

BETWEEN BORDERS:

Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History



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**MANUELA SOLIS SAGER
AND EMMA B. TENAYUCA:
A TRIBUTE¹**

by

Roberto R. Calderón and Emilio Zamora

One of the most memorable highlights of the annual conferences of the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS) has been the formal recognition of the work of Américo Paredes, Ernesto Galarza, Carey McWilliams and Julian Samora. In recognizing and honoring the accomplishments and contributions of these scholars to our history and culture, NACS paid tribute to the purpose and will that guided their scholarly and political contributions to Mexican people.

In 1984 the NACS conference extended this tradition by honoring Manuela Solis Sager and Emma B. Tenayuca, two labor activists who organized and led Mexican workers' movements in Texas during the 1930s.² In doing so, NACS acknowledged the key role of women in our history of struggle and underscored the need to bring this knowledge to the classroom and explore it in our research. This event like many others which have honored Manuela and Emma gave recognition to the commitment, courage and dedication these women displayed during a turbulent period in this country's history. They were also the first women to be thus honored and recognized by NACS since its inception twelve years ago.

We wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Leticia López, Oscar R. Martí and María Ortiz. We also appreciate the support given by the Chicano Studies Center, UCLA, the sponsor of this effort. Most importantly, we are grateful to Manuela Solis Sager and Emma B. Tenayuca for sharing with us those distant yet inspiring moments in the struggle.

Manuela's and Emma's intellectual formation was strongly impacted by social and political developments they had experienced while growing up in South Texas, many of these experiences they shared in common with other inhabitants of Mexican communities of the Southwest. Their families had nurtured the pride, love and concern which conditioned their personal experiences as individuals and as Mexicans during the early decades of the century.

Both women credit their families for giving them a sense of compassion for their neighbors and respect for fairness which would later play an important role in their fight for the rights of Mexican workers. Theirs was a community in which self-help, cooperation and protest activities were part of the cultural milieu and political environment of their childhood. All too familiar with conditions of social inequality and discrimination against people of color, their strong ties to their Mexican origins and their early exposure to Mexican political and cultural events reinforced in them a nationalist and working class identity. Their memories are clear on this.

Profile of Mexican Workers

A short note on the conditions that gave rise to Mexican labor activity during the 1930s is in order. The first three decades of the twentieth century registered the dramatic rise and urbanization of Mexicans in the United States, in part, this was the result of an increase in immigration from Mexico. By 1930, approximately 40 percent of this country's total Mexican population resided in Texas and 30 percent in California. The significant expansion of the U.S. national economy, particularly evident in the industrial development of the Southwest, stimulated this growth and concentration. Discrimination against Mexican workers, however, denied them fair wages and relegated them to unskilled occupations. In 1930 this condition is revealed by the following statistics: 41 percent of all employed Mexicans worked in agriculture; 11 percent in transportation; 3 percent in mining; 23 percent in manufacturing; and 10 percent in domestic and personal services. That is, 88 percent of all Mexican workers in the United States were employed in low-paying, unskilled occupations.

Also, the participation of Mexican women in wage labor increased noticeably. They worked at even lower-paying,

segregated jobs representative of extensions of housework. In 1930, twenty percent of Mexican workers were farm workers; 45 percent were domestic and personal service workers; some 5 percent were saleswomen; with the remainder employed in textiles, food processing and packing industries.

As in earlier periods, opposition to discrimination and inequality gave rise to increased labor organizing and strike activity among Mexicans throughout the United States. Independent Mexican workers' organizations sought affiliation with national labor unions. And they were welcomed by the more progressive labor federations such as the Workers Alliance of America and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). Membership figures suggest the participation of Mexican workers registered greater numbers for these progressive labor unions than for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). These figures also indicate Mexican workers' organizations were an important part of the unionization strategies of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) in contrast to that of the exclusive, craft-oriented AFL. Importantly, the activism of Mexicans in the labor movement of the 1930s was enhanced as never before by the growing number of female Mexican workers. Women such as Manuela Solis Sager and Emma B. Tenayuca played crucial roles in the leadership of these historic labor struggles.

Leadership Activity

Manuela's history as an activist began in Laredo, Texas between 1932 and 1933 when she helped organize unions and strikes among garment and agricultural workers. By 1934 she had gained the respect and admiration of fellow agricultural workers and was awarded by La Asociación de Jornaleros a year-long scholarship to attend the highly respected Universidad Obrera, a leftist labor school in Mexico City. Upon her return to Laredo, she joined her husband, James Sager, and other Laredo unionists in consolidating local efforts into a statewide Mexican labor movement. This resulted in a statewide conference held in 1935 at Corpus Christi which attracted delegates representing numerous Mexican community organizations including labor unions and other community collectivities.

The Corpus Christi conference established the South Texas Agricultural Workers Union (STAWU) which was to coordinate

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organizing work among Mexican workers, particularly field and packing shed workers. Manuela and James were appointed official organizers for the STAWU. The STAWU's decision to give them the responsibility of organizing the entire Rio Grande Valley is indicative of the confidence their ability and dedication had earned them. Indeed, the area was known as one of the most difficult places to organize, principally because of strong anti-Mexican and anti-union sentiments held by growers, packing shed owners and law enforcement officials.

Despite strong opposition and violent union busting tactics, Manuela and James managed to assist workers in organizing several Mexican unions totaling a membership of over 1,000 field and packing shed workers. Recalcitrant bosses, however, made it almost impossible to translate labor organizing success into gains at the workplace. After serious deliberation, Manuela and James decided to leave for San Antonio to meet with organizers from throughout the state. In San Antonio the possibility of bringing to fruition a major Mexican labor victory seemed tenable.

Once there, both husband and wife became an integral part of a formidable labor strike by Mexican pecan shellers, the majority of whom were women. They joined with union members and union leadership such as Emma Tenayuca with whom they had been in contact since the early 1930s. Since Emma was so intimately tied to the events of these early labor struggles, it is impossible to speak of one without the other.

Emma began her involvement in the labor movement at the age of sixteen when she read of the 1932 and 1933 strikes against the Finck Cigar Company in San Antonio. She walked the picket line and subsequently joined the strikers in jail. During 1934 and 1935, Emma was also prominent in the formation of two locals of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. By 1937, she had become a member of the Executive Committee of the Workers Alliance of America, a national federation of unemployed workers' organizations. She had also assumed the position of general secretary of some ten Alliance chapters in San Antonio. Many of the Alliance members were affiliated with local unions of cigar, garment and pecan shelling workers.

When at the end of January, 1938, approximately 2,000 pecan shellers went out on strike against the local industry, they asked Emma to act as their strike spokesperson and this she did enthusiastically. Her speeches were passionately arousing and her popularity soared making her one of the most respected and

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dedicated union leaders in San Antonio. It was during this time that she became known as "La Pasionaria."

Strikers were teargassed on at least six occasions, as some 150 San Antonio city police officers were deployed to prevent the strike from spreading. Over a thousand strikers were jailed and sent to both the city and county penal facilities. Trivial and even ludicrous charges such as obstructing the sidewalk were trumped up to arrest strikers. Repression and intimidation were used to instill fear in workers and keep them from joining the strike. These tactics were only partially successful: six to eight thousand pecan shellers, most of them women, did heed the call to strike. Soup kitchens were established and thousands received their meals there. The Texas Women's International League for Peace and Freedom assisted in the operation of the soup kitchens and extended additional help in other areas. Had it not been for threats, numerous Mexican-owned and operated businesses would have given their help to strikers, but city politicians promised they would find cause to shut down establishments known to render assistance to the strikers.

The leadership and membership of the strike and pecan shellers' unions was comprised primarily of women. The Comisión Pro-Conferencia had three members, two of them women, Manuela Solis Sager and Juana Sánchez. And two of the three members of the Strike Committee were women, Emma Tenayuca and Minnie Rendón. Thus, four out of six major strike leaders were women in the front lines working directly with the rank and file.

The strike helped to call attention to the deplorable working conditions of Mexican laborers and the Texas Industrial Commission began a series of hearings into the strikers' grievances. The governor of the state intervened and attempted to persuade the pecan shelling industry to arbitrate. The industry finally joined the bargaining table and agreed on a settlement favoring the workers' demands.

The strike, while restoring wages to pre-strike levels, regrettably, saw its nominal gains whittled away a few months later when the industry remechanized.³ Thousands of pecan shellers were displaced leaving approximately a thousand youthful employees in the city's entire pecan shelling industry. In the meantime, just as the Depression seemed to be easing up on Mexican workers, war loomed large on the horizon portending a hiatus for Mexican participation in the Texas labor movement.

After the victorious strike and abrogated settlement, both Emma and Manuela maintained a political course that awaits a more detailed examination than this short note can accommodate. Some observations, however, should be made. In 1939, Emma assumed the position of chair of the Texas Communist Party. In that same year, she also co-authored what is still the most lucid and accurate analysis of the Mexican working class ever produced by a member of the Communist Party. Emma's effectiveness and popularity as a Mexican labor leader often made her the focal point of anti-union and anti-Mexican hysteria which eventually forced her to leave Texas to ensure her personal safety. Years later she would return to San Antonio as a certified teacher and teach until her recent retirement. She still teaches occasionally.

Manuela, on the other hand, remained with her husband in San Antonio where she has continued her involvement in progressive causes related to the Chicano movement, the women's movement, immigrant rights, electoral politics, and opposition to U.S. interventionist foreign policy. She feels strongly about these issues as evidenced in her acceptance speech at the NACS conference.

Both women are an inspiration and no doubt will continue to provide examples of courage, dedication, and purpose. As Mexicans, their history of involvement and accomplishment underscores the struggle and search for justice and equality among our people.

The following is the text of the acceptance presentations Manuela Solis Sager and Emma B. Tenayuca delivered at the 1984 NACS conference.

Manuela Solis Sager

"Voy a leerles algo en español porque ... es la lengua mía y quisiera dejar un mensaje a ustedes y les voy a tener que leer porque estoy muy nerviosa y *excited* con todos esto.

"El mensaje que debemos dejar con los educadores es muy simple. Al investigar la clase obrera mexicana hay que estudiarnos como lo que somos, *obreros*, y al estudiar a los obreros hay que entender nuestras luchas contra el imperialismo, nuestras luchas contra las industrias, nuestras luchas contra las universidades y en las áreas agrícolas. Pero al estudiar también hay que participar en esas luchas--no se debe estudiarlas solamente.

"Fuera con Reagan en el '84! Abajo con la intervención imperialista en Centroamérica! Y empleos para todos nosotros y paz.

"También quiero decirle algo a la mujer mexicana y a la mujer en general. Esto no lo escribí, lo estoy diciendo de mi corazón. Esto quiero decirles a ustedes--que así como nosotros luchamos, ustedes tienen que seguir esta lucha y seguir adelante y ayudarnos ... Yo ya ... voy a cumplir 73 años el 29 de abril y estoy en la lucha desde hace más de cincuenta años y quisiera que cada uno de nosotros, siguiéramos adelante sobre ese mismo tema y ayudar a la clase trabajadora, a las luchas del pueblo trabajador!"

Emma B. Tenayuca

"The first thing I would like to do is thank you very, very much. During the thirties when I was working in San Antonio I never attached any importance to my work. I never kept newspaper clippings. Actually, I was too busy organizing and working.

"I was born in San Antonio ... on my mother's side of the family, I am a descendant of Spaniards who came to Texas and settled in one of the colonies on the Louisiana border. There was a mission established there. On my father's side, we never claimed anything but Indian blood, and so throughout my life I didn't have a fashionable Spanish name like García or Sánchez, I carried an Indian name. And I was very, very conscious of that. It was this historical background and my grandparents' attitude which formed my ideas and actually gave me the courage later to undertake the type of work I did in San Antonio. I had wonderful parents and wonderful grandparents.

"I remember since I was about five watching the Battle of Flowers parade in front of Santa Rosa Hospital right in front of the Plaza del Zacate. I also remember, and I was quite young, the election of Ma Ferguson. Here was the occasion for quite a discussion in my family between my grandfather and my mother's uncle. My father had voted for Jim Ferguson, even though Ferguson had been forced out ... for having taken some money from the University of Texas. My parents, my grandfather, and his family

voted for Ma Ferguson and the reason for that was because she had stood up against the Ku Klux Klan in Texas.

"A memory comes back to me of hooded figures. I also remember one particular circular, and it read "one hundred percent White Protestant Americans." That left me out. I was a Catholic and also ... a mestiza, a mixture of Indian and Spanish. During the time I was growing up, it was very difficult to ignore ... conditions in San Antonio. Ours was a close-knit family, and I didn't remember any discrimination, actually, until I started school. A lot of people found out that it was hard to push me around.

"But during the time that I was growing up here in San Antonio, my home, I had deep roots there and I felt a strong attachment with the past. I went to the mission when I was quite young. I remember we used to hold confessions on the eighth of December, which is the day of Our Immaculate Conception. I remember kicking up the dust and discovering my first Indian arrow, and that of course excited my imagination. My father taught me to fish in the San Antonio River, and it was that river that almost brought about my drowning. I was pulled out of that river with water rushing out of my nose and my mouth. I never learned to swim after that.

"I witnessed a lot of discussion on topics such as Carranza and the Cristero Movement. I could not help but be impressed by the discussions ... of my family, my family circle. Also, the Plaza del Zacate was the type of place where everyone went on Saturdays and Sundays to hold discussions. If you went there you could find a minister preaching. You could also find revolutionists from Mexico holding discussions. I was exposed to all of this. I was also exposed to the nature of politics and to ... form[s] of corruption. I remember as a youngster attending a political rally with my father. Sandwiches were distributed and inside the sandwich was a five-dollar bill. I didn't get one, neither did my father.

"Let me give you an idea of what it meant to be a Mexican in San Antonio. There were no bus drivers that were Mexicans when I was growing up. The only Mexican workers employed by the City Public Service and the Water Board were laborers, ditch diggers. I remember they used to take the leaves from the pecan trees and they would put them on their heads in order to go out and dig

ditches. I came into contact with many, many families who had grievances, who had not been paid. I was perhaps eight or nine years old at the time. On one occasion while at the Plaza with my grandfather there was a family of poor migrant workers who came and a collection was made for them. I learned that while the family had harvested a crop, the farm owner who lived somewhere in the Rio Grande Valley had awakened the family at two or three in the morning, and he and his son ran the family from the land with shotguns. I remember this discussion at the Plaza on a Saturday and they decided to go down to the Mexican Consul and [raise] charges against the farmer. People from the Plaza accompanied the family to the Mexican Consul. It turned out that the family was Texas-born. This made quite an impression on me as a seventeen-year-old, a recent graduate from high school.

"One of the first groups of organized workers that I remember were women and it is with them that we saw the beginning of the breakup of the type of political organization that existed in San Antonio. And I saw those women herded and taken to jail. The second time that happened, I went to jail with them. These were the Finck Cigar workers on strike. In both the Finck Cigar and pecan shelling strikes there was a desire to keep ... Mexican workers as a reserve labor pool which could be used in case of strikes. There was poverty everywhere.

"My city enjoyed the dubious reputation of having one of the highest tuberculosis rates in the country. My San Antonio also had the reputation of having one of the highest infant mortality rates. It was these things and ... the fact that I had a grandfather who lost his money when the banks were closed in 1932 that made a deep impression on me. I think it was the combination of being a Texan, being a Mexican, and being more Indian than Spanish that propelled me to take action. I don't think I ever thought in terms of fear. If I had, I think I would have stayed home.

"We had demonstrations of 10,000 unemployed workers demanding employment. We visited the mayor's office. We staged a strike at City Hall, and it was there that I was arrested. I went to jail many times. A nun friend used to write to me and tell me, 'Emma, I have to read the papers to see whether you are in or out of jail.'

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"I believe that what was done there and what had to be done was confronting the power structure. It was the struggles of the Workers' Alliance, ... bringing in ... people of mutual aid organizations, some of whom had been anarchists. I read all about the Wobblies and in my mind I also became an anarchist.

"I had the idea of actually beginning with the Finck Cigar strike, of actually attacking the power structure, but at the same time doing it in such a manner that we did not get beaten up. We didn't go to jail too often you see. It was much easier for twenty or thirty of us to go to jail for three days or seventy-two hours. It was easier doing that than to fight. And we had many demonstrations in San Antonio. We have now a COPS (Citizens Organized for Public Service) organization, and I assure you that it is one of the most democratic and progressive organizations. And a very active organization, too!

"So in giving thanks I am thinking of the Finck Cigar strikers. I'm also thinking of the garment workers who went to jail and whose strikes were broken. I'm thinking also of men such as Maury Maverick, Sr. of San Antonio. I'm also thinking of the then Texas assistant attorney general, Everett Looney, who came to San Antonio and defended me on a charge of inciting to riot and, therefore, I was able to spend my twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-third birthdays out of jail. I thank you very much."

NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of an article of the same title published in *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race and Gender*, eds. Teresa Cordova, Norma Cantú, Gilberto Cardenas, Juan García, and Christine M. Sierra. (Austin: National Association for Chicano Studies, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1986), pp. 30-41.

2. The NACS conference program honoring Manuela and Emma was sponsored by the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA and organized by the authors. The accompanying reception was sponsored by the Center for Mexican American Studies, The University of Texas, Austin, and the Mexican American Chamber of Commerce, Austin, Texas. The program included a slide presentation on the condition of Mexican workers and the history

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of Mexican labor activity in Texas during the 1930s as well as introductory remarks by Calderón and Zamora. The slide presentation and accompanying materials have been deposited at the Chicano Studies Research Library, UCLA, for public use.

3. Prior to the beginning of the Depression in the early 1930s, the San Antonio pecan shelling industry had been mechanized. But the Depression made manual labor more profitable than mechanization during most of the 1930s.

A PROMISE FULFILLED: MEXICAN CANNERY WORKERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA*

by

Vicki L. Ruiz

Since 1930 approximately one-quarter of all Mexican women wage earners in the Southwest have found employment as blue collar industrial workers (25.3% (1930), 25.6% (1980)).¹ These women have been overwhelmingly segregated into semi-skilled, assembly line positions. Garment and food processing firms historically have hired Mexicanas for seasonal line tasks. Whether sewing slacks or canning peaches, these workers have generally been separated from the year-round, higher paid male employees. This ghettoization by job and gender has in many instances facilitated labor activism among Mexican women. An examination of a rank and file union within a Los Angeles cannery from 1939 to 1945 illuminates the transformation of women's networks into channels for change.

On August 31, 1939, during a record-breaking heat wave, nearly all of the four hundred and thirty workers at the California Sanitary Canning Company (popularly known as Cal San), one of the largest food processing plants in Los Angeles, staged a massive walk-out and established a twenty-four hour picket line in front of the plant. The primary goals of these employees, mostly Mexican women, concerned not only higher wages and better working conditions, but also recognition of their union--The United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America, Local 75--and a closed shop.

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The Cal San strike marked the beginning of labor activism by Mexicana cannery and packing workers in Los Angeles. This essay steps beyond a straight narrative, chronicling the rise and fall of UCAPAWA locals in California. It provides a glimpse of cannery life--the formal, as well as the informal, social structures governing the shop floor. An awareness of the varying lifestyles and attitudes of women food processing workers will be developed in these pages. No single model representing either the typical female or typical Mexicana industrial worker exists. Contrary to the stereotype of the Hispanic woman tied to the kitchen, most Mexican women, at some point in their lives, have been wage laborers. Since 1880, food processing has meant employment for Spanish-speaking women living in California, attracted to the industry because of seasonal schedules and extended family networks within the plants.²

During the 1930s, the canning labor force included young daughters, newly-married women, middle-aged wives, and widows. Occasionally, three generations worked at a particular cannery--daughter, mother, and grandmother. These Mexicanas entered the job market as members of a family wage economy. They pooled their resources to put food on the table. "My father was a busboy," one former Cal San employee recalled, "and to keep the family going ... in order to bring in a little more money ... my mother, my grandmother, my mother's brother, my sister and I all worked together at Cal San."³

Some Mexicanas, who had worked initially out of economic necessity, stayed in the canneries in order to buy the "extras"--a radio, a phonograph, jazz records, fashionable clothes. These consumers often had middle-class aspirations, and at times, entire families labored to achieve material advancement (and in some cases, assimilation), while in others, only the wives or daughters expressed interest in acquiring an American lifestyle. One woman defied her husband by working outside the home. Justifying her action, she asserted that she wanted to move to a "better" neighborhood because she didn't want her children growing up with "Italians and Mexicans."⁴

Some teenagers had no specific, goal-oriented rationale for laboring in the food processing industry. They simply "drifted" into cannery life; they wanted to join their friends at work or were bored at home. Like the first women factory workers in the United States, the New England mill hands of the 1830s, Mexican women entered the labor force for every conceivable reason and

for no reason at all. Work added variety and opened new avenues of choices.⁵

In one sense, cannery labor for the unmarried daughter represented a break from the traditional family. While most young Mexicanas maintained their cultural identity, many yearned for more independence, particularly after noticing the more liberal lifestyles of self-supporting Anglo co-workers. Sometimes young Mexican women would meet at work, become friends, and decide to room together. Although their families lived in the Los Angeles area and disapproved of their daughters living away from home, these women defied parental authority by renting an apartment.⁶

Kin networks, however, remained an integral part of cannery life. These extended family structures fostered the development of a "cannery culture." A collective identity among food processing workers emerged as a result of family ties, job segregation by gender, and working conditions. Although women comprised seventy-five percent of the labor force in California canneries and packing houses, they were clustered into specific departments--washing, grading, cutting, canning, and packing--and their earnings varied with production levels. They engaged in piece work while male employees, conversely, as warehousemen and cooks, received hourly wages.⁷

Mexicana family and work networks resembled those found by historian Thomas Dublin in the Lowell, Massachusetts, mills in the ante-bellum era. California canneries and New England cotton mills, though a century apart, contained similar intricate kin and friendship networks. Dublin's statement that women "recruited one another ... secured jobs for each other, and helped newcomers make the numerous adjustments called for in a very new and different setting" can be applied directly to the Mexican experience. Mexican women, too, not only assisted their relatives and friends in obtaining employment but also initiated neophytes into the rigor of cannery routines. For instance, in the sorting department of the California Sanitary Canning Company, seasoned workers taught new arrivals the techniques of grading peaches. "Fancies" went into one bin; those considered "choice" into another; those destined for fruit cocktail into a third box; and finally the rots had to be discarded. Since peach fuzz irritated bare skin, women shared their cold cream with the initiates, encouraging them to coat their hands and arms in order to relieve the itching and to protect their skin from further inflammation.⁸ Thus, as Dublin notes for the Lowell mills, one can find "clear evidence of

the maintenance of traditional kinds of social relationships in a new setting and serving new purposes."⁹

Standing in the same spot week after week, month after month, women workers often developed friendships crossing family and ethnic lines. While Mexicanas constituted the largest number of workers, many Russian Jewish women also found employment in southern California food processing firms.¹⁰ Their day-to-day problems (slippery floors, peach fuzz, production speeds-ups, arbitrary supervisors, and even sexual harassment) cemented feelings of solidarity among these women, as well as nurturing an "us against them" mentality in relation to management. They also shared common concerns, such as seniority status, quotas, wages, and child care.

Child care was a key issue for married women who at times organized themselves to secure suitable babysitting arrangements. In one cannery, the workers established an off-plant nursery, hired and paid an elderly woman who found it "darn hard ... taking care of 25 to 30 little ones." During World War II, some Orange County cannery workers, stranded without any day care alternatives, resorted to locking their small children in their cars. These particular workers, as UCAPAWA members, fought for and won management-financed day care on the firm's premises, which lasted for the duration of World War II.¹¹ Cooperation among women food processing workers was an expression of their collective identity within the plants.

At Cal San many Mexican and Jewish workers shared another bond--neighborhood. Both groups lived in Boyle Heights, an East Los Angeles working-class community. Although Mexican and Jewish women lived on different blocks, they congregated at street car stops during the early morning hours. Sometimes friendships developed across ethnic lines. These women, if not friends, were at least passing acquaintances. Later, as UCAPAWA members, they would become mutual allies.¹²

Cannery workers employed a special jargon when conversing among themselves. Speaking in terms of when an event took place by referring to the fruit or vegetable being processed, workers knew immediately when the incident occurred, for different crops arrived on the premises during particular months. For instance, the phrase "We met in spinach, fell in love in peaches, and married in tomatoes" indicates that the couple met in March, fell in love in August, and married in October.¹³

Historians Leslie Tentler and Susan Porter Benson, studying women workers on the east coast, have also documented the

existence of female work cultures. However, unlike the women Tentler studied, Spanish-speaking cannery workers were not waiting for Prince Charming to marry them and take them away from factory labor. Mexican women realized that they probably would continue their seasonal labor after marriage. Also in contrast, Benson, delineating cooperative work patterns among department store clerks from 1890 to 1940, asserted that women experienced peer sanctions if they exceeded their "stint" or standard sales quota.¹⁴ Mexican cannery workers differed from eastern clerks in that they did not receive a set salary, but were paid according to their production level. Collaboration and unity among piece rate employees attested to the strength of the cannery culture. Although increasing managerial control at one level, gender-determined job segmentation did facilitate the development of a collective identity among women in varying occupations and of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Of these work related networks, the cannery culture appeared unique in that it also included men. Comprising twenty-five percent of the labor force, men also felt a sense of identity as food processing workers. Familial and ethnic bonds served to integrate male employees into the cannery culture. Mexicans, particularly, were often related to women workers by birth or marriage. In fact, it was not unusual for young people to meet their future spouses inside the plants. Cannery romances and courtships provided fertile *chisme* which traveled from one kin or peer network to the next.¹⁵

The cannery culture was a curious blend of Mexican extended families and a general women's work culture, nurtured by assembly line segregation and common interests. Networks within the plants cut across generation, gender, and ethnicity. A detailed examination of the California Sanitary Canning Company further illuminates the unique collective identity among food processing workers. Cal San, a one plant operation, handled a variety of crops--apricots and peaches in the summer, tomatoes and pimientos in the fall, spinach in the winter and early spring. This diversity enabled the facility, which employed approximately four hundred people, to remain open at least seven months a year.¹⁶

Female workers received relatively little for their labors due to the seasonal nature of their work and the piece rate scale. In the Cal San warehouse and kitchen departments, exclusively male areas, workers received an hourly wage ranging from fifty-eight

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to seventy cents an hour. On the other hand, in the washing, grading, cutting and canning divisions, exclusively female areas, employees earned according to their production level.¹⁷ In order to make a respectable wage, a woman had to secure a favorable position on the line, a spot near the chutes or gates where the produce first entered the department. Carmen Bernal Escobar, a former Cal San employee, recalled:

There were two long tables with sinks that you find in old-fashioned houses and fruit would come down out of the chutes and we would wash them and put them out on a belt. I had the first place so I could work for as long as I wanted. Women in the middle hoarded fruit because the work wouldn't last forever and the women at the end really suffered. Sometimes they would stand there for hours before any fruit would come down for them to wash. They just got the leftovers. Those at the end of the line hardly made nothing.¹⁸

Although an efficient employee positioned in a favorable spot on the line could earn as much as one dollar an hour, most women workers averaged thirty to thirty-five cents. Their male counterparts, however, earned from \$5.25 to \$6.25 per day.¹⁹

Though wages were low, there was no dearth of owner paternalism. Cal San's owners, George and Joseph Shapiro, took personal interest in the firm's operations. Both brothers made daily tours of each department, inspecting machinery, opening cans, and chatting with personnel. Sometimes a favored employee--especially if young, female, and attractive--would receive a pat on the cheek or a friendly hug; or as one informant stated, "a good pinch on the butt."²⁰

While the Shapiros kept close watch on the activities within the cannery, the foremen and floor ladies exercised a great deal of autonomous authority over workers. They assigned them positions on the line, punched their time cards and even determined where they could buy lunch. Of course, these supervisors could fire an employee at their discretion. One floor lady earned the unflattering sobriquet "San Quentin." Some workers, in order to make a livable wage, cultivated the friendship of their supervisors. One favored employee even had the luxury of taking an afternoon nap. Forepersons also hosted wedding and baby showers for "their girls." While the "pets" enjoyed preferential treatment, they also acquired the animosity of their co-workers.²¹

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The supervisors (all Anglo) neither spoke nor understood Spanish. The language barrier contributed to increasing tensions inside the plant, especially when management had the authority to discharge an employee for speaking Spanish. Foremen also took advantage of the situation by altering productions cards of workers who spoke only Spanish. One foreman, for example, was noted for routinely cheating his Mexicana mother-in-law out of her hard-earned wages. Some women sensed something was wrong but either could not express their suspicions or were afraid to do so. Bilingual employees, cognizant of management's indiscretions, were threatened with dismissal.²² In general, low wages, tyrannical forepersons, and the "pet" system prompted attempts at unionization. In 1937 a group of workers tried to establish an American Federation of Labor union, but a stable local failed to develop. Two years later Cal San employees renewed their trade union efforts, this time under the banner of UCAPAWA-CIO.²³

The United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America has long been an orphan of twentieth-century labor history even though it was the seventh largest CIO affiliate in its day. Probable reasons for this neglect include the union's relatively short life--1937-1950--and its eventual expulsion from the CIO on the grounds of alleged communist domination. UCAPAWA's leadership was left-oriented, although not directly connected to the Communist Party. Many of the executive officers and organizers identified themselves as Marxists, but others could be labeled New Deal liberals. As one UCAPAWA national vice-president, Luisa Moreno, stated, "UCAPAWA was a left union not a communist union." Union leaders shared a vision of a national, decentralized labor union, one in which power flowed from below. Local members controlled their own meetings and elected their own officers and business agents. National and state offices helped coordinate the individual needs and endeavors of each local. Moreover, UCAPAWA's deliberate recruitment of Black, Mexican, and female labor organizers and subsequent unionizing campaigns aimed at minority workers reflected its leaders' commitment to those sectors of the working-class generally ignored by traditional craft unions.²⁴

This CIO affiliate, in its policies and practices, closely resembled the nineteenth-century Knights of Labor. Like the Knights, UCAPAWA leaders publicly boasted that their organization welcomed all persons regardless of race, nationality,

creed, or gender. Both groups fostered grass roots participation as well as local leadership. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the official UCAPAWA motto "An Injury To One Is An Injury To All" paraphrased the Knights' "An Injury To One Is The Concern Of All."²⁵

In California UCAPAWA initially concentrated on organizing agricultural workers, but with limited success. The union, however, began to make inroads among food processing workers in the Northeast and in Texas. Because of its successes in organizing canneries and packing houses, as well as the inability of maintaining viable dues-paying unions among farm workers, union policy shifted. After 1939, union leaders emphasized the establishment of strong, solvent cannery and packing house locals, hoping to use them as bases of operations for future farm labor campaigns.²⁶ One of the first plants to experience this new wave of activity was the California Sanitary Canning Company.

In July 1939, Dorothy Ray Healey, a national vice-president of UCAPAWA, began to recruit Cal San workers. Healey, a vivacious young woman of twenty-four, already had eight years of labor organizing experience. At the age of sixteen, she participated in the San Jose, California, cannery strike as a representative of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (C&AWIU). Healey had assumed leadership positions in both the C&AWIU and the Young Communist League.²⁷

Dorothy Healey's primary task involved organizing as many employees as possible. She distributed leaflets and membership cards outside the cannery gates. Healey talked with workers before and after work, and visited their homes. She also encouraged new recruits who proselytized inside the plants during lunch time. As former Cal San employee Julia Luna Mount remembered, "Enthusiastic people like myself would take the literature and bring it into the plant. We would hand it to everybody, explain it, and encourage everybody to pay attention." Workers organizing other workers was a common trade union strategy, and within three weeks four hundred (out of 430) employees had joined UCAPAWA. This phenomenal membership drive indicates not only worker receptiveness and Healey's prowess as an activist but also the existence of a cannery culture. Membership cards traveled from one kin or peer network to the next. Meetings were held in workers' homes so that entire families could listen to Healey and her recruits.²⁸

The Shapiros refused to recognize the union or negotiate with its representatives. On August 31, 1939, at the height of the peach

season, the vast majority of Cal San employees left their stations and staged a dramatic walk-out. Only thirty workers stayed behind and sixteen of these stragglers joined the picket lines outside the plant the next day. Although the strike occurred at the peak of the company's most profitable season and elicited the support of most line personnel, management refused to bargain with the local. In fact, the owners issued press statements to the effect that the union did not represent a majority of the workers.²⁹

In anticipation of a protracted strike, Healey immediately organized workers into a number of committees. A negotiating committee, picket details, and food committees were formed. The strikers' demands included union recognition, a closed shop, elimination of the piece rate system, minimal wage increases, and the dismissal of nearly every supervisor. Healey persuaded the workers to assign top priority to the closed shop demand. The striking employees realized the risk they were taking, for only one UCAPAWA local had secured a closed shop contract.³⁰

The food committee persuaded East Los Angeles grocers to donate various staples such as flour, sugar, and baby food to the Cal San strikers. Many business people obviously considered their donations to be advertisements and gestures of goodwill toward their customers. Some undoubtedly acted out of a political consciousness since earlier in the year East Los Angeles merchants had financed El Congreso De Pueblos Que Hablan Español, the first national civil rights assembly among Latinos in the United States.³¹ Whatever the roots of its success, the food committee sparked new strategies among the rank and file.

Early in the strike, the unionists extended their activities beyond their twenty-four hour, seven days a week picket line outside the plant. They discovered a supplementary tactic--the secondary boycott. Encouraged by their success in obtaining food donations from local markets, workers took the initiative themselves and formed boycott teams. The team leaders approached the managers of various retail and wholesale groceries in the Los Angeles area urging them to refuse Cal San products and to remove current stocks from their shelves. If a manager was unsympathetic, a small band of women picketed the establishment during business hours. In addition, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters officially vowed to honor the strike. It proved to be only a verbal commitment, for many of its members crossed the picket lines in order to pick up and deliver Cal San goods. At one point Mexicana unions members became so incensed by the sight of several Teamsters unloading their trucks that they climbed onto

the loading platform and quickly "depantsed" a group of surprised and embarrassed Teamsters. The secondary boycott was an effective tactic--forty retail and wholesale grocers abided by the strikers' request.³²

Action by National Labor Relations Board further raised the morale of the striking employees. The NLRB formally reprimanded the Shapiros for refusing to bargain with the UCAPAWA affiliate. However, the timing of the strike, the successful boycott, and favorable governmental decisions failed to bring management to the bargaining table. After a two and a half month stalemate, the workers initiated an innovative technique that became, as Healey recalled, "the straw that broke the Shapiros' back."³³

Both George and Joseph Shapiro lived in affluent sections of Los Angeles, and their wealthy neighbors were as surprised as the brothers to discover one morning a small group of children conducting orderly picket lines on the Shapiros' front lawns. These malnourished waifs carried signs with such slogans as "Shapiro is starving my Mama" and "I'm underfed because my Mama is underpaid." Many of the neighbors became so moved by the sight of these children conducting what became a twenty-four hour vigil that they offered their support, usually by distributing food and beverages. And if this was not enough, the owners were reproached by several members of their synagogue. After several days of community pressures, the Shapiros finally agreed to meet with Local 75's negotiating team.³⁴ The strike had ended.

A settlement was quickly reached. Although the workers failed to win the elimination of the piece rate system, they did receive a five cent wage increase, and many forepersons found themselves unemployed. More importantly, Local 75 had become the second UCAPAWA affiliate (and the first on the west coast) to negotiate successfully a closed shop contract.³⁵

The consolidation of the union became the most important task facing Cal San employees. At post-strike meetings, Dorothy Healey outlined election procedures and general operating by-laws. Male and female workers who had assumed leadership positions during the confrontation captured every major post. For example, Carmen Bernal Escobar, head of the secondary boycott committee, became "head shop steward of the women."³⁶ Soon UCAPAWA organizers Luke Hinman and Ted Rasmussen replaced Dorothy Healey at Cal San. These two men, however, concentrated their organizing energies on a nearby walnut packing plant and, thus, devoted little time to Cal San workers. In late 1940, Luisa Moreno,

an UCAPAWA representative, took charge of consolidating Local 75. Like Dorothy Healey, Moreno had a long history of labor activism prior to her tenure with UCAPAWA. As a professional organizer for the AF of L and later for the CIO, Moreno had unionized workers in cigar making plants in Florida and Pennsylvania.³⁷

Luisa Moreno helped insure the vitality of Local 75. She vigorously enforced government regulations and contract stipulations. She also encouraged members to air any grievances immediately. On a number of occasions, her fluency in Spanish and English allayed misunderstandings between Mexicana workers and Anglo supervisors. Participation in civic events, such as the annual Labor Day parade, fostered worker solidarity and union pride. The employees also banded together to break certain hiring policies. With one very light-skinned exception, the brothers had refused to hire Blacks. With union pressure, however, in early 1942, the Shapiros relented and hired approximately thirty Blacks. By mid-1941, Local 75 had developed into a strong, united democratic trade union and its members soon embarked on a campaign to organize their counterparts in nearby packing plants.³⁸

In 1941, Luisa Moreno, recently elected vice-president of UCAPAWA, was placed in charge of organizing other food processing plants in southern California. She enlisted the aid of Cal San workers in consolidating Local 92 at the California Walnut Growers' Association plant, and Elmo Parra, president of Local 75, headed the Organizing Committee. Cal San workers also participated in the initial union drive at nearby Royal Packing, a plant which processed Ortega Chile products. Since ninety-five percent of Royal Packing employees were Mexican, the Spanish-speaking members of Local 75 played a crucial role in the UCAPAWA effort. They also organized workers at the Glaser Nut Company and Mission Pack. The result of this spate of union activism was the formation of Local 3. By 1942, this local had become the second largest UCAPAWA union.³⁹

Mexican women played instrumental roles in the operation of Local 3. In 1943, for example, they filled eight of the fifteen elected positions of the local. They served as major officers and as executive board members. Local 3 effectively enforced contract stipulations and protective legislation, and its members proved able negotiators during annual contract renewals. In July, 1942, for example, *UCAPAWA News* proclaimed the newly-signed Cal San contract to be "the best in the state." Also, in 1943, workers at the

Walnut plant successfully negotiated an incentive plan provision in their contract. The local also provided benefits that few industrial unions could match--free legal advice and a hospitalization plan.⁴⁰

Union members also played active roles in the war effort. At Cal San, a joint labor-management production committee worked to devise more efficient processing methods. As part of the "Food for Victory" campaign, Cal San employees increased their production of spinach to unprecedented levels. In 1942 and 1943, workers at the California Walnut plant donated one day's wages to the American Red Cross. Local 3 also sponsored a successful blood drive. Throughout this period, worker solidarity remained strong. When Cal San closed its doors in 1945, the union arranged jobs for the former employees at the California Walnut plant.⁴¹

The success of UCAPAWA at the California Sanitary Canning Company can be explained by a number of factors. Prevailing work conditions heightened the union's attractiveness. Elements outside the plant also prompted receptivity among employees. These workers were undoubtedly influenced by the wave of CIO organizing drives being conducted in the Los Angeles area. One woman, for example, joined Local 75 primarily because her husband was a member of the CIO Furniture Workers Union.⁴² Along with the Wagner Act, passage of favorable legislation, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Public Contracts Act, and the California minimum wage laws (which set wage and hour levels for cannery personnel), led to the rise of a strong UCAPAWA affiliate.⁴³ Workers decided that the only way they could benefit from recent protective legislation was to form a union with enough clout to force management to honor these regulations.

World War II also contributed to the development of potent UCAPAWA food processing locals, not only in southern California, but nationwide. To feed U.S. troops at home and abroad, as well as the military and civilian population of America's allies, the federal government issued thousands of contracts to canneries and packing houses.⁴⁴ Because of this increased demand for canned goods and related products, management required a plentiful supply of content, hard-working employees. Meanwhile the higher-paying defense industries began to compete for the labor of food processing personnel. Accordingly, canners and packers became more amenable to worker demands than at any other time in the history of food processing. Thus, during the early 1940s, cannery workers, usually

at the bottom end of the socio-economic scale, had become "labor aristocrats" due to wartime exigencies.⁴⁵

They were in an atypical position to gain important concessions from their employers in terms of higher wages, better conditions, and greater benefits. As UCAPAWA members, women food processing workers utilized their temporary status to achieve an improved standard of living.⁴⁶

Of course, the dedication and organizing skills of UCAPAWA professionals Dorothy Ray Healey and Luisa Moreno must not be minimized. While Healey played a critical role in the local's initial successes, it was under Moreno's leadership that workers consolidated these gains and branched out to help organize employees in neighboring food processing facilities. The recruitment of minority workers by Healey and Moreno and their stress on local leadership reflect the feasibility and vitality of a democratic trade unionism.

Finally, the most significant ingredient accounting for Local 75's success was the phenomenal degree of worker involvement in the building and nurturing of the union. Deriving strength from their networks within the plant, Cal San workers built an effective local. The cannery culture had, in effect, become translated into unionization. Furthermore, UCAPAWA locals provided women cannery workers with the crucial "social space"⁴⁷ necessary to assert their independence and display their talents. They were not rote employees numbed by repetition, but women with dreams, goals, tenacity, and intellect. Unionization became an opportunity to demonstrate their shrewdness and dedication to a common cause. Mexicanas not only followed the organizers' leads but also developed strategies of their own. A fierce loyalty developed as the result of rank and file participation and leadership. Forty years after the strike, Carmen Bernal Escobar emphatically declared, "UCAPAWA was the greatest thing that ever happened to the workers at Cal San. It changed everything and everybody."⁴⁸

This pattern of labor activism is not unique. Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatler, and Emily Honig in their study of the Farah Strike documented the close bonds that developed among Mexican women garment workers in El Paso, Texas. Anthropologist Patricia Zavella has also explored similar networks among female electronics workers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and food processing workers in San Jose.⁴⁹ But while kin and friendship networks remain part of cannery life, UCAPAWA did not last beyond 1950. After World War II, red-baiting, the disintegration of the national union, Teamster sweetheart contracts and an

indifferent NLRB spelled the defeat of democratic trade unionism among Mexican food processing workers. Those employees who refused to join the Teamsters were fired and blacklisted. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, moreover, deported several UCAPAWA activists, including Luisa Moreno.⁵⁰ In the face of such concerted opposition, Local 3 could not survive. Yet, the UCAPAWA movement demonstrated that Mexican women, given sufficient opportunity and encouragement, could exercise control over their work lives, and their family ties and exchanges on the line became the channels for unionization.

Notes

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4. Taylor, field notes.
5. Taylor, field notes; Caroline F. Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacturer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931; rpt. ed., New York, NY: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966), pp. 217-219.
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9. Dublin, p. 48.
10. Mount interview; Escobar interview.
11. "Interview with Elizabeth Nicholas" by Ann Baxandall Krooth and Jaclyn Greenberg published in *Harvest Quarterly*, Nos. 3-4 (September-December 1976): 15-16; interview with Luisa Moreno, August 5, 1976, by Albert Camarillo.
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15. *N.Y.A. Study*, pp. 15-39; Castillo, p. 154; Moreno interview, July 1978; Rodriguez interview, April 1984. Note *Chism?* means gossip.
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27. Nelson-Cisneros, p. 463; Healey interview; *UCAPAWA News*, October 1939.

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29. Escobar interview; Healey interview; *UCAPAWA News*, September 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1939.

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33. *UCAPAWA News*, September 1939; Healey interview.

34. Healey interview; *UCAPAWA News*, September 1939; *UCAPAWA News*, December 1939.

35. Healey interview; Escobar interview; *UCAPAWA News*, December 1939.

36. Escobar interview; Healey interview; Moreno letter, July 1979.

37. Moreno interview, September 1979; Moreno interview August 12-13, 1977 with Albert Camarillo; Escobar interview; Moreno interview, July 1978.

38. Escobar interview; Moreno interview, September 1979; Moreno letter, July 1979.

39. *UCAPAWA News*, August 25, 1941; Moreno interview, September 1979; Moreno letter, July 1979; *UCAPAWA News*, November 17, 1941; *UCAPAWA News*, December 1, 1941.

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46. Ruiz, "UCAPAWA, Chicanas," pp. 151-176.

47. Sara Evans has defined "social space" as an area "within which members of an oppressed group can develop an independent sense of worth in contrast to their received definitions as second-class or inferior citizens." *Personal Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 219.

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50. For more information on the Teamster take-over, see Ruiz, "UCAPAWA, Chicanas," pp. 206-243.