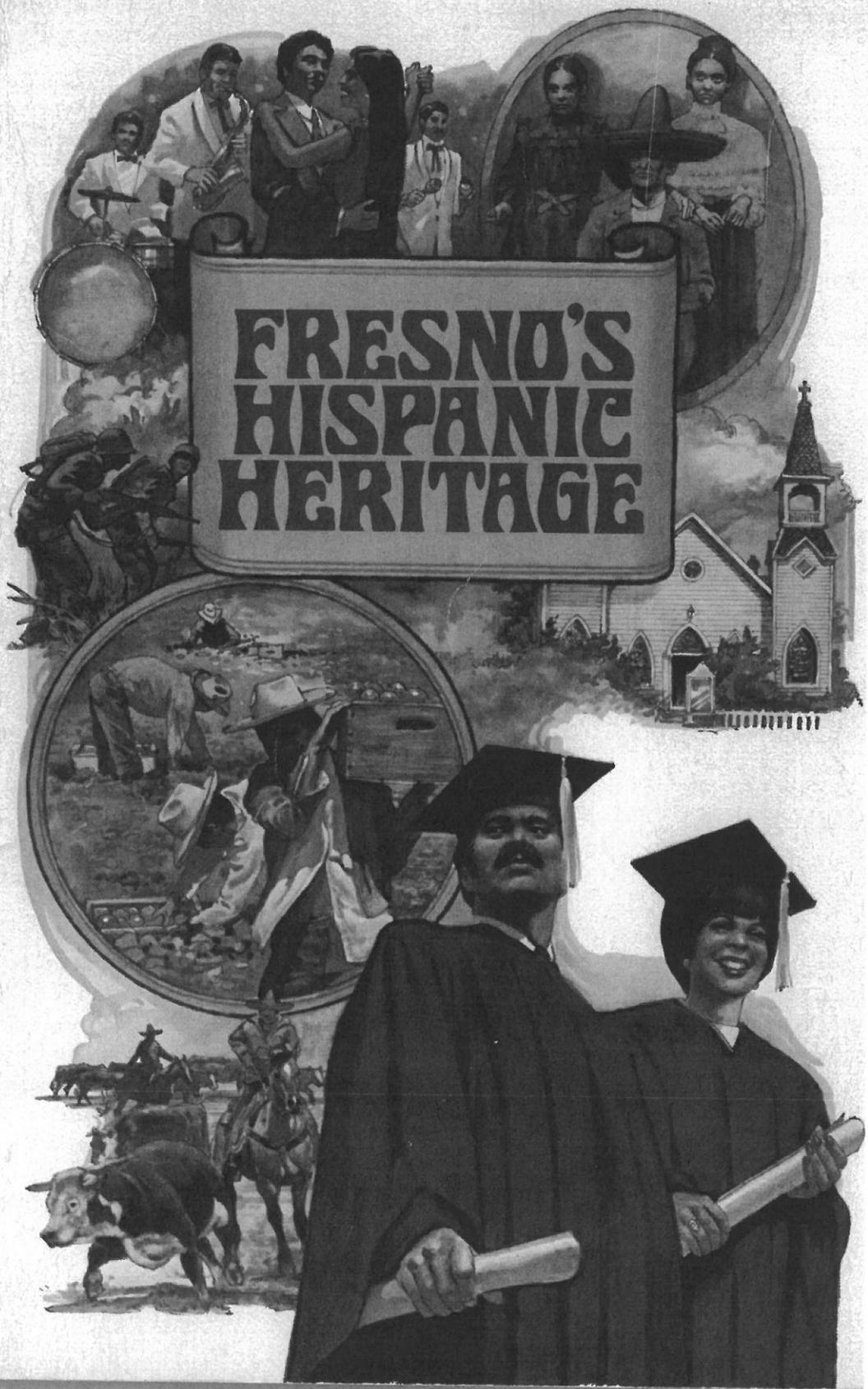


# FRESNO'S HISPANIC HERITAGE



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# **FRESNO'S HISPANIC HERITAGE**

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By  
Alex M. Saragoza



**Great American**

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## CHAPTER 4

### MEXICANOS EN EL VALLE DE SAN JOAQUÍN, 1900-1930

*El desarrollo económico del Valle últimamente produjo una gran necesidad de trabajadores. Además, las condiciones en México estimularon a muchos a buscar una vida mejor fuera del país. En estas circunstancias, era lógico que miles de mexicanos llegaran al Valle; por su labor, el Valle floreció como uno de los más grandes centros agrícolas del mundo. En esta época, el mexicano estableció la fundación de la comunidad mexicana del Valle. A pesar de la discriminación, trabajo duro, y pobreza en muchos casos, el mexicano "no se dejó" y dio a sus hijos la oportunidad de educarse, de desarrollarse y de seguir una vida mejor.*

### MEXICANS IN THE VALLEY, 1900-1930

Laws, methods, teachings, wealth and sources of wealth, and customs, were all left ready for use—and a highly important use they did have—while those who introduced and developed them are unreasonably ignored and condemned.

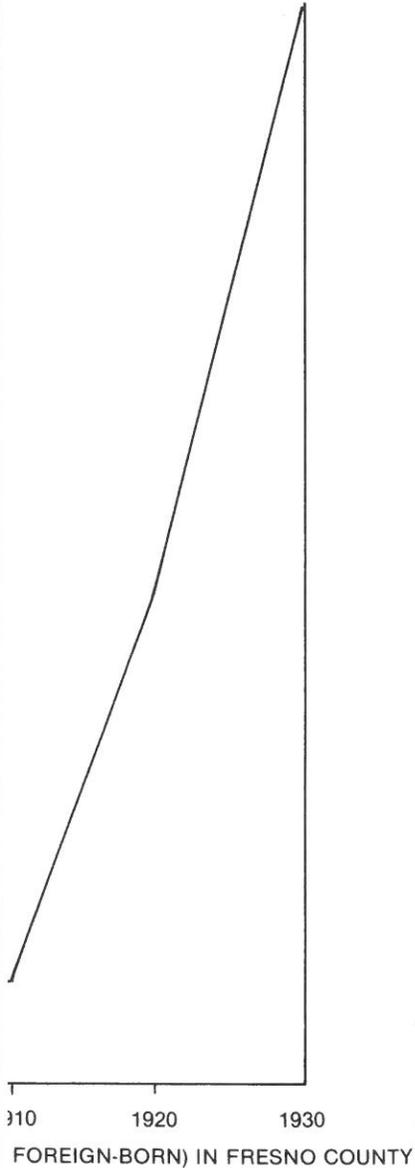
Professor Harry Bernstein, (from "Spanish Influence in the United States: Economic Aspects," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1938)

... and there was no form of industry in which the inventive genius of the missionaries was more evident than in the construction of irrigation works . . . They were the real pioneers in the great water conservation system which now covers a large part of the state with a network of canals.

Nellie van de Grift Sanchez (from *Spanish Arcadia*, 1929)

... studies which have been made of the California system of irrigation districts, widely imitated throughout the West, have traced the beginnings of this system to the mission establishments and their communal utilization of a limited water supply.

Carey McWilliams (from *North from Mexico*, 1949)



## I

In 1900, residents of the Valley were generally unaware of the Valley's Hispanic heritage. Many people, for example, were ignorant of the derivation of the word *fresno*: that *fresno* referred to the "ash" trees Spanish-speaking explorers encountered in the area over a century before. The arrival of large numbers of Mexican immigrants, however, soon altered the "invisibility" of Hispanics in the Valley. Initially, the majority of the newcomers were not socially prominent, famously rich or politically important. Rather, most worked, worked hard, and provided the foundations for a better future for their families. Upon their labor, others became prominent, rich and powerful; upon their labor, the San Joaquin Valley became indeed a "garden in the sun."

As farmworkers, and in other occupations, Mexicans contributed crucially to the progress, prosperity and prestige of the Valley. It was, unfortunately, a contribution often disregarded, and, at times, even disavowed. Various forms of prejudice persisted, and its resultant barriers continued to exercise an effect for several years. Nonetheless, the determination of the Mexican immigrant proved to be resilient and undaunted.

The growth of agriculture in central California was phenomenal in the early part of the twentieth century. At the time, the technological aspects of farm production were at best rudimentary. Valley farmers cultivated the land without the myriad of resources available to modern agricultural operations. Yet growers succeeded despite economic uncertainties, imperfect knowledge and scant equipment.

The increases in farm acreage told only a portion of the story. The figures contained a key dimension: the type of crops and the labor required to harvest it. Wheat, for instance, made impressive strides in the Valley in the late nineteenth century. As noted earlier, Fresno County produced 40 million bushels in 1890. But in comparison to other crops, wheat required relatively little labor, and, in fact, wheat production declined in the Valley. Where over 7.5 million bushels were harvested in 1874, nearly 18 million bushels were taken up in 1884. But, by 1895, just over 7 million bushels were gathered in the Valley.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, labor-intensive agriculture witnessed a very different situation. In the case of Fresno County, grapes comprised 15,000 acres in 1880. Ten years later, the amount tripled. In 1910, over 100,000 acres of vineyards covered the Fresno area. Incredibly, between 1910 and 1930, the number of vines grew from 40.7 million to 85.2 million in Fresno County.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the labor required for the grape harvest (*las piscas*) rapidly multiplied, as well as the work necessitated by the weeding (*la limpia*), pruning (*la poda*) and the irrigating (*la riega*) of the vine prior to its fruition.

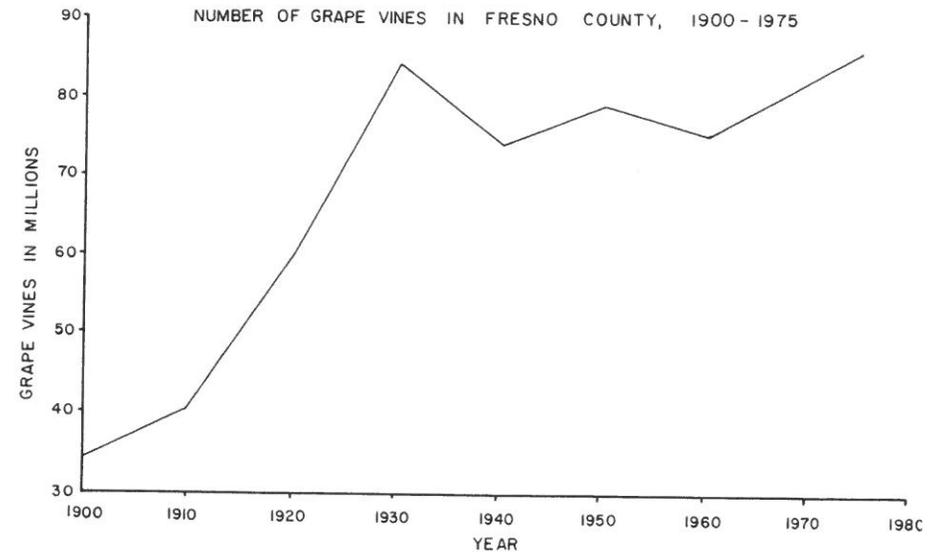
The expansion of vineyard acreage reflected the rise in other labor-intensive crops. In 1910, cotton production was negligible in Fresno

County. In contrast, between 1920 and 1930, land devoted to cotton surged from 5.5 thousand acres to over 51 thousand acres.<sup>24</sup> As the accompanying tables illustrate, the period before 1930 produced a great increase in crops that required much manual labor.

Developments in Fresno County paralleled agricultural trends throughout the Valley. As a result, the demand for labor increased in the first decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, the need for workers was compounded by the underdevelopment of agricultural technology. Hence, manual labor was necessary for a longer period of time, and more frequently than would be the case in more modern times. Agriculture, therefore, was particularly dependent on hired labor during the formative period before 1930.

The restrictions on Chinese immigration ended an early source of farm labor. Japanese workers followed the Chinese into the Valley's fields, but they eventually faced a similar wave of prejudice that severely curtailed immigration. Consequently, farmers again sought a pool of cheap labor to replace the declining numbers of Asian workers and to supplement an insufficient body of "white" laborers.

Japanese dominated the farm labor force in 1910, a position held twenty years previously by Chinese; for a time, in Fresno County, Japanese composed over 50% of farm labor. Population figures told a predictable story. Chinese numbered nearly 1,800 in the county in 1900; by 1920, their numbers had dwindled to less than a thousand. About 600 Japanese resided in the county in 1900, but almost 6,000 populated the Fresno area twenty years later.<sup>25</sup>



With the great increase in grape acreage in Fresno county, the demand for labor spurred the entry of Mexicans into the Valley early in the 20th century.

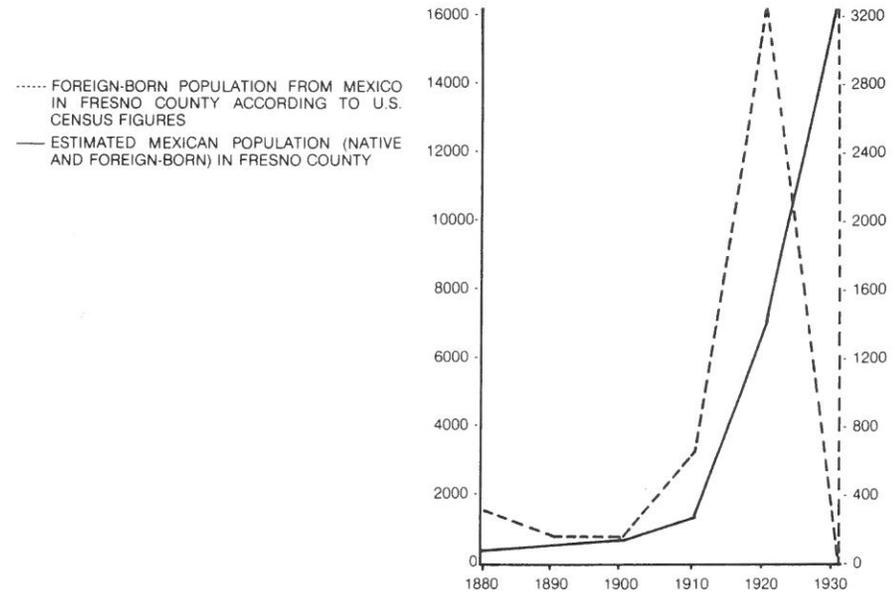


Again and again, Mexican families descended the Tehachapis looking for work in the Valley's fields.

The gradual loss of Asian farmworkers dramatically affected the composition of farm labor in the Valley. Less than 5% of agricultural laborers were Mexicans in 1910. By 1930, Mexicans constituted nearly 60% of the farm labor force, with some estimates as high as 80%. On the eve of the depression, the farming fortunes of the Valley clearly stemmed to a large extent from the labor of Mexican people.<sup>26</sup>

The riches of the Valley, however, were often unavailable to those who worked the land. "The wages paid to the immigrant laborer employed in large numbers have been relatively low," a report stated in 1911, and "when engaged in the same occupations, they have generally been paid less per day than native white men."<sup>27</sup> In addition, the report noted that Mexicans were rarely employed as foremen, as drivers, as packing-shed workers, or as "regular" (year-round) laborers. Two decades later, an investigation found that Mexicans were paid "generally 20 to 30 cents per day less" than the rates paid to non-Mexicans. A quarter meant a lot in those days, especially when, on the average, one earned \$3.50 for ten hours of work.<sup>28</sup>

In search of employment, families often traveled in pursuit of the crops. Issued in 1922, a report indicated that 70% of migrant farmworkers were Mexicans.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, as agriculture expanded in the Valley, workers flocked to its fields; and many stayed.



The Mexican-born population grew after 1900 in Fresno County, although the U.S. Census appeared to make grievous errors in counting. In the chart, the left scale indicates some 16,000 Hispanics estimated to reside in Fresno County in 1930, while the census that year indicated practically no foreign-born Mexican population.

Over the Ridge Route they came, via Texas, Arizona, and particularly from southern California. In May of 1927, over a thousand descended the Tehachapis, careful not to push their precious *carcanchitas* (jalopies) too hard. Another 3,000 followed in June, more than 5,000 in July, and nearly 12,000 in August. Consequently, "the differential in favor of the northward movement" (from southern California), one observer concluded in 1928, "is essentially true in its indication of permanent accretion to the Mexican labor population of the Valley of California."<sup>30</sup>

Yet, even when settled, they still went long distances to find work, especially during the "slow" months of December, January and February. In short, Mexican farmworkers frequently faced low wages, poor housing, and a constant search for better jobs.

Life, therefore, was rarely easy. Prejudice only added another complication. "We are loath to burden our state with this type of immigrant," stated the chairman of the Agriculture Committee of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce in 1926.<sup>31</sup> According to an early report of the Immigration Commission, Mexican labor initially was "invariably placed at or near the end of the list of a half-dozen or more races" employed by farmers.<sup>32</sup>

Fifteen years later, Lloyd Fellows found that over 40% of Valley farmers preferred Mexicans, while "whites" received only a 20% preference rating. Nevertheless, negative attitudes prevailed. "Mexicans are even now classed by the white population as belonging to a lower order of human beings," Fellows concluded in 1928, and "they are wanted only to meet the demand for common labor in agriculture just as the negroes were wanted to supply the demand for common labor in the cotton industry before the Civil War."<sup>33</sup>

The other side of the coin was perhaps less subtle in its bias. "The Mexican is not aggressive, he is amenable to suggestions and does his work," one member of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce observed in 1926, and "he is a fellow easy to handle and very quiet in his living, a man who lends himself very well to ranch labor, a man who gives us no trouble at all."<sup>34</sup> Need had apparently softened the heart.

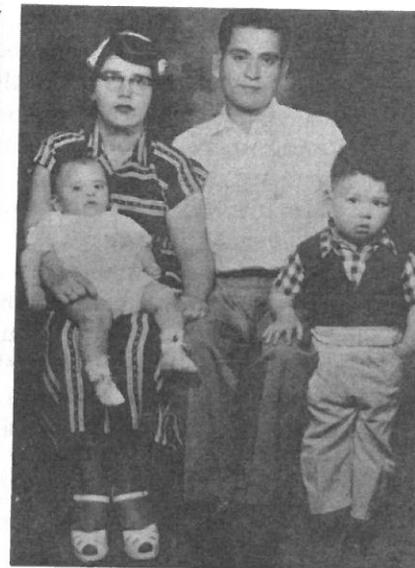
In 1911, Mexicans were "said to be lazy, indifferent and slothful workmen."<sup>35</sup> By 1928, Mexicans had become "a far more desirable person to have around," according to a speaker at the meeting of the California Farm Bureau in Fresno in 1929. Moreover, "the Mexican does not intermarry with Americans," the speaker went on to say, and "is not, therefore, a menace to the American bloodstream."<sup>36</sup>

Such attitudes appeared among much of the Valley's population at that time. Similar to his Asian, Armenian and other ethnic counterparts, Mexicans lived in a social environment punctuated by slurs and stereotypes. In one early report on immigrants in Fresno, Mexicans were not the most "difficult" ethnic group. The dubious honor fell to the Russian-Germans; they were accused of a series of defects, and the "most deplorable fact about the Russian-Germans is (was) their low moral standard"—according to the report.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, such sentiments toward ethnic groups affected their employment opportunities and status.

"Race prejudices have much to do with preferences shown in the employment of laborers," a study concluded in 1908 after an investigation of the Fresno area.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, Mexican laborers resisted racist barriers and pursued jobs beyond the fields. By 1928, a survey of Fresno County industries reported that Mexicans comprised nearly 20% of industrial workers.<sup>39</sup> If public opinion toward Mexicans remained somewhat negative, employers were forced to respect, however grudgingly, the diligence and stamina of the Mexican worker.

Construction companies "declared Mexicans to be very desirable workers" because of their ability to withstand tough work conditions. Railroad managers also realized the value of Mexican labor:

The section gangs do the work of constantly keeping in order the tracks and roadbeds . . . White men do not seek such employment under any condition; they will not submit to the living conditions which are a necessary incident of the work.



The Mexican family has been the foundation of maintaining the Mexican culture in the U.S.—poor or not, the closeness and pride in family were eloquently captured in these early photographs.