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HISPANIC MIGRANT WORKERS' SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN IDAHO

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As a distinctive ethnic element, Hispanic peoples have had a long and varied experience in Idaho. Some times they have gained positive recognition for their more significant contributions, but more often their distinctive cultural preferences inspired hostile responses from Anglo elements.

1. During Idaho's initial mining era, Anglos had to learn how to discover and produce gold and silver from experienced Spanish operators, whose procedures became standard for early mineral development.¹

Mexican packers also had exceptional skills for hauling supplies and heavy equipment into remote districts that featured very difficult access.² For over a century, Boise had a charming Spanish village, laid out in traditional Mexican style, where packers could flourish in their own cultural atmosphere and surroundings.³

2. After 1940, wartime shortages of farm workers led to importation of Hispanic migrants who performed essential agricultural services. Then postwar farm labor needs brought a gradually increasing dependence upon Hispanic workers. Coming from places like southern Texas in time for crop growing seasons, they received low wages that other farm workers rejected.⁴

Concern for Hispanic migrant workers' problems grew rapidly when a revolution in farming practices affected labor conditions on an increasingly greater scale after 1946. Within a decade, mainline Protestant churches responded with programs designed to provide social and educational services to migrant families. Acting through their National Council of Churches, those denominations (in cooperation with their Idaho affiliates) reached a number of Idaho's notable migrant camps with summer services directed by Pacific Northwest regional supervisors.⁵ Most Hispanic migrants were Roman Catholic, so care was exercised not to try to engage in religious conversion. Cooperation with Roman Catholic authorities (who had initiated their Idaho migrant service programs in 1949) was regarded as essential.⁶ Deplorable housing conditions in many migrant

camps and unfortunate working conditions became a target of Catholic and Protestant leaders alike. A variety of efforts to relieve poverty conditions and to meet other glaring needs emerged from these church programs.

3. Aside from severe economic problems, Hispanic migrant workers met with social and cultural rejection in many communities, including rural areas that they served.

Too often treated with disdain in some stores and restaurants, with their traditional celebrations and values disregarded, they frequently were passed off as a backward people.⁷

4. Until expanded educational, public health, and similar services became available through Office of Economic Opportunity programs, migrant families faced severe problems during times they were employed away from their Texas homes.

Many of them who could not communicate in English had to deal entirely through crew leaders, some of whom profited excessively from abuses of that system.

Educational opportunities for adults, as well as children, could be provided only with great difficulty. Placement of children in local schools for brief periods did not work because of language barriers and random subject exposure.

Farm work often was hazardous and compensation to cover costs of accidents, as well as family funds for health benefits, too often were unavailable.

Care facilities for young children frequently were absent, and infants often had to be stashed in unattended cars left in fields away from services.⁸

5. Migrants normally had no way to deal effectively with their primary problems. Hispanic farm workers in California engaged in a controversial program of unionization with strikes and boycotts that had nonagricultural community support.⁹ States like Idaho offered practically no such opportunity. When Cesar Chavez, a noted leader of California's unionization movement came to Boise Valley to see what could be done to help deal with local migrant problems, his visit had to remain secret from non-Hispanic elements there.

6. National Council of Churches' programs in Idaho had operated for most of a decade by 1964. Summer workers, often college students, served a number of Idaho's larger migrant camps. Local churches, through a Southern Idaho Migrant Ministry organization, joined to support these National Council efforts. An incipient Idaho Council of Churches enterprise, that agency led to arrangements in 1964 to organize such a cooperative body. Because of its Hispanic religious aspect, this cooperative effort included

significant participation by Bishop Sylvester Treinen's Roman Catholic diocese of Idaho.¹⁰

7. Vastly expanded financial support for migrant services became available after President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated his war against poverty in 1964. This included a new federal Office of Economic Opportunity that funded a variety of national programs.¹¹ Some of them had limited relevance for Hispanic migrants, but several had a direct application to their problems. Adult and children's educational offerings had special possibilities. A preschool young children's opportunity, known as Head Start, dealt with a particularly severe migrant need. One of a group of Community Action Programs, Head Start services could be offered by nonprofit, nongovernmental agencies designed to incorporate local poverty group participation in development and management functions. That approach went a long way toward requiring Anglo and Hispanic representatives to work together, with migrant peoples no longer relegated to some sort of inferior status that compounded their economic and social problems.¹²

8. An entirely new Idaho agency clearly was needed to provide an effective Community Action Program for migrant farm families. Even if people in each local area that attracted Hispanic workers had wanted to develop their own separate and independent Community Action Programs, they would have had a difficult time organizing in a way to qualify for federal grant funding. A single Idaho application for grant funds clearly was needed. By 1964, an effective, but financially limited, National Council of Churches migrant service program had functioned in Idaho for almost a decade. A dramatic expansion of that effort suddenly became possible, and in preparing for their 1965 season, National Council administrators of Pacific Northwest operations set out to utilize that opportunity.¹³ Their existing services had been organized as separate Oregon, Washington, and Idaho operations. They retained that feature in developing their federal funding expansion. Their Southern Idaho Migrant Ministry agency associates had arranged in 1964 to develop an Idaho Council of Churches that could assist, with Roman Catholic diocesan participation, in setting up a migrant Community Action Program.¹⁴ Because Idaho's church council developers had no function other than Hispanic migrant services, they could respond quickly.
Sarah Hall Goodwin, National Council migrant program administrator, came to Idaho from her Portland base with William Johnson, national manager, late in January, and within a week, an Idaho Farm Workers' Services nonprofit corporation was created and organized, February 4, 1965.¹⁵
(To save time, a legal format used to establish local

historical societies was utilized, with nothing changed but name and purpose.) When its organization and initial program were completed and perfected February 28, Idaho's Hispanic migrant workers still were in places like Texas, but provisions were made to include them in corporation policy and management.¹⁶ Hispanic participation sometimes was limited because much essential work had to be undertaken when they were off in other places. But Hispanic attitudes and values had to dominate program development and had to be respected for effective operation.

9. Community Action Programs in Idaho for Hispanic migrant families brought a variety of opportunities for cultural adaptation of traditional Anglo approaches.

In Twin Falls, where Jesse S. Berain (an Idaho Hispanic leader with a number of years of experience with National Council summer programs there) managed Idaho Farm Workers' Services projects, an effective system emerged. Educational offerings that had commenced with Anglo-style classes by age-grades had to be transformed for a time into classes for family groups regardless of children's ages. Splitting up family members into age groups had failed to produce beneficial results. But new approaches, including summer camps that combined Hispanic and Anglo children into camping groups that resembled Boy Scout activities, bridged cultural gaps between local and migrant children, all of whom benefitted from such contacts.¹⁷ That kind of cultural transition helped Anglo and Hispanic children understand each other's heritage. Office of Economic Opportunity programs had to serve Anglo poverty families even though they may have been instituted to benefit Hispanic migrants.¹⁸

That requirement helped bridge cultural gaps still more. Furthermore, Jesse Berain's participation there helped greatly in bringing Hispanic leadership into Farm Workers' Services programs. Greater reliance upon Hispanic leaders was arranged in Caldwell and other migrant family communities.

Educational reforms pioneered by several innovative Idaho Farm Workers' Services programs (adjusted for federal requirements) had a broad impact. Extension of Head Start opportunities from conventional kindergarten classes to cover migrant needs in Idaho, in fact, preceded those of any other state. So Idaho's Farm Workers' Services programs was regarded nationally as a model for other communities.¹⁹ In addition, Hispanic migrant activities soon penetrated local school systems in areas that gradually attracted growing Hispanic populations after 1960. Transformation of farm labor conditions, with mechanized field equipment replacing many laborious hand operations, reduced an earlier demand for Hispanic migrants in a number of field jobs. But those changes gave them opportunities to engage in more rewarding kinds of work. Responding to better opportunities,

thousands of Hispanic families eventually settled in Idaho (and other Pacific Northwest communities) to engage in superior occupations--some of them nonagricultural. Their school children could attend regular classes, which still had to meet their special needs. Community action programs, introduced by Idaho Farm Workers' Services grants, assisted local school systems to make a transition toward programs that recognized ethnic diversity. Finally in 1967, Congress abolished educational (as well as all other) grants to nongovernmental Community Action Programs. Nonprofit corporations, such as Idaho Farm Workers' Services applicants, abruptly became obsolete.²⁰ But their activities had created programs that still had to be maintained through various kinds of government agencies.

10. An evaluation of Poverty Act services for Idaho's Hispanic peoples suggests that progress was made toward cultural acceptance. In any event, during four years of federal grant operations, Idaho's Hispanic migrant Community Action Program had a substantial long-range impact. By 1969, almost \$600,000 in federal grants had been utilized. These had come at a rate faster than they could be expended at times, but balances were retained for future day care and education.²¹

Contacts achieved between program developers and Hispanic migrants proved particularly important. When W. L. Robison (State Labor Commissioner) suggested in 1964 that this program be initiated, Idaho Migrant Ministry participants joined Bill Johnson and Sarah Goodwin (National Council of Churches administrators) and Nicolas Walsh (Boise Diocese representative) in insisting upon Hispanic program leadership. But C. Ben Reavis (initial Farm Workers' Services president) was Idaho State Social Security administrator, and his successor, Alice Dieter, was a prominent Boise journalist: like other board members, they had other duties that prevented them from spending most of their time in migrant meetings. But they joined in regular sessions that involved Hispanic members.²² As time went on, more Hispanic participants became available. This interrelationship feature might have been expanded if Anglo board members had not had so many other obligations to attend to. In any event, Hispanic views were respected, and a new era of their cultural recognition and acceptance got under way.

ENDNOTES

¹J. Arthur Phillips, *Mining and Metallurgy of Gold and Silver* (London, 1867), recognizes this point. Western ranching practices also reflect similar Hispanic antecedents.

²William J. Trimble, *The Mining Advance Into the Inland Empire* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1914), 120.

³Jesus Urquides (commonly referred to as Kossuth Urquides by Anglos who did not know how to spell) was an exceptionally skillful Boise packer who founded and maintained Boise's Spanish Village near his own mansion.

⁴Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico* (New York, 1968); Steve Allen, *The Ground is Our Table* (New York, 1966).

⁵Information provided by Sarah Hall Goodwin in 1960.

⁶Information provided by Nicolas Walsh, later Bishop of Yakima, in 1964.

⁷Erasmus Gamboa, "Braceros in the Pacific Northwest: Laborers on the Domestic Front," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* (August, 1987), 56:378-398.

⁸Isabel Valle, *Fields of Toil* (Pullman, 1994), deals with Pacific Northwest Hispanics.

⁹Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York, 1975) and J. Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Worker Movement in the 1960s* (New York, 1985), are part of a vast literature on this subject.

¹⁰Information provided by Paul Hovey in 1964.

¹¹Daniel P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York, 1969), 88, 96-99, 128-164.

¹²Valora Washington and Ura Jean Oyemade, *Project Head Start* (New York, 1987), 72; Edward Zigler and Susan Muenchow, *Head Start* (New York, 1992), 2-4.

¹³Information provided by Bill Johnson in 1965.

¹⁴Information provided by Norman Foote, Episcopal Bishop of Idaho, in 1964.

¹⁵Articles of Incorporation, Idaho Farm Workers Services, filed with Idaho's Secretary of State, February 4, 1965.

¹⁶Idaho Farm Workers' Services Corporate Files, Idaho State Historical Society: Proceedings of Initial Meetings, January 31 and February 7, 28, 1965.

¹⁷Information provided by Jesse S. Berain, February 15, 1995, Boise.

¹⁸Corporate Files: Special Conditions Grant Approved
September 25, 1967.

¹⁹Wendell Peabody's Report, April 16, 1967, Corporate Files.

²⁰Robert Eyestone, "Office of Economic Opportunity,"
Dictionary of American History (New York, 1976), 2:135-6.

²¹Corporate Files: Grant Application Records.

²²Corporate Files: Board Meeting Proceedings, September 20,
and October 26, 1965.

(This information has not been edited.)

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