became an activist in Grand Rapids, he cleaned streets and shoveled snow in the cold winter months for less than fifty cents an hour. While this work was not high paying, it meant that he and his wife did not have to return to Texas.

By the mid-1940s, however, labor and demographic dynamics greatly changed. Though some of the first Mexican migrants referred to the city as a ‘small horse town’ in the 1930s, Grand Rapids became a burgeoning urban center with about 165,000 people. The local government doubled down on their commitment to business success at all costs during the country’s mobilization for total war, bringing the city’s few manufacturing plants and the remaining furniture industries to full employment. This increase in industrial jobs pulled the remaining European immigrants out of the fields and Mexicans and Puerto Ricans replaced them during the war. Latinos, and African Americans who were also arriving in Northern cities, were also able to secure some of their own positions in the war industry, and many more landed those positions after the war was over. To be certain, there were gendered layers to this labor migration. While virtually all members of a family worked on a field, Latino men usually took industrial jobs once available.

For Mexican Americans, those industrial jobs played an important role in moving people off of the fields – even if only temporarily. For example, Daniel Vargas became an acid pourer at the JC Miller Company, which made and sold welding equipment during the war. While with that company, Vargas said that JC Miller himself asked him to recruit more people from Texas to work at his company. On behalf of his employer, Vargas traveled to Texas and brought back his brother and 20 other Mexican men to work at the plant. This type of direct
recruitment was common and in combination with chain migration, Mexican Americans found their way directly to West Michigan. While some came to first work on fields, they also later became dye casters, sanders, machine operators, and general laborers for Kent Castings, American Seating Company, Mueller Furniture Company, Grand Rapids Brass Company, and American Excelsior, among others.33

Industrial work, while it paid more than harvesting, did not always provide consistent employment. Instead, in response to yearly layoffs, some family members planned to split their time in Grand Rapids and the surrounding areas. For example, Miguel Navarro, a Mercedes, Texas native, worked for the railroads in West Michigan, but in the summer he and his wife Isabel, traveled to farming towns like Hart, Montague, and Whitehall in northwest Michigan to harvest celery, lettuce, and beets.34 The proximity of the fields allowed for this to happen with ease.

As Mexican migrants attempted to make industrial work their primary source of income, Puerto Ricans filled the resulting agricultural labor shortages in the late 1940s. They joined Mexican nationals and some Mexican Americans in West Michigan on fields and manufacturing factories. For example Juan Báez, who arrived in Grand Rapids in the early 1950s, came through this route. His friends and brothers, Juan and Rafael Pérez, asked him to join them in Saginaw, Michigan in 1948.35 The three bachelors arrived just two years before a large, planned migration of Puerto Ricans landed in Saginaw. In March of 1950, Michigan sugar beet companies solicited Puerto Rican men to alleviate their severe work shortage. The Farm Labor placement program sent 5000 Puerto Ricans men to over 50 locations in the state.36 About 50% of them worked in places near Saginaw in Eastern Michigan, including small towns like Pigeon, Hope, Kingston, Palgrove, and Gagetown. Almost a fourth of all workers went to towns with less than 200 people or areas that were unincorporated territories of counties. Small and mid-sized towns alike introduced challenges for these all male work crews. Matías Cabán, one of these contracted employees, wrote to inform the governor of Puerto Rico that his employer in Pigeon, Michigan ran out of work for them to do and thus ceased payments.37 While the governor suggested Cabán and his compatriots find work on other farms, many Puerto Ricans sought out areas where they could find industrial work or a way to combine employment in both areas.

The Migration Division of Puerto Rico’s Department of Labor also facilitated migration to Michigan in a variety of sectors. In 1947, the New York Office of the Migration Division opened to the public. Historian Virginia Sánchez-Korrol aptly describes their ‘primary responsibilities …[as] organizing and monitoring of the general migratory stream from Puerto Rico, including seasonal agricultural migration.’38 The Migration Division worked with the United States Employment Services and the Puerto Rican government to identify industries in need of workers and workers in need of jobs.39 Less than a year later, Chicago opened up its own office of the Migration Division.40 While more Divisions opened in East coast cities, reports from Chicago and eventually from a Cleveland office noted that there was a small Puerto Rican population in Grand Rapids and nearby cities like Lansing and Kalamazoo. The Division encouraged people to settle in those areas.41

Many of the Puerto Ricans who arrived in West Michigan via the Migration Division lived in rural Michigan before moving to the city. The small Puerto Rican population in Lake Odessa, Michigan in the 1950s reflected this trend. After leaving fields in Saginaw and Edmore, Michigan, Juan Báez and Juan and Rafael Pérez arrived in the small farming town thirty-five miles east of Grand Rapids.42 Puerto Ricans in Edmore experienced poor conditions as evident
by the letters they wrote to the Migration Division and Governor Luis Muñoz Marín about the pay and living conditions. Lake Odessa, however, proved to be a place of steady employment and fair treatment. Tejanos, Mexican Americans from Texas had settled in the area during World War II. They joined interned Japanese Americans, Jamaicans, and southern migrants both in the fields and at the Lake Odessa Canning Company, supplying food for the war. Within a few short years, a small and relatively stable Puerto Rican population emerged in Lake Odessa.

It is unclear how Nicolas Escribano, a Puerto Rican man, found his way to Lake Odessa, but when Báez and the Pérez brothers arrived, he was already living there. In fact, by 1951, according to a Pan American passenger manifest, Escribano engaged in circular migration, traveling back and forth from Lake Odessa to New York to San Juan in the early 1950s. His cousin moved to New York City in the mid-1940s, other family members still lived on the island, and he maintained seasonal employment in Lake Odessa. With his extended network and affordable plane tickets, Escribano lived in both urban and rural areas to meet his financial needs. He likely engaged in this type of migration to preserve a connection to Puerto Rican culture that was not possible quite yet in West Michigan. Not all migrants had those networks available or the means to be mobile, however. By 1955 farm work alone could not support these workers as many of their families eventually joined them in Michigan.

By the 1950s, Grand Rapids had changed dramatically in its demographic composition. Seeking an escape from dire economic situations and discriminatory treatment, Latinos and African Americans sought out West Michigan and other northern cities for job opportunities. In 1940, Kent County, the county in which Grand Rapids is situated, had about 2800 African Americans. By 1960, the black population had increased to 14,630. Likewise, the Mexican and Mexican American population increased exponentially during the war years. Though there were probably more, in 1940 the U.S. census only recorded only six Mexican families living in Grand Rapids. By 1945, the Diocese of Grand Rapids estimated that there were ‘100 families or 500 individuals’ living there. In 1950, the diocese estimated there were about 235 Mexican families in the city. About 10 Puerto Rican families had trickled in by 1950 and exponentially more by the 1960s.

Part of this demographic shift also included the hardening of the local racial hierarchy. Through federal policies in housing and war participation, Europeans succeeded in their quest for assimilation and ultimately secured their place as whites. Though many Europeans entered the country in a higher position on the racial hierarchy than African Americans and Latinos upon their arrival, it was not until World War II when the emphasis of their identity was no longer on their ethnic or national origins. For Latinos, however, their positions as ambiguously brown newcomers marked them as foreign and ultimately non-white. Opportunities for quality housing, education, and jobs privileged white residents, while marginalizing blacks, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans.

Despite the prevailing racial attitudes, staying in Grand Rapids offered Mexicans and Puerto Ricans a variety of work opportunities and what they deemed a safe environment for their children. In this early 1950s and 1960s period, Latinos built strong networks with one another that helped them make new lives in West Michigan. Sara and Lorenzo Ramirez, a Puerto Rican couple, decided to settle in Grand Rapids, after briefly living in New York. After Lorenzo walked off of his Farm Labor Placement job in 1951 in Edmore, Michigan, a friend he made on the fields, Rafael Amador, helped him find a job in Grand Rapids. After marrying and spending a couple years in the area, his wife missed her family and they moved
to New York to be closer to them. Just two years later, after concerns over his growing children’s contact with gangs, the family returned to Michigan.51 Other Latinos also saw Grand Rapids as a place for opportunities. The possibility of upward mobility drove Daniel Vargas and his wife Guadalupe out of Texas. They worried about the future their son, Magdeleno, would have if he stayed in south Texas in the 1940s. The subtle forms of discrimination they faced in the Midwest seemed to pale in comparison to the more overt racism they faced in Texas. In placing people in Grand Rapids or areas near it, the Migration Division showed Puerto Ricans an alternative to living in the nation’s largest urban centers. Once settled in the area, Latinos found ways to survive economically, socially, and culturally.

**Women and children’s expendable and flexible labor**

Though many of them hoped that settling in Grand Rapids meant that their days on the fields were over, some families quickly learned that their industrial jobs, while an improvement from picking, could not sustain them financially. Oral histories reveal that agriculture provided work for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans even if they held other jobs in manufacturing and railroads. These arrangements also elucidate the gendered arrangements within families as women and children held important roles in their family economies.52 Moreover, employers reserved certain types of work for Latinos and in particular, Latinas, revealing the legacies of racialized and gendered segmentation of labor.

In some families, every person held a responsibility to financially contribute. Parents used school breaks as a way to make up for economic shortfalls. Rafael Hernandez, whose Mexican mother and Puerto Rican father met on fields in Lake Odessa, recalled that he and his extended family traveled to surrounding areas during summer breaks. The Fernández family, who also owned a bar, took their oldest five children to the farms when they realized their regular income was not going to be enough to support all 12 members of their immediate family. This type of mixed sector work not only shows how Latinos made a living in West Michigan, but it also highlights the role that families, especially wives and children, play in ensuring their economic survival.

José Flores’ mother ensured that her family utilized school breaks as effectively as they could. He recalled how accessible the fields were for the Flores matriarch and her children. Primarily, they already had a familiarity with the area. They arrived via the migrant stream in the early 1960s from Texas and maintained connections with local farmers. He also recalled that to get to Hudsonville, a rural area close to Grand Rapids, ‘that was a very short commute,’ allowing them to work on the fields and then drive to their home in Grand Rapids the same day. For other trips, the family ventured about forty-five miles away and spent the summer in areas like Lakeview and Edmore, Michigan. Though some years they would find themselves working along relatives from Texas who had migrated north from the season, it was usually just José, his siblings, and their mother. He recalled,

> my mom would make sure we got out there … we had goals, how many rows we would do before 9 or before 11. [She brought] … water, for washing our hands and for our basic cleanliness, [because there] were no restroom facilities … My mom had it all planned out–from how much we were going to need for our school clothes…

She utilized every member of the family to achieve that end. José recalled the family motto as ‘if you’re old enough to walk our old enough to pick.’ As a wife and mother, Rosa Flores, took on the responsibility for the short and long-term economic planning for her family. Her
precise calculations meant the family could afford the basic necessities of clothes, food, and housing, without having to leave West Michigan.

This type of work and movement between the city and countryside took a toll on these young people. Lila Paiz García’s experiences with dilapidated farm housing in Grant and an education system that did not meet her needs as an English language learner in Grand Rapids, led her to leave school all together at 16 years of age. Experiencing poverty in both cities and farms in the 1960s made her feel that she did not have many options. As a middle school aged boy, José Flores recalled that while other people were taking trips for their summer break, he and his family ‘were vacationing in the fields.’ His time away from Grand Rapids consisted of wearing holes into his blue jeans and walking around with blue hands, stained from blueberries. Disillusioned with his own academic experiences and early working life, he later became a teacher and activist for Latinos in West Michigan. While both Lila and José understood how necessary the work they did with their family was, these experiences drastically influenced their lives.

While youth played an important role in contributing to their families, it was women who organized this arrangement. In the 1960s, it was often women who took on the role of the mobile, expendable worker. After their time in the fields was done and their children returned to school, they sought out higher paying work than what they had access to as temporary agricultural workers. Many of them found openings in the commercial nursery industry. Lila Paiz Garcia eventually did. First, however, in a desperate attempt to find higher paying work, at 14 years old she lied about her age and obtained employment at a factory. While there were some other women working there, they were all over 16. Within months she was found out and began her job search again. She knew that Molesta Floral, a family-owned commercial nursery, would be one of the next places she would seek out. The heavy presence of Spanish-speaking women in those positions led her to believe she could get hired there. Lila noted the gender and racial dynamics of her employer: white women and men only worked in the front of the shop; a few Mexican men worked in the back packing flowers; and Mexican and Puerto Rican women made up the majority of manual labor in this operation. In this type of work, she took delicate care of the flowers similar to the way she would care for produce on the farms in rural West Michigan and she also engaged in a routinized packing process, similar to both farm labor and her job at a manufacturing plant. This nursery in Grand Rapids allowed Lila and others to contribute to the financial interdependence their families practiced.

Other nurseries, however, were located outside of Grand Rapids’ city limits, leading women to travel to rural areas. After moving to Grand Rapids with her husband from Florida, Luz María Zambrana sought out other Puerto Ricans in her neighborhood to help her get adjusted to the area. A friend, Luisa Fernández, who had worked outside of her home since the 1950s, recommended a position at her job. Together they worked at a commercial nursery in nearby Borculo, a small farming town near other agricultural areas like Zeeland and Holland, Michigan. With a couple more Latinas, Luz and Luisa traveled the thirty minutes to work together. However, since most families only had one vehicle and many of the women did not have licenses, their husbands took turns driving them. The smaller size of Grand Rapids allowed Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to find creative ways to maintain themselves economically. Moreover, with men working relatively stable jobs in manufacturing, women worked together to find ways to support their families by effectively using the space around them.
Meeting their leisure and recreational needs

Boundaries between urban and rural space did not mean much for the social geography Latinos created. Recreational needs motivated the movement of people back and forth from the city to the rural areas as early as the 1940s. After World War II, Mexicans in Grand Rapids formed a baseball team to participate in a ‘Mexican league’ that played against other Spanish-speaking men in west and central Michigan. Grand Rapids had all-white women’s and men’s baseball leagues, and a Negro league in the first half of the twentieth century. Without access to those teams, many members of the Spanish-speaking community met at Rumsey Park, on the Southwest side of Grand Rapids and had to not only form their own team, but also seek out teams to play against. Grand Rapids’ Latino team often traveled to Grant, Michigan for example. This agricultural area was home to less than 500 people, but they had a sizeable Mexican American population that was present for the summers at the very least. María Aguilar, who arrived in Grand Rapids in the late 1940s with her family from Texas, remembered watching her brothers and in-laws play together and travel together to games. Even when Puerto Ricans joined them in the 1950s and their team grew, they still did not have enough people to form their own leagues until the 1960s. Until then, the team continued to travel around Michigan. For Latinos, this pastime connected them to other Spanish-speaking people and other areas outside of Grand Rapids.

Pool halls, dances, and movies also encouraged Latinos to travel for recreation. As a small, majority white city, Grand Rapids did not always offer its Spanish-speaking residents many culturally relevant opportunities for leisure. In some cases, Latinos were outright excluded from particular venues. In one instance, the Moose Lodge, a fraternal organization, denied Miguel Navarro membership solely due to his Mexican heritage. While other occasions were not always reported, for Latinos living in this area, they found it more feasible to create their own establishments rather than gain entry into white-dominated spaces. On the other hand, rural areas, while some had communities of Latinos, might not have had the venues available to support their desired social activities.

This amounted to movement between places so people could find enjoyment in their lives. For example, Abrán Martínez relocated from Puerto Rico to Holland, Michigan after his brother had first found work there. After working long hours picking strawberries and blueberries, Abrán often traveled the thirty miles to Grand Rapids. While Holland had a sizeable Latino population, Grand Rapids’ offered him the chance to visit with other Puerto Ricans at a local pool hall in a Latino neighborhood in Grand Rapids. After hanging out with friends, he would return to Holland. Grand Rapids also offered a movie theater that regularly played Spanish language films, likely drawing people in from surrounding areas.

In contrast, Lila Paiz Garcia often sought out rural areas for her entertainment. While she was a teenager in Grand Rapids, she would visit her sister in Grant and attend dances hosted in the area. Though community members often organized dances in Grand Rapids, they often arranged for local family bands to play. The Mexican American community in Grant, most of whom were from Texas, pooled their resources to bring Tejano bands from home. With a larger proportion of Mexican Americans from Texas in Grand Rapids, it is likely that Lila was not the only person that headed to Grant or other areas for a dance.

Other families also moved between the rural periphery and urban center for their religious needs. In many small towns around Michigan, small Catholic Churches existed in the early 1940s and 1950s. In some areas, however, there were neither Spanish masses nor a large
congregation of Latinos, causing some people to come to the city for their sacraments. Evidence of these migration and settlement patterns appear in baptismal records in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The priest at St. Andrew’s Cathedral in Grand Rapids baptized many Mexican American children born in rural Michigan in towns such as Freemont, Cedar Springs, Zeeland, and Lakeview, all of which were twenty to fifty miles away. One of these children, Carlos Mancha, born to Tejano parents in 1951 thirty miles away in Grant, Michigan, was baptized in Grand Rapids in 1952. The Mancha family, however, did not stay in Grand Rapids, but instead returned to Grant as they aged. Other evidence that shows Latinos moved throughout varying spaces for their religious needs. For example, though the Aguilar family lived in Hudsonville, they made the thirteen-mile trip from the farm they worked on to the Cathedral of St. Andrew’s in Grand Rapids every Sunday. The family arrived in Grand Rapids in 1948 after the family’s patriarch found a winter job in Grand Rapids. Though they eventually decided to move to Grand Rapids, it was only after the diocese offered Aguilar’s father a job as caretaker for the Latino church that recently formed. For the Aguilers and many other Latinos their mobility created opportunities for social interaction with one another and financial security.

**Activism across boundaries**

The community also had a long history of organizing, both formally and informally, for the needs of people in both rural and urban West Michigan. As early as the late 1930s, Mexican migrants set up the Sociedad Circulo Mutualista, a mutual aid society that helped to collect funds for emergencies and settling new migrants. While, the Mutualista was a very formal process for outreach, many of its members took on very personal roles in helping people. For example, Daniel Vargas, a Mexican man involved in the Mutualista, helped many of the Spanish-speaking people who came to the city in his own home. His daughter recalled, in the 1950s and 1960s ‘my dad would go out the camps all the times [and] when the families would come into Grand Rapids. … I remember as a child my house was always full with all the families.’ She also remembered the role her mother, Guadalupe, played in collecting the clothes her children had grown out of and those of her friends for donation to these new families. In reflecting on her husband’s role, Guadalupe recalled,

Daniel andaba con la iglesia y la iglesia católica le daba much en esos tiempos … colectamos la ropa. Había un lugar, una panadería, que le daban pan, y todo eso le daban a la gente que no tenía.

[Daniel was involved with the Catholic Church … and the church gave a lot to us in those times … we collected clothes. There was a bakery that used to give us bread. We gave all that to the people who did not have anything].

Through Vargas’ work on the fields, when migrants would come into the city, they could count on shelter, clothing, and food that his wife and family supplied.

With a continuous influx of people moving from urban to rural areas, Latinos based in Grand Rapids used all of the resources available to them to help people survive in Michigan. Luisa Fernández and her family routinely opened their homes in a similar fashion, to the Puerto Ricans who arrived in Grand Rapids. Her children recalled her making large pots of rice for the various visitors that came through their home. Many of the Latinos living in Grand Rapids had just recently come off of the fields themselves, leaving the struggles of migratory
and rural work fresh in their minds. When some of those families looked to settle out, they utilized both familial and fictive kinship networks to help them in getting off of the fields.

As the community grew in the late 1940s, Daniel Vargas and other Mexican Americans created the Mexican Patriotic Committee. Part of the goals of the organization included celebrating and retaining Mexican culture and continuing to help Mexicans settle in Grand Rapids. While it was named for the larger Mexican population, Puerto Ricans participated and served in leadership positions since the 1940s. During that same period, the community combined cultural celebrations and fundraising efforts for farm working families. For celebrations of Mexican Independence or the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the community would hold dances and sell tickets. They also instituted a ‘queen of the festival’ contest, in which teenage girls would compete for the title of queen of the festival. Whoever sold the most tickets would win the title, while the profits from the contest and dances went to aid Latino migrants to the area. Latinos in urban Grand Rapids did not forget about their family and friends on the fields.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, both rural and urban areas in West Michigan dealt with high poverty rates and an increasing population. The Holland United Migrants for Opportunity office estimated that over 50,000 people worked temporarily on Michigan fields in 1971. In Grand Rapids, Puerto Ricans coming from rural areas on the island, Mexican and Mexican American migrants, and Cuban refugees were all arriving during this time period. In 1968 there were about 7000 Latinos in West Michigan and just four short years later, the population reached about 11,000. The rapid growth in the population and the beginning of deindustrialization in Grand Rapids meant that Latinos who arrived in the 1970s did not face the same economic dynamics their forebears found in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The dire position of so many of Latinos motivated them to organize against the economic and social marginalization they faced.

Federal government officials reacted to activism opposing this discrimination with the creation of several programs that constituted the War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s initiative to eliminate socioeconomic inequality. One of these programs gave the Latino community funds to address the issues they faced in Grand Rapids. Originally called the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966, the Model Cities program aimed to address poverty and crisis in the inner cities. By the 1970s, Grand Rapids, though a much smaller metropolis than Chicago or Detroit, had experienced much of the same issues these places had, including a riot, failing public schools, and rapid deindustrialization. The Model Cities program focused on allowing poor people a voice in deciding how their city should address their needs. When Latinos accessed Model City funds, in the 1970s they used their voice not to just address the needs of Latinos in cities as the program was designed for, but also to aid migrants who lived and worked rural areas.

Throughout the 1960s, Latinos continued to host events and conduct their own fundraisers to help Spanish-speaking people across West Michigan, but it became abundantly clear that the community alone could not solve the devastating poverty they faced. According to the 1970 census, half of families lived below poverty and one-third did not have a job on the Southwest side, the area where many Latinos settled. Likewise, about 10% of the families in the rural areas of Kent County in which Grand Rapids, lived in poverty. During the 1960s, the War on Poverty aimed to address issues inner cities faced including access to jobs, fair housing, and education. Similar concerns also surfaced for migrant workers in large part due to the activism of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers (UFW) in
California and the work Midwest labor organizers did on behalf of those migrants in the region.75

Activists in Michigan, however, did not view labor issues in California and Michigan as exactly the same. Roy Fuentes, director of the Northern Michigan region of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, drew stark contrasts in the different geographical and cultural contexts. ‘The culture in the southwest is less alien to the migrant, and the numbers are more substantial,’ he wrote about the limitations of activism for farmworkers in Michigan. Despite not having a large Latino population in Michigan, in a 1968 report, Fuentes argued that these ‘factors do not minimize the need for the eradication of such gross injustices by those institutions which are Michigan based and financed.’76 It is important to underscore that in a smaller urban area like West Michigan due to spatial proximity, the issues that plagued laborers existed both on the fields and in the urban center.

Fuentes also believed in an interconnectedness within Latinos in urban and rural areas. He urged readers of his report to remember the vulnerable position of those working and living in desolate conditions on farms and added that there was also a ‘systematic exploitation and exclusion of [those Latinos] who have only recently escaped into an urban marginality.’ Moreover, he called for unity among Latinos living in both urban and rural spaces. He passionately pointed out ‘urban Latins will not rest until their brother in the field receives better treatment.’77 This call resonated with Latinos in Grand Rapids. For some of them, quite literally, their brothers were in the fields while they worked at industrial jobs. It could also have just as feasibly been the wives and children of those ‘urban Latins’ who were toiling in agricultural work.

On a local level, activist Daniel Vargas understood the particular challenges Latinos faced when they tried to stay in urban centers after migrant work. In his positions as the first and only Latino member of the Human Relations Commission of Grand Rapids and as a part of the Governor’s Committee on Migrant Workers in 1965, he penned a report detailing the challenges Latinos in Grand Rapids, Michigan.78 The HRC, a commission charged with ‘fostering mutual understanding and respect among all racial, religious and nationality groups,’ worked specifically with issues related to the onset of the urban crisis including equal access to quality education, jobs, housing, and police brutality, while the latter committee dealt specifically with migrant workers.79 For Vargas, a Mexican American man and former farm worker who migrated from Texas in the early 1940s, his concern for Latinos in the state of Michigan pertained to both urban and rural areas. His membership on both committees reflected that position.

To address these issues, the city of Grand Rapids applied for War on Poverty funds to address urban blight and the state government commissioned several task forces to investigate the conditions migrant farm labor faced at the behest of farmworker advocates.80 While urban workers faced the realities of deindustrialization, the mechanization of farm work created continuous problems for rural workers. According to Fuentes’ 1969 report, mechanization would ‘reduce the migrant labor force by 47% over the next 10 years. This could mean that 42,300 more poor people will move into Michigan cities.’81 This prediction emphasized the related nature of both industry and agricultural for Latin/oos who made up the majority of rural workers. Daniel Vargas recognized this connection and took up both causes in an effort to help Latinos in the region advance socially and economically. To address these issues, however, activists needed an innovative approach. In the context of Michigan,
wherein there was not a large presence of Latinos to carry out large-scale demonstrations so prevalent in California or Texas, organizing would have to happen differently. In West Michigan, the conditions necessitated a more institutionalized activism that utilized federal funds to help people across spatial contexts.

In 1971, the Latin American Council, a grassroots organization formed in 1968, agreed to become an official Model Cities program and accepted funds to run their operations. The lack of Spanish-speaking employees at any of the city’s social service agencies drove Latinos to organize for their needs. When they first started, the LAC operated on a volunteer basis and aided residents in accessing social services, locating employment, and providing cultural programming. The availability of federal funding opened up the possibility to expand their operations. Some in the community were wary of any level of government intervention even if it came in the form of funding. Despite their hesitations, however, the LAC accepted the funds and thus institutionalized the methods of organizing they had been employing since they arrived. Due to their new, expanded budget, the Council hired a staff and appointed a board of directors. In addition, their programs and the amount of people they helped grew exponentially.

The LAC quickly became the center for organizing and cultural retention for Latinos in Grand Rapids. Various reports from the LAC point to an organization that saw urban crisis as just part of the problems they addressed. They used funds designed to stop urban blight to help rural Latino migrations. The LAC openly argued for more funds because of the population they served. Part of accepting the Model Cities funds included a stipulation that the programming would target area an urban city. They explained that Latinos did not just live in Grand Rapids, but rather throughout Kent County in rural areas and their mobility made their target area and specific population difficult to define. They often found that the number of people they assisted fluctuated from 200 to 400 people a month depending on the season. Moreover, migrant workers from the surrounding areas, who might not have held a permanent residence in Grand Rapids, sought out the LAC to utilize the food pantry, clothing donations, and in many cases, a lead for a job that would take them off of the migrant circuit.

In some cases, particular incidents in rural areas directly affected the way the Latin American Council operated. For example, a late spring frost in May of 1972 destroyed West Michigan’s blueberry crop, displacing 3000 migrant laborers. While some of them sought out the United Migrant Opportunity Initiative, others temporarily relocated to the Model Cities’ neighborhood in Grand Rapids and sought services from the Model Cities program and the Latin American Council. They crafted their programming to serve Latinos who lived in Grand Rapids for a long period of time, those migrant workers who were only in the area temporarily, and those who were living and working in nearby rural areas.

In approaching their community’s issues in this multifaceted way, the Latin American Council and its staff reframed what were the most pressing issues that those in poverty faced and how to address them. In addition to this position, the LAC, like other community organizations across the country, also openly supported the United Farm Workers. In a 1973 press release, the LAC Board of Directors wrote they had voted to support the UFW. The BOD stated, ‘we are pledged to do all in our power to help the United Farm Workers obtain just contracts for our people.’ The LAC also supported efforts of the United Migrants for Opportunity. In Michigan, this organization concentrated their efforts in helping migrant workers, exclusively. With organizations working directly to address migrants, the LAC
found ways to complement them. While the War on Poverty programs the LAC used were not designed to address rural poverty directly, the LAC expanded the model to fit their constituents’ needs. This strategic decision reflected this community’s long history of living and working in between and among the boundaries of urban and rural space.

Conclusion

For Latinos in West Michigan, the conditions they faced were not relegated to solely urban areas and industrial work or agricultural areas and rural work. Rather, Latinos moved fluidly between these spaces. The decision to do that and the process of moving between sectors, however, were not done lightly. Fuentes, Michigan Civil Rights Commissioner, remarked ‘those who have broken away from the migrant stream have done so with tremendous courage.’86 From Lila Paiz Garcia’s story we also understand that these movements for labor were also out of desperation. During her teenage years, her life was never fully supplanted in one area – urban or rural – or another. With some of her family living in Grant and others in Grand Rapids, she moved between these spaces to meet all of her needs. Whether it was dancing at a baile in the countryside or lying about her age to work at a manufacturing plant, she utilized every space at her disposable to make a life of her own in Grand Rapids. When she finally left Grand Rapids, it was only because the high paying, industrial job she longed for throughout her childhood and teenage years had finally opened up. As a newlywed in her early twenties, she and her husband landed jobs in nearby Lansing, Michigan at a General Motors plant. The road to that coveted position was not easy, but necessary.

Like Lila, Latinos in West Michigan found ways to make this region their home. They sought out dances and pool halls and Catholic Churches for sacraments in order to construct a safe environment in an unwelcoming area. Latino leaders are remembered for their efforts in pioneering those Latino centered activities. Activists within the Latin American Council found a way to direct War on Poverty funds through the Model Cities to help Latinos in both urban and rural areas, though the program was for aiding cities. In examining Latinos mobility in these spaces, we see that their lived experiences were not confined within one labor sector or geographical area, thus neither were their recreational activities and activism.

As Latinos move into the South and other regions where they have not traditionally lived, researchers can look to the Midwest and Grand Rapids to understand their experiences in a place wherein they are not the majority and live as marginalized peoples in their economies. Researchers might find that while the availability of jobs for men drives labor migration, women play equally important roles through their economic planning and contributions. They might also look to the recreational activities that these laborers engage in to better understand how they utilize space to fulfill their social needs. Taking into account this history of West Michigan, future projects should reexamine the traditional boundaries of study to better match the lived experiences of people who combine multi-sector work in an ever-changing economy.

Notes

2. Robinson, A City within a City, xi. For an analysis on the role that religion played in the Dutch community’s life, see Zwart, “Constructing the Homeland.”
3. The disparities among Grand Rapids’ white and non-white population widened and resulted in rising tension in the area. For example, white families’ incomes were 65% higher than non-white families in the 1960s. Latinos, in particular, experienced a 69% drop out rate in the late 1960s. In addition, a three-day urban rebellion occurred in Grand Rapids in July of 1967. It is important to recognize that Latinos occupied an ambiguous position within the city’s bifurcated racial hierarchy among African Americans and whites. By the 1950s, during these years, European immigrants had claimed a stake to American whiteness while local whites had unequivocally cast the small population of Southern African American migrants in the city as ‘black.’ These rigid classifications did not work for Latinos. Darker Puerto Ricans, specifically, were often mistaken for African Americans until their English language skills were tested. Lighter Puerto Ricans and Mexicans may have tried to pass for white as a way to avoid discrimination but again their use of Spanish marked them as conspicuously foreign and ultimately, not white nor black.

4. In much of the Midwest, various manufacturing industries attracted Mexican workers, but Grand Rapids did not have a singular pull. See Innis-Jimenez, Steel Barrio; Arredondo Mexican Chicago; Fernández, Brown in the Windy City; and Vargas, Proletarians of the North for more information on Latinos and the industrial Midwest.

5. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans living and working together is itself a unique situation. Their interactions together as early as the 1940s and 1950s are very much limited to the Midwest. While this topic is of interest, that is not the focus of this article. See Delia Fernandez, “Becoming Latino” for more information on their interactions.

6. In the Midwest, comparable cities would include Lorain, Ohio; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; or East Chicago, Indiana, for example. Moreover, studying cities outside of the major seven metropolises in the United States illustrates how Latinos outside of those areas lived their lives. In correlation, much of the work done on Latinos in the U.S. focuses on New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other large cities. While many Latinos live in larger cities than that of Grand Rapids, there is much less research done on the over 200 cities with a population between 100,000 and 250,000. 66% of the Latino population lives outside of the major cities according to Brown and Lopez, “Mapping the Latino Population.”

7. For texts on Latinos in rural or agricultural work, see the following selected works: Barajas, Curious Unions; Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects; Duany, “A Transnational Colonial Migration”; Ferriss, Sandoval, and Hembree, The Fight in the Fields; Findlay, We Are Left without a Father Here; Guerin-Gonzales, Mexican Workers and American Dreams; and Martin, Promise Unfulfilled. For texts on Latinos in urban areas or industrial work, see the following selected works: Fernandez, Brown in the Windy City; Garcia, A World of its Own; Garcilazo, Traqueros; Innis-Jiménez, Steel Barrio; Moralez, “Settling Out and Fitting In”; Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen; Valdés, Barrios Nortenos; Valle and Torres, Latino Metropolis; Vargas, Proletarians of the North; and Whalen, From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia.

8. See Arredondo, Mexican Chicago; Fernandez, Brown in the Windy City; Rodriguez, Tejano Diaspora; Vargas, Proletarians of the North. Instead, Grand Rapids might be more akin to Milwaukee; a place where Latinos moved for labor and in turn their activism followed the same geographical patterns.

9. Garcia, A World of its Own and Soja, Postmodern Geographies. This framework also references work by canonical historians of the southwest. See, McWilliams, Factories in the Field and Guerin-Gonzales, “Conversing across Boundaries.” In studying major cities or rural areas, Latino historians have not been able to aptly address the nuances of Latino labor arrangements in areas where they needed to combine a variety of work for economic survival.

10. This work expands on the ways we know that women have creatively found ways to provide for their families. Latinas who meticulously planned out how many rows a family needed to harvest to make it through the winter are akin to African American women and Latina women who have found work in informal markets, see Harris, Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners; Lisa Fine, The Souls of Skyscrapers; Enstad, Ladies of Labor; Orleck, Storming Caesar’s Palace; and Vargas; Proletarians of the North.

11. McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 71.
Some of these oral histories are drawn from a project undertaken by several Grand Rapids’ area institutions including Calvin College, Grand Valley state University, and the Grand Rapids Public Library, among others. These oral histories are accessible via the Grand Rapids Public Library. I conducted other oral histories for this project and others. Those transcripts are in my possession.

I use Spanish-Speaking, Latin American, and Latino to refer to Mexicans and Puerto Ricans collectively, who referred to themselves by these terms over the scope of this study.


Garcilazo, 48.
17. Garcilazo, 68.
Pedro López arrest record, Arrest Book #1, Grand Rapids City Archives (GRCA).
Ibid.
For a detailed look at Mexicans in Detroit, see Vargas, Proletarians of the North.
Juanita Vásquez, interview with author, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011.
Valdez, Barrios Norteños, 50.
See Vargas, Proletarians of the North.
For information on the furniture industry see Carron, Grand Rapids Furniture; For information on Grand Rapids during wartime see Harms and Viol, Grand Rapids Goes to War; and Jelks, African Americans in the Furniture City. For postwar histories on Grand Rapids see Olson and Lovell, Grand Rapids, a City Renewed; Robinson, A City Within a City. For histories on African Americans in Grand Rapids, see Jelks, African Americans in the Furniture City; Robinson, A City within a City. For a history of Latinos in Grand Rapids, see Fernandez, “Becoming Latino.”

In Grand Rapids no such repatriation campaigns occurred. County and federal officials targeted Mexicans in the Southwestern United States particularly, but the Midwest also experienced forced and voluntary repatriation during the 1930s. In large and small cities alike, Mexicans left en masse. Reviewing records for the Detroit and Chicago consulates revealed that Mexicans living in Grand Rapids, Lansing, or Kalamazoo were not on lists for voluntary repatriation or forced deportation.

Frank Arredondo, Polks’ Grand Rapids City Directory, 1930 and 1937, GRPL.
Guadalupe Vargas, interview with author, 1997, LMWC, 321, GRPL.
Juanita Rincones, interview with Gordon Olson, Grand Rapids, 2000, LMWC, 321, GRPL.
Daniel Vásquez, interview with Gordon Olson, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Undated, LMWC, 321, GRPL; Mike Neimann, “The Latins’ Voice Grows Louder Here.”
I examined at 50 Spanish-surnamed families listed in the Polk’s Grand Rapids City directory and recorded their listed employment to calculate this data. Polk’s Grand Rapids City Directory, 1946–1954, GRPL.
Juan Báez, interview with author, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2011.
Eileen Findlay includes an in-depth analysis of the workers’ responses to the issues they faced on the fields. She explains their actions as a part of a larger process of bregando, (struggling or
negotiating) with both the Puerto Rican government and their position as colonial subjects. See chapter 4 in We are Left Here without a Father.


38. Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 35.

39. Ibid.

40. Fernández, Brown in the Windy City, 49.


42. Juan Báez, interview with author, Grand Rapids, 2011.

43. Louis A. Delgado to John Kearney, “Field Trip to Niles, Michigan, January 4, 1960” Department of Labor-Migration Division, Chicago Regional Office, Box 2402, Folder 861, OGPRUS.

44. Bob Reed, telephone interview by author, August 24, 2011.


This number did not take into account Mexican Americans and likely also did not count migrant workers who were in the city only for seasonal work.


49. See the following works for information on whiteness and racial formation: Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color; Gerstle, American Crucible; Katznelson, When Affirmative Action Was White.

50. I draw on Thomas Guglielmo’s work on Italians in Chicago for this framework. See Guglielmo, White on Arrival.

51. Francisco Sánchez, Polk’s Grand Rapids City Directory, 1958. GRPL; Lorenzo Ramirez, Polk’s Grand Rapids City Directory, 1956, GRPL.

52. Historian Eduardo Moralez has noted that women have played this integral role in their families throughout the Midwest. See Moralez, “Settling Out and Fitting In.” There are numerous histories on Latina’s contributions to their family economies. See Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows as a canonical example of this work. For a history of Mexican American and Latina women as central actors in migrations, see Ruiz and Chávez, eds., Memories and Migrations. For the history of how Mexican women migrants organized and shaped the Mexican community in Chicago before World War II, see Arredondo, Mexican Chicago.


54. Jose Flores, interview via the Community House Senior Histories program, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2016.

55. Ibid.


57. This type of recreational exclusion was common practice across the country and throughout the twentieth century. Depending on the geographical context, Latinos may have been excluded from white-only recreational spaces leading them to create their own. See Alamillo, Making Lemonade out of Lemons, for an example in California. Latinos were excluded as part of the same processes that kept African Americans out of recreational spaces. See Wolcott, Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters.


59. Employer Record Cards for Gilden Co, Green Acres Turf, H.J. Heinz Co, Holcombe Sod Farms, Dawn Fresh Mushroom, and Bill Mar Foods, Box 2402, Folder 861, OGPRUS.


61. Armando Araiza, January 24, 1949, Cedar Springs, Michigan; Vidal Guzman, October 18, 1952, Freemont, Michigan; Jose Vladimir Saldivar, June 23, 1953, Zeeland, Michigan; and Juanita Pena, April 12, 1954, Lakeview, Michigan; Birthdates and locations, Baptismal Records, St. Andrew’s Cathedral.
62. Carlos Mancha, St. Andrew’s Cathedral, Baptism Record, February 2, 1953.
64. Maria Ysasi, interview with author, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2012.
65. For more information on mutual aid societies in the Midwest see Arredondo, Mexican Chicago.
66. Guadalupe Vargas, interview with Gordon Olson, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1997, LMWC, GRPL.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
70. Latin American Council, Monitor Report, October 2, 1971, LAC, GRCA.
72. It is important to note that the War on Poverty and its programs, including the Model Cities program, did not solve poverty. Historian, Eric Foner aptly declared that the federal government did not consider guaranteeing an annual income for all Americans, creating jobs for the unemployed, promoting the spread of unionization, or making it more difficult for business to shift production to the low-wage south or overseas . . . in attempting to eradicate inequality. Eric Foner, Give Me Liberty! In Grand Rapids, however, the activism that Latinos carried out made a difference in the lives for whom they advocated. This, therefore, is not a critique of the War on Poverty, but rather a pragmatic evaluation of the effects of the program.
73. Census Bureau, Table B-2, SMSA 1–22, Selected Characteristics of Persons and Families by Residence in Census Tracts with Poverty Rate 20% or More: 1970.
74. “Rural Poverty”.
75. Acuña, Occupied America; Ferriss, Sandoval, and Hembree. The Fight in the Fields; García, ed. The Chicano Movement.
77. Fuentes, “Problems of Migrant Workers,” 1.
78. Daniel Vargas, “Giving the Poor a Voice in Their Own Destiny” Michigan Welfare League Conference, Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 16, 1965, Box 14, Folder 10, HRC, GRCA.
79. Daniel Vargas, “Governor’s Commission on Migrant Labor” Grand Rapids, Michigan June 3, 1964, Box 14, Folder 10, HRC, GRCA.
80. Barajas, Curious Unions; Rodriguez, Tejano Diaspora; and Rodriguez, Migrants for Export.
82. Monthly narrative, Latin American Council, March 1972, MC, LAC, GRCA.
83. Latin American Council, Monitor Report, June 2, 1972, LAC, GRCA.
84. “Latin American council Endorsement of the United Farm Workers,” Board of Directors, September 17, 1973, LAC, GRCA.
85. In Milwaukee, United Migrants for Opportunity Services (UMOS) started helping migrants but expanded their services to include urban living Latinos. UMOS received funding from the Equal Opportunity Act, section IIIB, which was designated for migrant workers. Rodriguez’ work on UMOS only furthers the notion that Latinos were resourceful in expanding the definitions of the federal funding they received to address the concerns of mobile workers.
86. Few scholars examine this process in the Midwest. See Green, Del Valle a Willmar; Moralez, “Settling Out and Fitting In.”

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