FROZEN LABOR, FORGOTTEN STORIES: MEXICAN LABORERS IN SALMON CANNERIES 1910s ALASKA

by

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This thesis examines the history of Mexican workers in Alaska's salmon canneries during the 1910s. It focuses especially on the pivotal year of 1912. Drawing on Mexican Consulate records, primary source newspaper articles, and census records. It reconstructs the shared migration journey, working conditions, and the collective actions of Mexican workers. After travelling thousands of miles north in search of economic opportunity they were faced with unexpected challenges. Their experiences were rooted in a context of increasingly racialized labor hierarchies, exploitative contract systems, and broader movements for labor rights in the early 1900s. Despite Mexican workers isolated position, experiences of discrimination, and extreme exploitation, they forged solidarity within themselves, and more broadly Filipino and other non-white workers. The discovered solidarity culminated in strikes and protests that disrupted the 1912 canning season. This cumulated in collaboration with the Mexican Consulate and a unprecedent agreement with the dominant Alaska Packers Association. This thesis argues that Mexican nationals' resistance contributed to the evolving discourse of labor rights and racial justice in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Their contributions were largely erased from mainstream history and are rarely discussed. By highlighting their stories, this thesis challenges traditional narratives of the Alaskan canning industry and sheds light to the persistent resilience of marginalized migrant communities.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 6

Chapter 2: Historiography 10

Chapter 3: Background of Salmon Canning in Alaska 13

Early Alaskan History 13

Arrival of Euro-Americans 15

Development of the Modern Canning Industry 16

Chapter 3: Labor in the Alaskan Salmon Canneries 18

Alaska Packers Association 18

Chapter 4: The Dominance of Chinese Laborers in the Canneries Pre-1912' 20

Changes In the Labor Force 24

Filipino Introduction to The Canneries 25

Chapter 5: Historical Background of Mexican Labor Migration 28

Chapter 6: Cross Cultural Collaboration 35

Chapter 7: Strikes and Settlements in 1912 39

Chapter 8: Conclusion 62

Figures 64

Bibliography 65

Chapter 1: Introduction

Before the first spring flower had blossomed in 1912, a procession of hopeful men made their way onto massive boats along the ports of San Francisco. Looking around the men experienced a mixture of emotions. Some were looking back silently and saying goodbye to a town they had called home. For others San Francisco was just as unknown as the looming future their imminent boat ride promised. Sitting on the docks away from the cities the men would look around and be met with faces that shared similar stories. Despite their differences they all began their lives in Mexico and now were about to embark on a new future together in the most isolated part of the North American continent. Not only were they uncertain of the company and the destination, but these men had also been recruited to do a job that few dared or desired. Recruited through friends of friends, connections, companies promised a wage and a place to stay, these men hopefully set their sights on Alaska. Boarding the boats most of these men had no idea what lay in store on the remote and rocky land. All they knew was that they were on their way, like so many before, to profit off the wild salmon runs and work to sustain the industrial empire of salmon canneries that dominated the Alaskan shores.

The journey for the men began with a contract, but often this just involved a weak handshake and a lofty promise. In the large coastal cities of the West Coast, home to massive ocean commerce these men were recruited. By 1912 men living in San Francisco and Los Angeles had recently experienced the economic and political upheaval back in Mexico. They had left behind a growing but weak labor system that left many struggling and instead opted to try their luck up north which was powered by migrant labor. Men were enticed by promises of solid pay, food, and opportunity that America promised. None could have ever expected to end up in Alaska; a place that was so drastically different then their homes.

This thesis will reveal the little-known story of Mexican migration to the Alaskan salmon canneries in 1912. This story is situated within a much larger context of labor rights issues and the impact of racialized work hierarchies that defined the salmon canneries. By highlighting the social position of Mexican workers in the broader system of canneries, this thesis will explore how power was used and exploited to make lasting impacts on the canning industry. The record from the Mexican consulate reveals a story of persistence, unification between different nationalities, and the power of persistence in the face of adversity. This narrative exists on both global and national scale, illustrating a specific instance that reflects a broader pattern of exploitation, silencing and erasure, while also demonstrating how memory can endure through alternative and resilient channels.

Vessels going by many names carried men of all kinds through the icy choppy waters that led them up North. The boats would groan and ache as they carried the weight of men beyond what they were built for. These masses of men were quickly defined by hierarchies. While Chinese and Japanese contractors moved freely, Mexican, Filipino, and a mix of many others were placed in areas far too small for humans. Still, the men were free to roam the deck, and many experienced the spray of salty water and the quick bite of wind. Some may have seen the ocean before but leaning against the wooden rails, they came to realize just how far they were from home.

Without warning after months cramped on boats, the men felt a shake and shudder of the halting force of the dock. The moment they emerged on deck Alaska hit them in the face, and before they could take it in the laborers were already on the move. Walking down the small dock, the image was nothing like the growing and bustling downtown San Francisco that they had just left. Everything was quiet, and there was only the distant hum of movement through the tall green trees and the crash of the waves against the dock. The snow was beginning to thaw as the green

returned to Alaska, and there was excitement in the air. As promised, the salmon run was much larger than the year before, meaning the new arrivals had lots of work to do and fast.[1]

Within days of setting foot in Alaska, the men were being put to work. They had little training and lots to do. Quickly the same hierarchy that was established on the boats made its way into the cannery. Mexican workers were reliant on Chinese contractors and cannery bosses to learn the ways of work but were met with resistance. Contractors would refuse to or badly train them and then throwing them into dangerous situations. These new workers were faced with the anger from situations they had no control over. That first day they were charged for aprons and boots and thrust into the grueling schedule that would define the next seven months.[2] In small rickety buildings spread throughout the makeshift town men would gut and clean the fish, and they brandished knifes with little training and often felt the consequences. The chill that entered through their feet from the cold water was something that they would never shake. The little food that was offered to them reminded them how truly far from home they were. The meager rice and cabbage that was offered was so old it often made laborers sick once maybe twice a day, making the 18-hour days stretch for eternity.[3]

Facing this alien environment far from home, men did what they could to keep a semblance of their old life. In their bunks late at night after a long day, they could talk to each other and tell stories of home. As time went by, they met more Filipino men and realized their languages connected them despite such great differences. Laying at night in the bunkhouses these men would contemplate their decision to come to Alaska and slowly felt their dreams fill

[1] "Alaska Fishing Good.," *Victoria B.C. Times*, July 20, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping - APA Clippings Files.
[2] "Anon to SRE Trabajadores Mexicanos en las Pesquerias de Alaska" (Letter, San Francisco, California, April 9, 1912), Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, AHSRE, Scanned by Professor Julie Weise.
[3] Ibid.

with cold and ice. Mexican men would become another cog in the invisible machine that powered not only the canning industry but the world. The tinned salmon they produced would spread worldwide, and it would become one of the most profitable exports to ever come from the Alaskan territory. (see. Fig 1)

Chapter 2: Historiography

The focus of the scholarship written and researched on the salmon canning industry is primarily centered on the United States and Canada. There is research on the early salmon canners, like the Russians and Scandinavians, but that information is used to set up the entrance of European nations into the Pacific Northwest and canning. The scholarship focuses on discussing the salmon canning industry through the lens of the rise and fall of an early European capitalist industry. Most of the writings are economically focused and they discuss the ways in which salmon was canned, shipped, and advertised.[4] The scholarship of the time was written for an audience within the salmon canning industry. Within the scholarship there is little reference about the workers as individuals. The focus concerning the workers was the number of men and their abilities, not the experience of that the workers endured in the industry. The scholarship focused on statistics like those in the 1910 report from the Immigrant Commission made to the Senate on *Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States.*[5] The scholarship covered topics such as salmon migration, economy, marketing, land description and value, and general commerce. There was little to no scholarship on the workers or the demographic of the workforce that goes beyond their numbers and productivity.

After the 1950s though, specifically from 1980 and onwards, research and writing about the salmon canning industry focused on diving deeper beyond basic economic data. Scholarship covered the whole history of the Alaskan fishing industry starting with the first fishermen. The

[4] Patrick W O'Bannon, "Technological Change in the Pacific Coast Canned Salmon Industry, 1900-1925: A Case Study," *Agricultural History*, Symposium on the History of Agricultural Trade and Marketing, 56, no. 1 (January 1982): 151–66.
[5] The Immigrant Commission and Chairman, William P. Dillingham, "Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States," Report of the Immigrant Commission, Immigrants in Industries (Senate, Washington: United States Government, May 15, 1910), Asian American Studies Collections Ethnic Studies Library.

book, *The Natures of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea*[6] by historian Lissa Wadewitz documents the initial interactions between Native Americans and early American fisherman and trappers in the Pacific Northwest. It investigates the continuity clashes over land and water access. Similarly, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries* by Diane Purvis covers the same time span, discussing the reaction to labor migration by white workers and Native Alaskans. Her research investigates the development of fishermen's unions and the intersection of race within the canning industry.[7]

During this time the scholarship investigated the critical involvement of Chinese and other Asian laborers in the development and importance in the salmon canning industry in Alaska. These histories are explored in Chris Friday's *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry,*[8] and articles such as *Asian labor contractors in the Alaska canned salmon industry: 1880-1937* by Jack Masson and Donald Guimary.[9] The book *The Fisherman's Frontier: People and Salmon in Southeast Alaska* covers the history of Alaska fishing extensively from the first known people to fish the waters till the early 2000s. The primary focus was a discussion of the intersection of work, nature, race, and culture from 1900s to the 1950s.[10] Overall, there was an emergence of race and labor discourse in scholarly work on the salmon canning industry beginning with the exploration of the role of Chinese, Japanese, and

[6] Lissa Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea* (Seattle Washington: University of Washington Press, 2012).
[7] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=6677926.
[8] Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, n.d.).
[9] Jack Masson and Donald Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry: 1880–1937," *Labor History* 22, no. 3 (June 1981): 377–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/00236568108584625.
[10] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier: People and Salmon in Southeast Alaska* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, n.d.).

Filipino workers. This change mirrored broader discussions about untold stories in early American industries.

The scholarship concerning Mexican laborers in the Alaska canning industry is minimal. In some scholarship, there are a few mentions of workers, but they only described the unwanted replacement of Chinese workers, and the actual number of workers was very low. There is some recognition of their presence in first-hand accounts like newspapers of the time, but the written secondary sources do not reflect that reality. In *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves*[11] and *The Fisherman's Frontier*,[12] there is no mention of Mexican nationals in the Pacific Northwest. *Organizing Asian American Labor*[13] does briefly note the presence of Mexican laborers in Alaska concerning their involvement with Filipino labor contractors and wage discussions.

While there is little to no reference to Mexicans in Alaska, especially before the 1940s in the salmon canning industry, there is one written work on Mexicans in Alaska. The book *Mexicans in Alaska: An Ethnography of Mobility, Place, and Transnational Life*[14] discusses the immigration of Mexicans to Alaska and their continued presence up to the time the book was written in 2018. The book does acknowledge that Mexicans were working and living in Alaska in the early 1900s, with the record of one person applying for citizenship. The book contains one sentence on Mexicans working in the canning industry, but most of the book discusses the later 1900s to 2000s.

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[11] Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries*.
[12] Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier*.
[13] Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*.
[14] Sara V. Komarnisky, *Mexicans in Alaska: An Ethnography of Mobility, Place, and Transnational Life* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=5382758.

Chapter 3: Background of Salmon Canning in Alaska

Early Alaskan History

From a fishing boat in the sea, small Southern Alaskan towns can be seen sprinkled along the rocky shoreline. While these towns appear weathered by the centuries, they were relatively new in the long history of the landmass that would come to be known as Alaska. Despite its unforgiving weather and wild terrain, the movement of peoples within and to Alaska had occurred for hundreds of years. In the earliest stories of Alaskan history those who learned the land and how to respect it were the ones to profit the most from it. The story of Alaska is often told through the lens of the rise and fall of resources. While the resources that made Alaska so desirable are key, they do not tell the whole story. The Alaskan resource are vast but those resources could never have made such an impact without the men and women

Before the establishment of the towns that would later span the shoreline of Alaska the land held many diverse Indigenous people. This essay will focus on the Southern coast of Alaska as the main point of reference for understanding the development of the industry. Looking beyond the pages of basic history books, the relationship between Native peoples and Alaska and the environment is far more complex than it seemed. The label often given to Native peoples as "environmental stewards" and conservationists is not entirely inaccurate but leaving it at that minimizes the diversity of human experience. For many groups like the Tlingit and Haida people in Southeast Alaska their societies were built around primarily salmon and fishing territory. This can be seen in David Arnold's book when he identifies that while many actions groups took seemed to be ecologically concerned, the goal was instead social and cultural.[15] Access to

[15] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier,* 30.

resources was equated with wealth, and control of land and water resulted in prosperity for a clan and its leader. The control of land is not like modern private property but there were similarities in its importance in differentiating people and showing power. The lines were not drawn on a map, but they were there and there was an expectation of acknowledgement and respect.

The Indigenous groups of Alaska were not alone in their desire to manage the salmon resource. With the arrival of the first Russian trappers and traders in 1741, Native groups used their salmon stores to trade for European goods. The action of trading salmon and the sheer number of salmon traded piqued the interest of early explorers who quickly identified it as an abundant resource. Native Alaskans were some of the first to process salmon through salting which allowed for preservation and trading along farther distances. This process was adapted by the Russians soon after their arrival, and while they never achieved the same numbers, the idea of preserving salmon spread.

By the 1780s multiple Russian trading companies had been set up in Southern Alaska, they were not exclusively trading with salmon but did rely heavily on the marine life of Alaska. During this period tribes like the Tlingit and Haida remained in control of their own culture and marine environment. Native peoples continued to maintain control over their land through the 1860s, largely because Alaska's remoteness made it difficult for Europeans to establish a strong presence or access profitable trade routes—even after the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company. Even when the Hudson Bay Company departed from England and arrived in Alaska with the intention to enter the growing trade system, their arrival did not create conflict in the hierarchy. A drastic change occurred with the arrival of Euro-Americans on the scene. Their arrival marked a change in Southern Alaska that would persist despite the continued resistance and presence of Native peoples to this day.

Arrival of Euro-Americans

The arrival of the Euro-Americans to Alaska was triggered by military encroachment and the subsequent purchase of the territory from the Russians in October of 1867.[16] Like earlier arrivals, Euro-Americans realized the economic opportunities that could be derived from Alaskan resources. At the time of purchase salmon was not yet a popular commodity, but the diverse species of marine life, and inlets and bays that provided easy access to waters that promoted increased fishing and trading. For some years after the acquisition of Alaska the Americans found other means of profit. It wasn't until 11 years after the purchase of Alaska that salmon would be added to the growing number of American industries. In 1878 the first salmon canneries were established in Southeast Alaska by the North Pacific Trading and Packing Co. and the Cutting Packing Co., they built canneries in Klawock and Sitka respectively. The first canneries built were quickly joined by many more spreading along the coast, they would change hands, burn or be moved until the 1960s.[17]

The arrival of Americans would eventually lead to changes that made Alaska unrecognizable but in the early years the changes did not reflect the result. The canneries built in 1878 represented the first stage of American expansion up North. Initially canning was done by hand. It was closely resembled the salting process that the Native groups engaged in for centuries. Because of this the early canneries relied heavily on Native labor. While the canneries hired both men and women, Native women had more experience in packing from the earlier salting operations meaning their labor was heavily desired. During this time, because of fluid

[16] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 21*.
[17] Lewis G. MacDonald, "Chronological History of Salmon Canneries in Southeastern Alaska," appendix to *Alaska Department of Fisheries Annual Report, 1949*. Lissa Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea*.

borders and the youth of the European industry in the 1880s, the Native workers were able to exercise power in their jobs. Understanding that canneries were reliant on their labor as well as connections to fishing grounds they could bargain to get the best payment from whoever they wanted. In the eyes of the canning companies' Native workers did not have loyalty to companies belonging to the United States or to Canada. If their demands for better treatment were rejected, they had no problem walking away from the job to work for someone else. This led to a decrease in the workforce and a hole that opened.[18]

While Native labor was necessary for the initial survival of the American canneries, the introduction of new technological advances played a major role in the dominance of the European companies. In congruence with new technologies companies directly targeted Native resources and land. In studying the development of fishing in the Pacific Northwest, Lissa Wadewitz highlighted that in 1901, several companies built expansive traps that obstructed Native fishing and their transportation roots, and when confronted, some moved their traps. Still, some companies doubled down and threatened Natives with violence.[19] Compromise on land and sea was rarely met, especially within the context of such a lucrative environment.

Development of the Modern Canning Industry

Profit and speculation transform the American salmon canning industry from a small number of independent canneries to the massive industry it would become. With growing opportunities, the desire to increase access to resources and maximize profits pushed Euro-Americans to encroach more and more into Native lands that had been previously slightly respected. Again, Wadewitz notes, "white commercial newcomers sought to restrict Native

[18] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier, 72*.
[19] Lissa Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders, 79*.

mobility and attempted to regulate Indian fishermen out of the fishery. The rise of the industrial fishery in the 1890s soon led whites to physically commandeer Indian fishing locations."[20] This desire to maximize profits is something that remained consistent in the salmon industry throughout its reign of power.

The growth of the American industry began in the 1880s but would not realize its full potential until the burgeoning popularity of canned fish internationally. Realizing the opportunities that mass exportation of canned salmon held there was little oversight into companies canning and labor practices. Even more, the United States government had a vested interest in canning profits and wanted to ensure American companies had full access to land and resources they felt were legally theirs. These realities ensured that in the eyes of the United States government and the entrepreneurs moving North, the Native people's control of the land and resources needn't be considered. There was no legal ownership by Western standards of what Americans would consider property. Using this reasoning and the isolation of Alaska, the number of canneries and towns exploded during the 1890s and continued to grow until late into the 1920s.

With the massive growth of the industry the reality of an unreliable pool of laborers increasingly became a problem. The constant movement of workers did not align with profit-driven companies who wanted workers who would remain loyal for the season and connect them with more workers interested in the same agreement. The lull in laborers was the catalyst for salmon canning companies to look beyond Native Alaskans and the limited settlers and instead look south to the growing economic hubs of the West coast that was filling with laborers looking for a wage.[21]

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[20] Lissa Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders, 74*.
[21] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier, 28*.

Chapter 3: Labor in the Alaskan Salmon Canneries

Alaska Packers Association

During the early stages of the development of the Alaska canning operations, there were many smaller companies and groups of men jockeying for the best fishing and canning locations. From the takeover of Alaska by the Americans in 1867 until 1882 the industry remained relatively small because of its location and the limited knowledge of its potential. After 1882 though more canning companies were established and settled in Alaska condensing the market. To deal with the competition, some companies joined together to maximize profits and resources. In 1892, eighteen industrialists entered their twenty-eight canneries and packing companies into a cooperative arrangement. This joint company became the most profitable and lucrative canning operation in Alaska; it would come to be known as the Alaska Packers Association (APA).[22] This association was able to use their combined power to control the market for a long time and were the ones who would set the prices in canning and dictate the boundaries of the fishing. The most mechanized plants that relied on both technology and wage workers were those run by the Alaska Packers Association, which packed 2,400 cases of salmon per day.[23] Because of their sheer size, they remained an industry giant for a long time and controlled the pricing of salmon for all canneries.

The Alaska Packers Association canneries and towns were located all along the Southern Coast of Alaska; they were located primarily in the Kodiak and Bristol Bay regions. The APA had complete control of the area clouding smaller canneries. The rise of APA was described as

[22] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier*, 57.
[23] O'Bannon, "Technological Change in the Pacific Coast Canned Salmon Industry, 1900-1925: A Case Study."

meteoric, and the packers pooled their assets to ensure a monopoly over the Alaska canning industry. Their sheer size impacted the success of other companies all around Alaska.[24] The canneries and their surrounding towns were on the very edge of the state. At that time, the interior of Alaska was mostly unexplored by the Europeans. Towns around the canneries were minimal and often just had a store, a school, and a church. Alaska was not a location where newcomers went to settle; it was primarily a location for wage workers for a variety of industries.

[24] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 75*.

Chapter 4: The Dominance of Chinese Laborers in the Canneries Pre-1912'

Zooming out from Alaska a key characteristic of the 19th century was an increase in globalization which connected major cities with growing production capabilities and economies. This connection led to an exponential rise in economic opportunities for the West coast of the United States. Cities like San Francisco were undergoing massive infrastructure changes coupled with new industries created around newfound resources. This combination resulted in a need for more laborers than the local population could supply. Along the West coast this issue dominated the minds of politicians and businessmen. The early capitalists knew the industries of mines, railway, and agriculture along the West Coast would benefit the nation, but they could never get there without more workers. To address this issue, the United States looked outwards towards other nations to bring its workers and connect them with more economies.

One of the most influential nations for the supply of laborers at the time was China. Around the 1850s Chinese labor was critical in the Pacific Northwest to build infrastructure that the extractive economy relied on like railways and streets. Simultaneously, goods sold to China became an important foreign market for the United States.[25] Kornel Chang notes how "Chinese mercantile elite played a crucial role in establishing imperial nodes and facilitating traffic across them as they distributed migrant workers to sites of labor scarcity and opened Asian markets for Western goods."[26] From Chinese labor, the foundation of massive industries were built. These industries like the railroad would create some of the earliest millionaires in the United States, for men like Carnegie and Rockefeller who are known worldwide.

[25] Kornel S. Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands*, American Crossroads (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
[26] Chang, *Pacific Connections*.

In places like San Francisco in the 1860s it would be impossible to ignore the influx of migrant labor especially from China. While they worked to help build railroads and mines, they also laid down roots and settled in the United States. Once white Americans realized that Chinese labor was not temporary the general opinion turned, resulting in massive changes in the following years. The discussion of Chinese workers was presented as concern for the American man's job, that the vast opportunities in the West were being stolen from those most deserving. The critical eye bearing down on Chinese workers was not solely insular. It was reflected around the globe. During this time of increased connection, the exchange of people through labor migration, the essence of the nation was feeling challenged.[27]

Chinese migrants were used as a scapegoat for the problems facing nations and were used as a nationally unifying "other" in different movements in the later part of the 1800s. The sinking opinion of Chinese migrants culminated in anti-Chinese immigration laws in the U.S. and the subsequent spreading of these types of immigration laws internationally. In the United States, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 this act prohibited Chinese immigration for a ten-year period. Following this there was another Act passed in 1904 that entirely prohibited the entry of Chinese immigrants.[28] The result of this was a stemming of Chinese movement to the U.S. but not entirely. This was paired with an increase in the targeting of not only Chinese people, but any person deemed "not American" or a threat to society at large.

The salmon canning industry in Alaska was deeply impacted by the restriction of Chinese immigration. By 1886 the industry had started to pick up because of the increased labor force and had become reliant on the steady stream of labor. Canneries had been relying heavily on Chinese labor on all levels, from low-paying labor to bosses to labor recruiters. For the early

[27] Chang, *Pacific Connections*.
[28] Masson and Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," *383*.

canners their success relied heavily on the access to laborers along the West coast. This recruitment was assisted by Chinese contractors who built business solely on finding and providing laborers for companies up North. For the owners of the canning companies, Chinese laborers and contractors were desirable because they were willing to work for less than white workers for the same job, anywhere between one-quarter to one-third less.[29] For companies just starting out that pay difference could mean survival or death.

Prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act, a prime location for labor contracting and contractors was San Francisco. This was where Captain Carl J. Carlson of the Alaska Packers' Association on the Euterpe (APA Star of India) witnessed the influence of the Chinese contractors in action. Captain Carlson described in his journal that when he left San Francisco, there were about two hundred men aboard his ship, and at least half of them were destined for the cannery gang. He followed by stating that the men aboard were a "motley crew," and he noted that this was a result of Chinese contracting. He wrote that "a chinaman was the prime contractor for the company and he recruited his men wherever he could—Chinese, Japs, Mexicans, Filipinos."[30] Even before the Exclusion Act the position that Chinese contractors held within the canning industry was unlike anything else. They learned how to utilize their social networks and knowledge of the labor force to supply canneries with much needed labor.

Even once the pool of laborers within their social networks dwindled, the Chinese contractors were able to outsource and managed to stay relevant. One record of this came from an anonymous letter sent to the Labor Commissioner in 1912, Mr. McLaughlin, who was trying to determine the reality of the situation. This man had worked seven seasons in Alaska and saw

[29] Chang, *Pacific Connections*.
[30] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 165*.

the development of what he called the "Chinese contract gang," meaning they were fed and paid mostly by the Chinese and Japanese men who contracted them. Because of the Exclusion Act though the pools of Asian had workers disappeared. At this point the worker noted that the contractors turned to "Porto Rican sub-contractors", these men recruited what he described as Porto Ricans, Mexicans, and down-and-out white men"[31] those who had previously been overlooked. What is key here is how non-Asian workers were placed in a category of the last option and that was reflected not only their level of recruitment but also in the pay and treatment offered.

Even after the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese workers were still heavily desired workers and the means of obtaining them shows truly how desperate companies felt. The desperation led to often illegal means to obtain workers. In one case in 1901, a U.S. immigration inspector discovered that two "Chinese padrones" had been illegally providing workers to the Alaska Packers Association. This inspector, Charles Snyder, uncovered this system at a cannery on Point Roberts, where Chinese workers were being smuggled in for one hundred dollars per head. This was not an isolated incident either, in conferring with local fishermen he found out that smuggling Chinese workers to the U.S. was a big business.[32] The smuggling of Chinese workers into canneries almost 20 years after the passing of the Act shows just how needed they were.

Not only were Chinese workers positively desired, but other workers like the Mexican workers faced an unfairly negative perception. There was little hiding the negativity, for example the Marathon Fishing and Packing Company wrote to one of its labor contractors when

[31] "Confirms Story of Treatment of Fishery Victims," *San Francisco Daily Post*, September 27, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping - APA Clippings Files.
[32] Lissa Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders, 100*.

considering their choice in recruitment that “MEXICANS… They are an awful bunch; even Lewis the Chinese foreman says never again Mexicans for him" and "The Mexicans are the limit…They pay no attention to their foreman, and they lay off whenever they feel like it and go to work the same way.”[33] The perception of Chinese workers was so high even their opinions made an impact of the labor that was sourced.

Not only were Chinese workers generally desired, but they also played key roles in the running of canneries. Because of their roles in both working and contracting for the canneries there was little diversity within the workforce especially before the Exclusion Act. Within the canneries Chinese workers moved up in the ranks, and most of the group operations were run by Chinese bosses controlling Chinese laborers. To communicate with their non-English speaking Chinese laborers, the canners hired a “boss Chinaman.” He served as both a foreman and a wage negotiator for the Chinese workforce.[34] Along the West Coast early capital was often generated by ethnic labor contractors who were able skillfully to deal with the salmon canners and members of their race without seeming to be over-exploitive.[35]

Changes In the Labor Force

To deal with the loss of the constant flow of Chinese workers the APA and other canning companies turned to new sources of labor. As a result of encouragement to migrate from the Japanese Government in the 1880s large numbers of Japanese were looking for work along the west coast. In 1901 Japanese were introduced to the canning industry and moved to Alaska in the following years and by 1909 made up a third of the workforce inside the canneries.[36] The power

[33] Masson, Guimary, “Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry,” 385-86.
[34] Masson and Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," 383.
[35] Masson and Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," 381.
[36] Masson and Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," 384.

positions in Alaska transitioned from Chinese to Japanese laborers through subcontracting that arose from labor scarcity because of the selectivity of the Chinese contractors.[37] There was a change in the environment with the arrival of new ethnic groups to Alaska, with the arrival of the Japanese and there was a break from traditional Chinese contracting. A consequence of this transition was resentment from the Chinese foremen and workers for a perceived intrusion into their ranks.[38] While the Japanese were large in numbers by the end of the decade Chinese workers still were atop the hierarchy. Nonetheless the anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. did not just affect the Chinese, in 1907 through a "Gentleman's Agreement" Japanese migration was terminated.

Filipino Introduction to The Canneries

The immigration policy restricting Chinese and Japanese workers resulted in a dip in access to laborers beginning in 1909 Filipinos were recruited to work in the Alaskan canneries. In the lead up to the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the following *Insular Cases* immigration to America was heavily controlled by the immigration quotas. The Insular Cases were a series of cases that established the legal grounds for the United States' possession of colonies. This allowed for the United States to place the Philippines in a new legal category and avoid the promise of awarding eventual statehood and with that full citizenship.[39] In the background of these cases the immigration quotas were used to control the number of new immigrants based on national origin and race. Critically Chinese and late Japanese nationals had

[37] Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*.
[38] Masson and Guimary, "Asian Labor Contractors in the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," 384.
[39] Mae M. Ngai, "From Colonial Subject to Undesirable Alien: Filipino Migration in the Invisible Empire," in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850235, 98.

been targeted heavily by these quotas leading to loss of laborers for a large part of the West coast. Despite the general recognition of the Philippines being Asian they were not targeted by the same restrictions as other groups. The nuance of the position of Filipinos within the immigration conversation was a result of the Treaty of Paris. This treaty among other things transferred ownership of the territory of the Philippines to the United States from Spain.

The political transfer of the Philippines from Spain to the United States transformed the citizenship status of Filipinos to a blurred position allowing movement but dancing around rights. The result of this transfer resulted in a technical colonization of the Philippines by the United States which created this tension concerning citizenship. There were arguments within the government on what the new territory would be and what to do with the inhabitants. These discussions were filled with oppressive racial rhetoric and a desire for expansion but a distancing from imperialism. Statehood and full citizenship seemed preposterous instead they engaged in what the president William McKinley called "benevolent assimilation" which meant a focus on individual freedom but not national. Freedom really meant freedom through assimilation into United States culture but within their own borders.[40] This assimilation came with a final decision on the type of citizenship Filipinos would have in relation to the United States. The new colonial policy was the declaration of the people in unincorporated territories as "U.S. nationals" this seemed to solve the problem for the U.S. government.

The legal recognition of Filipinos as "U.S. nationals" did not change the scrutiny they faced regarding their perceived "racial inferiority" and the discourse of nonbelonging. According to Mae Ngai the colonial policy of America had created a liminal status for nationals where they were neither citizen nor alien.[41] This status meant they owed allegiance to the United States but

[40] Ngai, "From Colonial Subject to Undesirable Alien," 99.
[41] Ngai, "From Colonial Subject to Undesirable Alien," 100.

did not have the same right of a citizen. One concession made for Filipinos though was the freedom of movement within the territory of the United States, meaning, they were one of the only non-white groups at the time with no restriction on immigration. The liminal status of Filipinos was not an easy position to be in; there was a sense of instability with their position within the nation.[42] While there was a fear that Filipinos would take American jobs their status came at a perfect time for Western industries who had experienced a recent loss of a large part of their workforce due to earlier immigration restrictions.

The Filipino laborers were not only different compared to Chinese workers in their nationality status. Quickly after entering the industry, they began to challenge the established hierarchy within the canneries and beyond. They were the first group to try to unionize along ethnic lines to combat the contracting system as well as low wages faced by all workers in Alaska. Filipinos had been migrating to the United States since the 1900s where they learned the American attitude towards labor rights, of having fair wages and safety on the job. Because of their liminal status in the United States there was a understanding that they would remain on the continent for a longer period of time if not a lifetime so there was more of a desire to establish fair treatment from the beginning.[43] The demographic change of the workforce in such a short time from the 1880s to 1910s meant that no one group or individual felt secure and were all fighting for the same low wages and some recognition.

[42] Huping Ling and Allan W. Austin, "The Filipino American Experience: History and Culture," in *Asian American History and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=2058297, 99.
[43] Austin and Ling, "The Filipino American Experience," 100.

Chapter 5: Historical Background of Mexican Labor Migration

In the context of the history of salmon canning, Mexican recruitment to the canneries started off in port cities along the west coast. Mexican migration to the United States as whole is important to this story. The motivations, pathways, and struggles are important to understanding just how much of a move it was. Mexico is a large country situated below the southwestern area of the United States. Prior to the arrival of explorers from the east the border in the modern understanding of it did not exist. People from what is now northern Mexico and Southwest U.S. were interchangeable and moved freely as they pleased. Colonization created the beginnings of the country borders we know today just before the creation of the current layout; there was contention between the U.S. controlled portion of the Southwest and Spanish controlled Mexico.

Mexican immigration to the U.S. began after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.-Mexico war in 1848. The outcome of the treaty made it so the first wave of immigrants to the U.S. did not move to the U.S. but instead were those who technically immigrated because the border changed. The fluidity of borders is a common reality, especially during this time. From up in Alaska to down in the Southwest, borders had been established, but the people who lived there did not experience that change immediately the change was felt slowly over time. This border is like the Anglo-American border between Canada and the United States and Alaska, as described in the *Nature of Borders*.[44] This border was placed for nation building with little focus on the environmental and social realities that it would be impacting.

Along with the disregard for the pre-treaty borders, after the signing of the treaty in 1848 the United States government quickly started the movement of ownership of lands in California

[44] Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders*.

from Mexican and Native people to the settlers and anyone who wanted to stake their claim. In the eyes of the republican government, Mexican and Native people had failed to make the lands productive prior to 1848 and the fix was a change of ownership. Through complete control of the legal system as well as the selling and buying of land white Americans were able to dispossess most Mexicans living in California in the 1850s.[45] This land dispossession meant those Mexicans who still lived in California made a new low-wage labor force. This mass of people reliant of the wage system would remain for years by the 1860s in San Jose 75 percent of Mexican men were working as day laborers or farm workers.[46] The consolidation of Mexican laborers would be the foundation for the social connections drawing more Mexican nationals up north in the following years.

Parallel to the growth of Mexican wage laborers in California, years after the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty, a major change occurred in Mexico that would alter the course of migration. In 1876, through a coup, Porfirio Díaz became president and pushed an industrialist agenda that would change Mexico's political and technological landscape. The effect on migration was two-sided; it occurred through connections made with new forms of travel from South to North, but there was also the push because of limited opportunities in Mexico as well as violence and general hardship. The connection between the U.S. and Mexico was geographically strong through the border, but travel remained difficult. This was changed through the influence of U.S. investors who wanted to build national railways in Mexico to increase the efficiency and price of trade.[47]

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[45] Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1969).
[46] Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*.
[47] Daniel Morales, "Revolution and Migration: The Rise of 'Migration Fever' in San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato, 1890–1920," in *Between Here and There*, by Daniel Morales, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2024), 14–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197612590.003.0002, 16.

The growing industries in the American West were able to profit from this freer mobility that was so commonly highlighted by people moving across borders to make a wage in whatever industries they could find. At this point, there was no established control of the industry, so companies could set wages to maximize profit and bring in workers from major cities. These railroad projects gave Mexican workers new opportunities, both economically but also in quicker movement across the borders. When the railroad was completed, it created the connections necessary for goods and people in both nations. The Mexican Central linked to the Southern Pacific Railway and the Topeka and Santa Fe Railway at Ciudad Juárez/ El Paso, this railway was completed in 1884. While the Mexican National ended at Laredo, where it joined up with the Texas-Mexican and the International and Great Northern railway systems, this railway was completed in 1888.[48] Both the accessibility and the expansive reach of the railroad system simplified migration for a while, which benefited both the workers and the wage labor industries. Workers were able to move to find jobs, and recruiters had established vehicles to transport workers and share information about jobs to more places.

The creation of this railroad and increased connection across nations occurred during a time of change in the social and economic reality of Mexico for lower-, and middle-class workers. Between 1876 and 1910 the government moved to consolidate smaller land holdings into larger ones. For example, by 1910, 82 percent of the population of San Luis Potosí lived within *hacienda*/boundaries controlled by *hacendados*.[49] This transition resulted in a mass movement away from autonomy through smaller agriculture and instead an increase in wage-based labor. Additionally, there was high inflation in the price of basic commodities for many

[48] Morales, "Revolution and Migration," 17.
[49] Morales, "Revolution and Migration," 17.

who were in the process of finding wage employment, which produced profound income inequalities.

This drastic change under the Porfiriato resulted in the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The difficult and life altering experiences of Mexican people during this time of a general uptick of industrial jobs led to mass movements of people across borders in search of jobs and better opportunities. The basis for most migration during the years of 1820 to 1920 is outlined by Daniel Morales. Morales describes the environment that was a catalyst for mass migration, he highlights conditions that propelled this mass migration were the direct result of industrialization of the Mexico- US borderlands which coincided with the violence of the Mexican Revolution. There were multifaceted motivations within this context, the economic forces, revolutionary violence and the personal choice of leaving pushed and pulled migrants north.[50] As more people were displaced by the changing land regulations and the transformation of so many industries, social networks across borders grew and the migration patterns moved more North instead of internally.

Initially instead of dividing the United States and Mexico the border created a competitive economic environment. The competition stemmed from American and Mexican bosses competing for laborers and control of the economy in the borderland's region. Ease of movement across the border assisted in the proliferation of Mexican laborers all along the southern states, especially Texas and California, because of their booming industries. These industries required enticing rewards to gain the labor needed. The need to entice workers resulted in Texas and California having wages four to nine times higher than the border states of Mexico.

[50] Morales, "Revolution and Migration," 14.

The growth of industries in the major cities along the southern border and up into California led to an increase of direct labor recruitment for a variety of economic ventures.[51]

For many workers arriving in the United States, the first stop was Texas; from there, many workers moved west to California either to get jobs they had been told about or to join up with friends and family settled there. Once in California, there was a great variety of jobs available for Mexican laborers. This diversity of opportunity was facilitated through the railroad, which connected almost all of California. Many Mexican labor migrants moved north to San Francisco due to its distance from the border and the wide range of available jobs in sectors such as mining, agriculture, and canning. San Francisco was a hub for not only Mexican workers but for a variety of immigrant groups.[52]

Although precise records are sparse, data from the Alaskan Census taken in 1900 offers valuable insights into the early movement of Mexican migrants to Alaska. In the United State Census, it states that out of 8,784 people recorded in Alaska, 11 people were recorded as being born in Mexico. With the information that there were 11 Mexican nationals in Alaska in 1900 it can be approximated that they moved around 1895 to 1899. While the counting by the census cannot be trusted in entirety due to human error and the nuances of race and nationality at the time it gives a good starting number. This information can be backed up as well by information from the actual scanned records of the census. From those records that are available on Ancestry.com 11 Mexican nationals are listed.[53] These people are a mix of families, homeowners, and laborers. Their exact professions were not listed the only specificity that was

[51] Morales, "Revolution and Migration," 33.
[52] Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*.
[53] United States. Bureau of the Census, “Thirteenth Census of the United States” (Population Schedule, Alaska Territory, 1910), T624, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.ancestry.com.

made was laborers, the early industries in Alaska were the railroads and mining. Interestingly none of the Mexican workers at the time were listed as fishermen or canners. The movement of Mexicans to Alaska continued, and by 1910 the Alaskan census recorded that 219 or 1.2% of 17,974 people recorded were listed as being from Mexico.[54]

Exploring census records more closely provides a valuable window through which to examine the broader motivations behind Mexican migration to Alaska. Using a randomly selected sample of 10 men from the 1910 Alaska census stored on the Ancestry website who were listed as being Mexican some more conclusions can be drawn. From the 1910 Census sample it can be gathered that six out of the ten men had been in the United States for 6 years and more, meaning they had been recorded crossing the border.[55] The migrants most likely did not move straight to Alaska once they crossed the border but instead moved around in the United States either settling or working. What is important is that they still gained experience of being migrants in America. Four of the men on the sample were listed as being in the same lodging house; in total the ten men in the sample from the census were part of a group of over 30 Mexican migrants recorded in Bristol Bay, and the Kodiak region alone. This experience of being in the U.S. and most likely Alaska for some time meant they had established themselves were able to inform more people about Alaska.

Exploring the Census with more detail it becomes clear that not only were Mexican people in Alaska but that they had been there in larger numbers for a significant time. Two men from the 1910 sample had been in Alaska for over a decade by 1912, for one he had lived in Alaska for more than half of his life. A young man of 19 named Elijio Martines was born in Mexico in 1890 turning 20 later in the year 1910. Elijio's parents were both Mexican nationals,

[54] Bureau of the Census, 1910.
[55] Ibid.

his race in the Census was recorded as Mexican (Latino) but also as a "mulatto." His immigration story in the United States began with his crossing into the United States in 1900, most likely crossing with his family because he was only nine years old.[56] The record of him in Alaska tells a story that supposes that he most likely travelled from within the United States up to Alaska to work or visit. In Alaska Elijio established himself like many other Mexicans at the time in a lodging house with a diverse group of men. On the actual Census documents from the time, he is listed as living with 100 different laborers under a head of house from the Philippines Juan Manahli a 23-year-old who had immigrated in 1905.[57] In all likelihood these men either lived close together or in a large building ran by Juan. The lodging house was filled with men from all around the world, specifically though Elijio lived with 11 Filipinos, four Puerto Ricans, and six men from Hawaii. Importantly though for the discussion of social networks Elijio lived with 3 other men from the sample all Mexican nationals.[58] The young men ranging from 17 to 19 years old were part of the larger system of workers who were profiting on the varying wage work systems based on the vast resources in Alaska.

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[56] United States. Bureau of the Census, "1910 United States Federal Census, Bristol Bay, Division 3, Alaska Territory" (Population Schedule, 1910), T624, Roll 1750, Page 46b, Enumeration District 0010, FHL microfilm 1375763, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7884/records/31374839.

[57] United States. Bureau of the Census, "1910 United States Federal Census, Bristol Bay, Division 3, Alaska Territory" (Population Schedule, 1910), T624, Roll 1750, Page 45b, Enumeration District 0010, FHL microfilm 1375763, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7884/records/31374774.

[58] Ibid.

Chapter 6: Cross Cultural Collaboration

Now that the path for Mexican migration to Alaska has been investigated another key part of this story is the collaboration between Mexican and Filipino workers. The movement of Mexican migrants North in larger numbers coincides with the influx of Filipino workers in the canneries after 1909. There were not as many who travelled North as the Filipinos, but their experiences went hand in hand. The Filipino workers as stated above were some of the first non-White people to attempt to a successfully unionize against the Alaska canning companies. Their success could not have been achieved without Mexican workers. The two groups joined together and fought not only to unionize but also for similar improved treatment and once unionized were able to make some progress.

In most of the scholarship written about the strikes during this time the collaboration between Mexican and Filipino nationals in Alaska is virtually nonexistent. The only written history of this collaboration comes from newspapers that document the struggle to unionize of the Filipinos, Mexicans, and even of Puerto Rican and Portuguese. The background for their union can truly be seen through their living situations. From data collected from the 13th Census of the United States of the population of Alaska taken in April of 1910 it was recorded that there were several Mexican nationals living in Kodiak and Bristol Bay Alaska. From a random sample of 10 recorded Mexican laborers in Alaska, it was recorded that all 10 of them had Filipino neighbors. They were listed as being in the same living area based on the long dashes used to determine different locations. One man, Felix Escobedo, was listed as being neighbors with 19

Filipinos nationals, three Mexican, two Puerto Ricans, and a Chilean.[59] The documentation in the Census is a clear record of the diversity in the Alaskan cannery towns.

The living situation of these workers made it, so they were able to share experiences and organize against their bosses. In many cases Filipinos, Mexicans, and other "Latins" were all lumped together as on group this grouping is impactful because they more than likely were able to communicate across nationalities. Through the colonization of the Philippines by Spain Filipinos were in the position to learn Spanish which could be used to communicate with Mexicans and other Latinos. This is mirrored by the fact that during this period immigration from non-white countries was being restricted but the Mexican and Filipinos did not face those legal obstacles. Neither group was accepted wholly into white American society, but they did share similar liminal statuses in the variability of Mexicans being labeled as "white" and Filipinos being U.S. nationals.

The Filipino workers listed were listed as laborers or "At Sea (Seaman)" which was the same occupations that were listed for the 10 Mexican workers. The specific living situations of the workers cannot be gathered from the Census data. Despite that it can be assumed that the salmon canning workers were either in lodging houses together, or in housing barracks provided by the companies. The solidarity between Mexican laborers within their own nationality could only have grown through repeated shared experiences and seasons spent together. From the sample of 10 Mexican workers six of them were listed as living together or as neighbors.[60] The

[59] United States. Bureau of the Census, "1910 United States Federal Census, Kodiak, Division 3, Alaska Territory" (Population Schedule, 1910), T624, Roll 1750, Page 48b, Enumeration District 0013, FHL microfilm 1375763, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7884/records/31377834.
[60] Bureau of the Census, "Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Bristol Bay, Division 3."

proximity between the workers meant that they could get both support but also movement towards change.

The day-to-day living situation of the laborers cannot be specified but there is evidence emerging that they lived based on nationality. One of the first canneries acquired by the young Alaska Packers Association after their absorption of smaller companies was the South Naknek Cannery. The cannery was built in 1895 and served as the centerpiece of the Bristol Bay salmon fishery for the APA. Miraculously the facility never endured a fire or reconstruction and remained active till 2015, importantly it has maintained its architectural integrity and remains the same as it was in 1895. Considering this, a blueprint from 1957 of the Naknek Cannery is a tool to explore the living situation for the men who worked in the 1910s. The bunk houses were all labeled by race and all the non-white races were housed separately from white workers. They were housed towards the edge of the cannery.[61] While this may have been isolating from the rest of the cannery it also meant that they primarily interacted with their own races and non-white workers.

To add to the physical division the mess halls were also separated by race the map only listed an "old mess house", a "new white mess hall," and a "Filipino mess hall." This again emphasizes how non-white workers were often lumped together while being separated from their white counterparts. Separation of people into groups is a way in which power over people can be enacted because it creates not only physical but also ideological space. It also calls into question the reasoning for separating almost all aspects of the lives of the workers. Not only were they separated by white and non-white, but also by different non-white races. While it could be

[61] Alaska Packers Association, *Bristol Bay (Naknek), NN Cannery*, Cannery Plan, 1" = 50' (Bellingham, WA: Johnson & Higgins of California, February 26, 1957), Series III: Property, 1841–1989, Sub-series: Cannery Maps, Oversize Folder 15, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.

connected by the sheer number of non-white workers, it also shows that the owners of the canneries were most likely aware of the solidarity that would build between non-white groups through living together.[62] This separation built into a cannery in 1957 is the effect of the creation of non-white unions and solidarity against the bosses which they had to learn to prevent. The exploration of the blueprint of Naknek shows the diversity of Alaska that has been left completely out of history books.

With this context the following story that comes from primary source documents from the Mexican Consulate and newspapers can be investigated and analyzed. The relationship between Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican workers is important within the context of the broader environment of employment under the Alaska Packers Association. Mexican workers entered a system where the Alaska Packers Association had dominated for years both as a canning company but also a primary employer in Alaska in the 1910s. The following story is a small window into a broader environment of the complexity of labor, migration, and representation.

[62] Alaska Packers Association, *Bristol Bay (Naknek), NN Cannery,* 1957.

Chapter 7: Strikes and Settlements in 1912

At the center of this thesis there is a complex cache of voices—filtered, manipulated, and often full of contradiction. The primary source documents from 1912 span for almost six months starting in late March until early October. These include correspondence and reports from Mexican consulate officials as well as the lawyer and Vice-Consul from Spain Arthur Brand.[63] Their position within the system offers a revealing yet imperfect image of the lives of Mexican laborers in Alaska's canning industry. These sources, while rare and invaluable, must be approached with a critical eye. Their language is steeped in paternalism and shaped by the institutional priorities of their authors. Consular reports often presented the experiences of Mexican workers in a reassuring and optimistic light; consulate officials were acting in response to growing bureaucratic oversight.[64] The consulate documents do show a focus on the protection of Mexican nationals while also reflecting cautious diplomacy that stops short of radical support. Similarly, the writings of the white officials in the consulate oscillate between benevolent oversight and racialized control. A more complete and nuanced image of the laborers' experiences come to light when read alongside newspaper articles from the Alaska Packers Association archive. The competing perspectives of these sources allows for a tracing of the broad contours of labor, identity, and resistance. They reveal not only how Mexican workers were perceived but also how they navigated and resisted the structures that restrained them.

[63] The lawyer Brand is referred to as Arthur in both Mexican Consulate documents as well as in the newspapers. For continuity his name will be listed as Arthur in this thesis, but it should be noted that the name is not common for Spain. On the website PoliticalGraveyard.com they list all the honorary consuls in U.S. territories representing Spain and for San Francisco they list his name as Arturo Brand. Considering this it could be assumed that he either went by or was called Arthur when in the states but to remain consistent and represent what is on the sources he will be listed as Arthur.

[64] Juan Gómez-Quiñones, "Piedras Contra La Luna: México En Aztlán y Aztlán En México: Chicano-Mexicano Relations and the Mexican Consulates, 1900-1920," in *Contemporary Mexico: Papers of the IV International Congress of Mexican History*, ed. Michael C. Meyer, James W. Wilkie, and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, vol. 29 (El Colegio de Mexico: University of California Press, 1976), 494–523.

Around the turn of 20th century, opportunities available to migrant workers in the Alaska salmon canneries had spread beyond the isolation of Asian communities. At this time the Alaska Packers Association was faced with the reality of the dwindling labor supply, resulting in the Chinese labor contractors turning to Mexican, Filipino, and Portuguese workers. Despite the thousands of miles that they had to cover and the uncertainty of the work ahead, many Mexican workers made the decision to go north. By 1905, the first Mexican nationals had arrived in Alaska at the start of the canning season to work as fishermen and canners. Their arrival coincided with a broader shift towards wage workers as the labor force across North America. Considering the size of Alaska, they needed thousands of workers quickly, because of the restrictions on immigration from Asia.[65] Between 1905 and 1910, Mexican workers established themselves in Alaska, staying for the season or year-round, also finding work in the mines and on railroads.

In 1912, the Mexican laborers in Alaska's salmon canneries burst into public view. Newspapers across the West Coast began reporting on their protests, demands, and resistance. To understand the deeper meaning of this moment, it is important to establish the context in which these events would unfold. The Mexican workers at the heart of this story were employed by the Alaska Packers Association (APA), the most powerful canning company in Alaska at the time. Representing the APA was Henry F. Fortmann who throughout the year of 1912 presided over the APA through the headquarters in San Francisco. Also based in San Francisco was the Mexican Consulate which was the main point of contact for Mexican nationals working all along the West Coast.

[65] "Porto Ricans Cause Small Riot," *San Francisco Call*, March 22, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.

By the early 20th century, Mexican consulates had spread across the southern states like California, Texas, and Arizona and had been established as early as the 1850s. For many years the consulates had significant autonomy in their decision making, by 1905 the consulates became organized and governed with increased scrutiny. This took the form of enforcement higher professional standards, and the government increased the requirements to even work in one.[66] When it came to the powers of the consulate two strict limitations determined their role concerning Mexican nationals during this time. First, they were absolutely prohibited to mix and interfere in the politics in the United States. Secondly consulate officials were instructed to ensure their relationship with the U.S. officials remained positive and to respect their position.[67] These boundaries meant that while the consulate workers were tasked with supporting Mexican nationals their power to interfere was limited. The growing tension between their duty and maintaining diplomacy would directly shape the response to the growing tension in the Alaskan canneries.

By the early months 1912, animosity was rising, there was major labor unrest and disruptions in the salmon canning industry. Workers employed the Alaska Packers Association-owned canneries had begun to organize and unionize to fight for better wages and treatment. The canning industry in Alaska was a diverse industry filled with workers from around the world. The diversity often led to rigid divisions along race and nationality. This unrest in the industry was not limited to Alaskan canneries. All along the West coast—in places like Tillamook, Oregon and along the Columbia River—cannery workers were also striking and protesting. What

[66] Juan Gómez-Quiñones, “Piedras Contra La Luna," 497.
[67] Ibid, 496.

had been previously stable seasons of salmon canning for the APA was now marked with disruption.[68]

Despite the undeniable growth of the labor movement, the literature concerning the strikes of 1912 in the salmon canning industry left much to be desired. There is a general acknowledgement of labor protests in the industry, but it often only centers on the experience White Euro-Americans and of Native Americans and Asian migrants.[69] One of the few exceptions is recorded by historian David Arnold in his book of southeast Alaska. He simply states, "In 1912 a major fisherman's strike pushed more canneries to switch to trap operations, ensuring them a steady salmon supply without having to rely on 'independent' fishermen operating movable gear." [70] His focus was on the role of fish traps in relationship with the canneries and the Native people of Alaska, but he does offer some valuable insight, nonetheless. Arnold says of the time that the discussions over the fish traps were a small part of growing debates concerning the management of fisheries, economic efficiency, social justice, local control, and "moral economy." Arnold's work highlights the broader debates of the time.[71]

The spring of 1912 saw a rise in newspaper coverage along the West coast. The confrontation of the APA management varied by location and experience, but all were protesting the low wages for high levels of work. A common theme in the protest emerged, workers wanted a minimum of $200 a season and an increase in compensation per salmon caught. The strikes in Alaska reached their peak in late March and early April, while the protests in Oregon,

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[68] *Clippings File*, Series VIII: Reference files, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clippings, APA, Volume 175 Clippings Files *Alaska Packers Association records*, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections, Western Washington University, Bellingham WA 98225-9123.
[69] Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*. : Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 248*.
[70] David F. Arnold, *The Fisherman's Frontier, 93*.
[71] Ibid.

Washington, and Canada reached their peak in June and concluded by late July. Tillamook, Oregon was a hotspot with agreements being brokered not only between APA and the cannery but also with the fishermen who were protesting their pay as well.[72] The protests ranged from civil discussions of contract agreements to physical confrontations. Bay City, Oregon became the location of a violent confrontation between strikers and men charged with taking their gear. This confrontation surrounding the Elmore cannery of Garibaldi resulted not only in the shutdown of the cannery for an unspecified amount of time, but the strikers also were imprisoned for the violent threats.[73] There was a real shared consciousness spreading throughout the Pacific Northwest canneries in the spring of 1912 that ignited a series of strikes that disrupted the salmon canning system.

As the striking intensified, a deeper divide appeared within the labor force fracturing the momentum. While the White workers—particularly those of European and American descent—were easily able to organize and unionize while many other were barred from entry. Arising from this relationship was the creation of the "Alaska Fishermen's Protective Union of the Pacific Coast and Alaska", created in 1902 this union would come to be known as the "Alaska Fishermen's Union". The union was able to engage in negotiations for better contracts and fish prices and had succeeded in that prior to 1912.[74] By March of 1912, Mexican, Filipino, and Portuguese workers remained excluded from union membership.

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[72] "Fishermen's Strike On At Tillamook," *Portland, ORE Journal*, n.d., Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections, accessed February 6, 2025.
[73] "Fishermen's Fight Arrives At Gun Stage," *Portland, ORE Journal*, July 27, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.
[74] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 182*.

The exclusion by ethnicity in the Alaska Fishermen's Union created a contrasting experience. White unionized men were given sufficient food and were paid on time in accordance with the U.S. shipping commissioner. On the other hand, the non-white workers faced a reality of harsher conditions all around. A worker remarked that the differences resulted in two classes of men going north. The classes were separated a result of mistrust and competition ensuring the socially defined lines remained intact.[75] In San Francisco that separation was visible in the streets, on March 28 the Washington Tribune described how men were hungry and penniless huddled in groups together waiting to hear if the labor council could assist them. After many appeals to the city a mass of the strikers met to discuss how to organize and survive through the strike.[76] While non-white groups were excluded from white unionizing, that did not stop the efforts to protest for better treatment. Workers organized across culture and nationality differences, combating language barriers to unite against exploitation and grow in solidarity.[77]

The fishing season of 1912 was predicted to be a fruitful one. Newspapers up and down the West coast had been reporting all summer that the salmon had been gathering in masses. In the background workers for the Alaska Packers Association reached their breaking point, frustrated by unfair pay and not being paid on time, they decided to strike. In previous years, in the face of protests by the workers, the Alaska Packers Association used Native Alaskans to break strikes. But in 1912 Native workers joined in solidarity and demanded higher pay. The offer from the APA was $160 for the season, but even that varied by race and job role. The sense

[75] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 182*.
[76] The Tribune Special Service, "Alaska Cannery Men Penniless," *Tacoma Washington Tribune*, March 28, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.
[77] "Brand Mixes In Cannery Trouble," APA, 1912.

of injustice was amplified when the men learned that the AFU workers received better pay on the ships and in the canneries.[78] On the return to their city of recruitment nine out of ten men were broke and left without any options. The Mexican men so far from home were left stranded, with nothing to show for months of grueling labor.

For Mexican laborers their hardship began often long before their arrival to Alaska. The contract system used to recruit cannery workers was seeped with exploitation. Contractors—often Chinese, Japanese, and eventually Filipino—who ran recruitment businesses or key workers for the companies. Once they recruited workers, their job was done in terms of their agreement with the canning company. They were technically required to feed and ensure the wellbeing of the workers from a distance but for Mexican workers these same contractors exploited them the most.

Mexican workers reported they were forcefully coerced to drink and gamble away funds. They were forced to pay exorbitant prices for necessary goods, and finally when the workers thought it was over the contractors would receive the pay for the workers from the company and pocket it for themselves. The exploitative practices of the contractors left workers largely destitute by the end of the season. Arthur Brand, the vice-counsel and lawyer for the Mexican consulate, was an outlier in his open criticism of the contract system. He saw the contract system as especially harmful to Mexican workers and believed that the removal of it could lead to significant improvements for the Alaskan workers.

The toll of continued exploitation on workers was severe. They suffered at the hands of the contractors and APA, before boarding the ships and long after they returned. The experience of exploitation, exhaustion, and mistreatment led to the workers having a sense of hopelessness.

[78] Diane J. Purvis, *Rugged Coast, Rugged Coves: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Southeast Alaska Canneries, 182*.

While the workers did not just accept their mistreatment, the toll in every aspect had a profound effect. In some instances, the feeling of desperation got so big that men reportedly jumped from the ships—this act recorded by a worker in 1912 a drastic response to their painful conditions.[79] Returning home for these workers was a painful experience as well. At the time of initial employment, they were offered 160 dollars for the season, most would owe money to the company or to their contractor. The worker concluded his story by describing the workers:

> They are morose and sullen, brooding over landing home after a season of hard work, and often commit suicide or try to. For the most of them are in worse circumstances than when they left. A thorough investigation of these conditions would be a godsend to humanity.[80]

These testimonies represented a broader trend for the Mexican labor migrant population in the salmon canning industry. Physically and emotionally drained men were stranded in San Francisco without money, friends, and avenues for improvement. In the face of adversity Mexican workers refused to be silenced, their stories became a form of protest and brought attention mistreatment.[81]

The written evidence of this movement emerged during the 1912 season, when an anonymous worker wrote a letter to the press. His account revealed how Mexican workers organized with workers of many different nationalities. Prior to formal unionization there were smaller protests from different groups trying to entice change. One of the earliest reported instances appeared in different newspapers. There are some slight discrepancies with the date, but the story remains the same. A difference of note though is that in account men involved were

[79] "Confirms Story of Treatment of Fishery Victims," APA, 1912.
[80] "Confirms Story of Treatment of Fishery Victims," APA, 1912
[81] "Many Arrested in Waterfront Riots," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 24, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.

all described as “porto ricans” while another described them as “Latin” men. These descriptions highlight the fluid and sometimes inaccurate recording of nationalities especially when it came to the influx of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Portuguese workers.

The early protests by Mexican workers came in quick succession all over southern Alaska but this protest was the first to involve violence. In an early morning in March an APA ship, the “Star of Russia”, was targeted by Latin workers attempting to confront non-union workers brought in to break the strike. The first contact between the sides came when the strikers tried to prevent a man named George Cubero from getting on the boat. The boat docked at shore was the site where the fight broke out.[82] The violence between the groups of men was met by clubs and bats wielded by the police. In recollection the men involved claimed that the police had been unusually harsh and siding heavily with the company and their supporters.[83] The police who were called by the APA arrested 20 union workers for the riot that broke out. When taken into custody, the arrested men shared their demands with a journalist from the San Francisco Examiner. The workers shared they were demanding a raise in total seasonal wages from 160 to 200 dollars and to be paid in full on the completion of the season. The message expressed was clear, they were no longer going to accept their continued exploitation in silence.

Following the earlier protests that had turned violent, Mexican workers shifted their focus to engage in different strategies to support others in similar position. Instead of violent confrontations the workers turned to peaceful cross-national corporation. On March 27th, 1912, cannery workers gathered in the hundreds—Mexican, Filipino, and Portuguese nationals—who met in the “Latin quarter” to protest the conditions imposed on them by the Alaska Packers

[82] “Many Arrested in Waterfront Riots," APA, 1912.
[83] Ibid.

Association.[84] Due to their similar positions at work and close living conditions the Mexican, Filipino, and Portuguese workers joined together. This was assisted by the possible overlapping of language through their shared history of colonization by Spain. There was a proposal put forth to create a union for every experienced working man in the Latin quarter and demand a pay raise and the elimination of Chinese cannery hands.[85]

Between the Mexican and Filipino workers there was a shared desire to limit the control of Chinese. The workers called for a restriction of the power of the contractors and reduce the percentage of the wages they had to forfeit. One man explained to the newspapers that workers were forced to use their wages on necessary food and goods, and contract agreements, that "the average man returns from a six months' season in the Alaska canneries with from $7 to $15 in his pockets."[86] The exploitative payment to Mexican workers began with $40 dollars upon boarding. Once on the ship they were required to spend that same pay on overpriced gear. They had to give that money to their contractors who exploited their vulnerability.[87] The isolation of the boat was a tool for abuses by contractors for the companies, but they also became an actual jumping off point for Mexican workers to protest. This experience of arrest and opposition would be a consistent theme for the Mexican workers.

As March turned to April the strikes and protests in Alaska continued to gain coverage in the news along the West coast. The newspapers had been focused on the white unionized workers but that began to change. The stories of Mexican workers emerged with coverage of protests, arrests, rioting, and engaging in violence when needed. The increased media coverage

[84] "Alaska Cannery Workers Meet to Organize," *San Francisco Post*, March 27, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.
[85] "Alaska Cannery Workers Meet to Organize," APA, 1912.
[86] "Many Arrested in Waterfront Riots," APA, 1912.
[87] "Confirms Story of Treatment of Fishery Victims," APA, 1912.

alerted the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco to the heightened tensions. While their official role in the U.S. was to support Mexican nationals, they simultaneously were charged with maintaining order and maintaining a positive reputation for Mexican people in the United States.[88] For the Mexican consulate in 1912 there was a desire to intervene, to prevent an increase of rioting, and ensure that the situation did not blow up as it progressed. Simultaneously more Mexican people were migrating north which resulted in more people sending remittances to families and dependents. As a result, the Mexican consulate had dual interest, not only to protect workers but also to maintain Mexico's system of migrant workers.

Workers were growing impatient with the feeble intervention attempts of the Consulate. The workers had been trying to have their problems addressed for some time, reaching out to different Consulate locations, like San Diego and Los Angeles. For years though even the combination of protesting and pressing the consulate system nothing had changed.[89] Based on their own records the Consulate had been trying to address what they described as numerous disgusting molestations to their people. Different Consulate Generals had tried to make changes, but all reported that there was a two-pronged barricade. The Consulate encountered massive resistance from the Alaska Packers Association. There were also the legal limitations governmental agencies faced when disputing signed contracts, even with the language barriers and manipulative environment. Simply they were instructed to not be directly involved in union issues, their focus was oriented towards peace.[90]

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[88] "AHSRE," April 9, 1912; Wilkie, Meyer, and Monzón de Wilkie, "Piedras Contra La Luna," 497.
[89] Anon to SRE Trabajadores Mexicanos en las Pesquerias de Alaska," AHSRE, 1912.
[90] "Brand Mixes In Cannery Trouble," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.

As a result, the pressure continued to build. On the 5th of April frustrated and exhausted men walked into the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco as weeks went by without change. The group comprised of eight Mexican workers shared with the lawyer Arthur Brand that they represented over 150 other men who were aboard the "Star of Scotland." As part of the Alaska Packers Association the "Star of Scotland" was to bring the men recruited to work in the salmon canneries from Southern California. The labor contractors had widened their reach beyond San Francisco by this time moving to Los Angeles. Aboard the ship the men learned they would be underpaid and were informed by other workers on board they had experienced mistreatment from contractors and the APA. Learning of this before the ship could take off to Alaska, the eight men jumped ship and evaded the police to find sanctuary wherever they could.[91] Jumping ship to many men seemed like a safer bet than getting on the boat and agreeing to a most likely dangerous future.

The arrival of the men at the Mexican Consulate resulted in face time with the "Honorable Antonio Leon Grajeda, Consulate General of Mexico." When confronted with these eight men who had escaped for their safety but also evaded police Grajeda had to grapple with what to do. He told the escapees that he as the Consulate general did not have jurisdiction over the boat or international waters. More importantly because of his position he told the men that "que si habían firmado contrato, lo tenían que cumplir" (if you signed a contract, you have to complete it) even if it was with the Chinese contractors who had no financial or moral responsibility to uphold their end of the contract.[92] Grajeda could only offer to the men to go to the port authority, gather the names of all men, and see if he would free them.

[91] "Anon to SRE" (Letter, San Francisco, California, October 14, 1912), Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
[92] Congratulations from Arthur Brand to SRE, AHSRE, 1912.

For Sr. Grajeda the limitations of what he could do were a painful reality. He had previously been stationed in Laredo Texas but in April of 1910 he had gathered 25 men to create an association to provide leadership and representation for the Mexican community. Meeting in this way drew the attention of newspapers and the Mexican government and within a few months he had been removed from his post.[93] Despite his past efforts to assist Mexican workers Grajeda still acted within the rules and standards of the government. Acting along those lines his little support did not satisfy the men, and the Mexican workers again felt abandoned.

With their demands not being met, the escapees of the "Star of Scotland" returned to the Consulate the very next day. Antonio Grajeda was met by even more day workers, some traveling from Los Angeles to plead their case. This time joined by "Jefe de la Liga." The "Jefe" was the leader of the union supporting the Mexican workers. The "Jefe" with heightened authority approached Grajeda with a demand to make the Packers Association pay the workers no less than 200 dollars.[94] They took it so far, saying that if these demands were not met the Consulate should take the Association to court and order a strike of the Mexican workers.[95] They wanted recognizable support and a unified push to bring the Alaska Packers Association to the table. The "Jefe" and other leaders of strikes had been trying to negotiate and argue with the Packers Association but had been dismissed and ignored.

The threat of this bold move put the Consulate in complicated position. They had to consider that in pushing for better contracts they could destroy their profitable relationship with the Alaska Packers Association and the larger cannery and fishing systems. Inside the consulate Arthur Brand would record that, "there is no doubt in my mind that the conditions have been

[93] Wilkie, Meyer, and Monzón de Wilkie, "Piedras Contra La Luna," 498.
[94] Congratulations from Arthur Brand to SRE, AHSRE, 1912.
[95] Ibid.

deplorable in the fish canneries. The men have not had sufficient food, and the contractors have gouged them at every opportunity." At the same time as the Vice-Consul, he acknowledged that some of the Mexican workers had agreed to contracts. The arrival of Arthur Brand on the scene spiked the interest of newspapers. On April 7th the "San Francisco Chronicle" wrote that his arrival was notable because prior to this there had been no legal support for the Mexican workers, and for many they were only aware of the white men striking. Additionally, he was named the key negotiator between the workers and the APA which signified a shift in the dynamic.[96]

As coverage grew journalists were able to gather more information through connections with the canning companies. The same men who entered the Mexican Consulate on the 5th of April had separately attempted to get other legal help. They asked for a writ of habeas corpus from a federal judge.[97] That same day the Federal Judge DeHaven rejected the writ based on procedural issues; he stated that the men petitioning for it did not sign a proper application. The men after hearing this staged a demonstration on a pier in the face of rejection. During the protest they were met by Arthur Brand who upheld his previous statement that the workers had signed legal contracts to go North. Brand explained to the men that he could not do anything for them legally.

The following day another group of Mexican laborers executed an escape from an APA ship. The seven men who were presumed to be Mexican escaped from the ship "Yale" joining a larger collective of men who refused to sail. These escapees were persuaded to join the Alaska Salmon Packers' Industrial Union and not sail North. This union was a part of a larger organization, the "Industrial Workers of the World" who were vocal opponents to industrial

[96] "Brand Mixes in Cannery Trouble, APA, 1912.
[97] "Brand Mixes In Cannery Trouble," APA, 1912

oppression in the canning industry and beyond. This unions emergence in the newspapers is significant because this was a non-white union that had made waves. This union was comprised of Mexicans and Filipinos as well as other minorities including African Americans, and men from smaller Latin countries. In all it was a signal that the continually marginalized workers were not solely resisting exploitation but also were building avenues for solidarity and representation.

The days between April 5th and 7th, 1912, marked a dark time for Alaska Packers Association facing attacks on their authority. During this time there was little work happening and the pressure was growing to come to a resolution. All along the coast, Mexican workers continued to protest and would literally jump ship. This protesting tactic strayed from the norm of most protests as reported by the "San Francisco Examiner." The APA ship the "Harvard" was a site where this new tactic took hold. The "Harvard" had picked up 94 men from a port in San Pedro, California and had made it all the way to the shores of Alaska. Once there many of the men refused to leave the boat peacefully, some did, but many remained. A few instead jumped from the ship as a show of resistance.[98] This reoccurrence of protesting and unmoving Mexican workers had become something of a pattern. The ongoing years of dismissal, ignoring demands for better treatment and wages, and broken promises had finally come to a head.[99]

Mexican workers had struggled in Alaska for many seasons prior to 1912. They were disconnected from home and any support. The involvement of the Consulate with true intention marked a real change. The pressure from the strikes, media attention, and the Mexican Consulate resulted in a groundbreaking agreement aimed to improve the experience of Mexican nationals.

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[98] "Cannery Hands from South," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 7, 1912, Sub-series 4: Newspapers and Clipping, Volume 157 - APA Clippings Files, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Libraries Archives & Special Collections.
[99] "Cannery Hand From South," APA, 1912.

On April 8th of 1912, the Alaska Packers Association came to the table and a sequence of requirements for future Mexican employment was made. The main concerns for the Mexican workers were the withholding of food, water, and their pay at the end of the season which the resulting agreement aimed to address.

First in the agreement the APA agreed to provide meals that were not only nutritionally sufficient but also culturally appropriate for Mexican workers. This point was supported by the repeated complaints by Mexican laborers not only in the Consulate files but also multiple newspapers. The men complained that the food was meant for men for men of Chinese nationality, meaning rice and cabbage, it can be assumed that the overall lack of food contributed to this complaint. The men had never had to survive on that type of food, so it added to their discomfort. The promise to make changes regarding the food, while not easily enforceable, did mark a small step by the APA to acknowledge the difference of their workers.[100]

The second point conceded by the APA was that of water access. The APA through Henry Fortmann promised that the men would be given "sufficient" water but maintained that would be determined by the length of the workday. Although the verbiage used on this point was noticeably vague, it did document however that a basic human necessity, water, had been neglected up to this point by the APA. Even with the inconsistently already present in the agreement an improvement from restricted water access to none was recognized as a win for all Mexican workers.[101]

The most significant agreement made between the Mexican workers, and the APA was in respect to wages. The APA agreed that the men would be given the whole amount offered in their contract and that they would receive that amount on the once the boat docked back in the

[100] Henry F. Fortmann, "Letter from Fortmann" (Letter, San Francisco, April 8, 1912), AHSRE.
[101] Henry F. Fortmann, "Letter from Fortmann" (Letter, San Francisco, April 8, 1912), AHSRE.

port. Within that agreement came a caveat, the company could withhold any "amount charged on the book showing a purchase by any individual."[102] The wording of this created space for contractors and the ship could limit the goods given to the men on board and force men to spend their wages while working. The continuation of the power being in the hands of the contractors and the ship reflected the structural issues that plagued the contract system. While the Mexican workers could feel a sense of financial stability a power imbalance remained. The agreement ended by listing the 17 ships that would be carrying Mexican workers to Alaska who were covered under the agreement.[103] For the Alaska Packers Association this agreement was an unprecedented move, it formally recognized the need for protections and importantly set in motion new standard for future discussion.

While the agreement made in April between the Alaska Packers Association and the Mexican Consulate marked a step forward on paper, the actual implementation of the agreements was not so easy. The promises made by the APA of fair wages, sufficient food, and real human treatment were more difficult in practice—especially in the isolated canneries far from supportive oversight. One case representing this complexity came from the Kogquiong[104] cannery in the southwest Alaska. In this remote cannery two Mexican workers, Antonio Muñoz and Armendariz, shared with the consulate that the promises made were not being enforced. The account shared by these men highlight how even the most intentional changes often fall short in practice directly hurting the people they are meant to support. It reflects a broader trend of division between overarching institutional decision and reality.

[102] Henry F. Fortmann, AHSRE, 1912.
[103] Henry F. Fortmann, AHSRE, 1912.
[104] Kogquiong has an Americanized name, now known as Koggiung. Located in Bristol Bay Alaska in Southwest Alaska.

In June 1912, nearly two months after the decision between APA and the Mexican workers Muñoz and Armendariz contacted Arthur Brand detailing the conditions of their work. Because of the increased publicity of the strikes and the agreement reached by Brand the men were hoping he could address the shortcomings of the APA in their case. They described that in May when the salmon canning season was near its peak the workers at Kogquiong were being pushed past their limits. The involvement of Brand in this instance was warrented additionally by the fact that the men that season were shipped up North aboard the "Centennial" an APA ship. The importance was that it was one of the ships named in the earlier APA agreement meaning they fell under the promise of improvement of working conditions that same season.[105] Muñoz and Armendariz in the letter were not only advocating for themselves but for all the Mexican nationals who had travelled on that ship.

The workers reported a reality that differed greatly from the promises made only a month earlier. Every day working worsened in the cannery, they reported they did not have nearly enough food or resources to stay healthy and that their health was rapidly deteriorating. On May 28th the workers had reached a breaking point where they could simply not continue as they had. The men reported to Brand that they first confronted the superintendent of the cannery Sr. Dornard who oversaw the day-to-day. The workers declared that if the requirements set forth for the Alaska Packers Association by the Consulate were not met and improvements were not made they could not continue or even survive the season.[106] In response, Sr. Dornard in accordance with the earlier agreement ordered their Chinese contractor to hire a Mexican cook, ensure them

[105] Henry F. Fortmann, AHSRE, 1912.
[106] Antonio Muñoz and Armendariz, "Copia-Letter from Kogquiong Cannery" (Letter, San Francisco, June 22, 1912), Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

enough food, and to make changes to improve their overall health. These orders were written on a document to ensure the compliance of the contractor and have written proof.[107]

While this at the time felt like an improvement for the men in the Kogquiong cannery, the agreement came with a price. According to the workers, while they were being given food, they were also being charged 50 cents per hours worked for the provisions they were given.[108] This meant that the men were often forced to choose between food and wages, for men who already struggled to get paid for the work they did, the addition of that charge was costly. Not only did the men of Kogquiong suffer, but their treatment was also an obvious contradiction to the April 8 agreement and reinforced the earlier complaints concerning the detrimental effect that the contracting system had on Mexican workers.

This letter from the Kogquiong cannery represented a flaw in the agreement made to improve the treatment of Mexican workers by the APA. While the agreement was made with good intentions there was obvious failure to create a system for consistent enforcement, meaning that for men in the isolated canneries the promises only manifested themselves on paper.[109] Actual change for men in remote areas remained as possible as before the striking began. This case again reveals the real gap between This case again reveals the real gap between written policy and those policies in practice. In the context of the Mexican migration to Alaska it is important in that it serves as reminder that the promise of real institutional change cannot be done without enforcement and effort. While the Mexican consulate in 1912 made tangible efforts and an agreement was made with the Alaska Packers Association, the reality for Mexican workers was impacted by a hasher truth. In the early salmon canning system driven by profit

[107] Muñoz and Armendariz, "Copia-Letter from Kogquiong Cannery," 1912.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

while promises of improvement could be made, for marginalized workers those promises rarely manifested in improved conditions. For groups of labor migrants in the 20th century there was a pattern of inconsistent labor protections leading to exploitation.

Mexican laborers continued to work in Alaska for decades beyond 1912, specifically during and towards the end of World War II. The year of 1912 marked a pivotal moment in the history of Mexican labor migration to the North. Not only in action but also in the obvious absence in history literature. Labor issues in Alaska would persist but concerning the 1912 season the Consulate documents conclude on October 7th with the final correspondence with between the Consulate and Arthur Brand. The Mexican Consulate in San Francisco played a major role in the negotiation with the Alaska Packers Association, the final correspondence offers some valuable insight in how the consulate viewed their own involvement and how that perspective was recorded.

In this final correspondence, Arthur Brand is congratulating Antonio Grajeda the Consul General for his success in his efforts to improve the condition of Mexican nationals in the Alaska Packers Association canneries. With this praise Brand is recognizing Grajeda as pivotal to the improvements in the canneries, with this he is suggesting that their diplomatic involvement both was the primary factor and that it had resulted in real change. With this in mind it important to acknowledge that the narrative is molded by the consulate itself. Which as stated previously has a real interest in portraying themselves as not only effective but also ensuring that their countrymen are seen as being well-protected in foreign economies.

According to Arthur Brand, the following season from his perspective was one of massive improvement and that the men were doing significantly better. He reported to Grajeda that at the end of following season Brand visited the Labor Commissioner confirmed not a single

Mexican worker came to complain about mistreatment.[110] While this drastic change suggests progress for Mexican workers, the claim by both the Commissioner and Brand must be approached with caution. Realistically the absence of recorded abuses does not mean there was not workers who continued to face issues with pay and treatment as many could be not documented or disregarded. The sweeping statement of the Labor Commissioner reflects a larger pattern of institutional bias in the United States to minimize or silence labor issues especially when corporate success is in play. Despite the obvious optimism shared by the consulate the fight for improved pay did not cease. After the agreement, the Chairman of the Packers Industrial Union, A.T. Alfonso, stated that the success of Brand and the Consulate was impactful but for the broader movement the fight for better pay, and more recognition for the union would not stop.[111] There would be a need for a continued strengthen of unions that represented specifically Mexican workers in Alaska due to the continued exploitation

Additionally, Brand's own reporting of conversations he had with workers returning to San Francisco clouded the narrative of mass improvement. The men reported to him their experience in the APA canneries had changed significantly. In their experience the issue of food insecurity had made progress, the food was reported to be good quality, it was not superabundant, but it made a difference.[112] Access to water remained a prevalent issue though, they reported their water was still being restricted, but they were not prohibited to drinking water. Most importantly for the men, once they arrived in San Francisco at the end of the season they were paid all the wages they were owed promptly without issue. Generally, Brand felt as though the experience of the Mexican workers this season was deserving of congratulations.[113]

[110] Congratulations from Arthur Brand to SRE, AHSRE, 1912.
[111] "Brand Mixes in Cannery Trouble," APA, 1912.
[112] Congratulations from Arthur Brand to SRE, AHSRE, 1912.
[113] Ibid.

Yet, in the same breath, Brand expressed he still felt that Mexican nationals still faced abuses that needed to be addressed. Prior to writing to the Consulate in October Brand communicated his frustration to the Alaska Packers Association secretary Mr. Tichenor, who assured him that his worries would be promptly addressed. A troubling practice repeatedly shared at all levels was the coercion by contractors to get men to spend their money, often directly from their paycheck. Contractors—Chinese, Japanese and even Filipino—would attempt turn a profit by selling personal luxuries like fruit, meat, soda, and water at inflated prices. The prices often so high that contractors could often reclaim the money they paid men, and many would go into debt. Along with the goods alcohol flowed freely and gambling ran rampant, because of this violence would break out between the men leading to a chaotic work environment.[114]

For Brand the blame for continued mistreatment fell almost entirely on the labor contractors. He believed that the Alaska Packers Association could never be a good employer for Mexican workers until they no longer relied on contractors. The influence the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino contractors had within the company and over the men was a direct result of their success in earlier migration waves and being a constant source of labor.[115] Even in the face of immigration restrictions and increased scrutiny on Asian people in general they operated with considerable autonomy. There existed a true power imbalance, the contractors put themselves in a position where they were difficult to control and punish even with the existence of formal agreements and increased legal oversight. Even after the extensive agreements were made with the Alaska Packers Association Mexican workers were still exploited within the contract system.

[114] Anon to SRE Trabajadores Mexicanos en las Pesquerias de Alaska, AHSRE, 1912.
[115] Anon to SRE Trabajadores Mexicanos en las Pesquerias de Alaska, AHSRE, 1912.

In summation, while it is undeniable that 1912 marked a turning point in the treatment of Mexican laborers in Alaska, there was also the reality that the improvement was uneven and unsustainable. The Mexican consulate's portrayal of their intervention in the Alaskan salmon canning industry must then be read critically. It cannot be read without recognizing the limitations of diplomatic agency specifically during this period, as well as the fact that the same exploitative labor systems persisted. The goal is not to undermine the way that the consulate advocated for the Mexican workers in Alaska or the enormity of the unprecedented agreement made with the Alaska Packers Association. Instead, it is just recognizing the importance of who wrote the history at the end, and the imbalance in the consulate records between the real voices of Mexican workers and their voice documented by the pens of men influenced by institutional pressures. In Alaksa the struggle for fair treatment, equitable pay, and union organization would continue for decades, creating a history shaped by long standing institutions and the winds of change.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This story of Mexican migration to Alaskan salmon canneries in 1912, though long overlooked, offers a lens through which racialized hierarchies that structured the Alaskan fishing industry can be more deeply examined. This thesis has revealed how Mexican workers despite being smaller in number compared to Native, Asian, and Euro-American workers, existed in a distinct and often unstable position in the cannery system. The experience of Mexican workers—documented in part through consulate records—highlights both the exploitation they faced but also the avenues in which they resisted the dehumanizing conditions and forged solidarities across national and ethnic lines.

By centering this narrative within the context of the broader salmon canning industry, this thesis contributes to a slowly growing body of scholarship that aims to highlight the complex historiography of the salmon canning industry. While in recent years Native Alaskan, Chinese, and Filipino laborers have received greater recognition for their impactful roles in the industry, the Mexican presence has remained largely invisible. This absence is not a rare gap in the literature but instead reflects broader patterns of historical erasure. The lack of documentation concerning Mexican laborers in the early 1900s is not just isolated to the salmon canning industry. Instead, the records of Mexican workers during this time are often filtered by institutional lenses. The discovery and detailed analysis of the Mexican Consulate documents, primary source newspaper articles, and secondary source labor reports challenge this silence and demand a more inclusive account of who built it as an early industrial power and sustained it during lulls in labor.

This research situates the Mexican experience in 1912 within both national and global frameworks. Within the United States it reveals how racialized labor system developed far

beyond the U.S. -Mexico borderlands, extending into the remote industrial frontiers of Alaska. On a broader scale this story highlights how transnational labor flows were shaped by growing imperial economies and racial ideologies that influenced immigration policies. It uncovers how these pieces enabled the strategic employment of migrant labor. The Mexican workers' Alaskan narrative is not an isolated incident but instead serves as part of a broader pattern of unbridled exploitation and resilience that would characterize early 20th-century labor industries and the labor migrant experience.

Ultimately, this thesis emphasizes the importance of memory and how it manages to persist through alternative measures even in the face of removal from the official histories. The resilience of Mexican workers, their empowerment through cross-cultural organization, and their continued presence in archival histories combats that erasure. By recentering the discussion of the history of the salmon canning industry and the strike of 1912 onto a focus of Mexican workers, this thesis aims to enrich the historiography of the canning industry. It also affirms an often-minimized reality of the centrality of Mexican nationals' experience in shaping the overall labor history of the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

Figures

Figure 1.



1. Map of Alaska from 1906 accessed from the U.S. Geological Survey

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