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Latinos in Missouri:
Gateway to a New Community

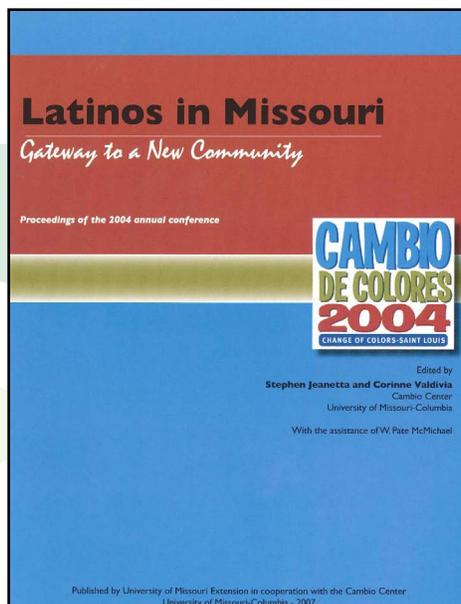
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New Latino Farmers in the Midwest: The Case of Southwest Michigan

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Abstract

Our paper is, “New Latino Farmers in the U.S. Heartland: An Example of a Growing Trend in U.S. Agriculture.” It is a change that is affecting the economic well-being, social, and cultural arena of rural America. We will address the major findings of our USDA-funded study on the how Tejano farmworkers and Mexican immigrants from Chicago are becoming small farmers in southwestern Michigan. The study is based on a qualitative survey conducted in Van Buren County with 30 out of 32 Latino farmers in the county. Specifically, we will discuss how these farmers are using their social capital to enter the farming business. We will show that they use very little government assistance and provide the reasons for this practice. Our presentation will also demonstrate that Latinos, in general, are becoming new farmers across the United States, challenging the myth that they are only farmworkers.

Keywords: Latino farming, immigrant farming businesses, Latinos in agriculture

SELECTED PAPERS 2003 AND 2004

The *Cambio de Colores* conferences in 2003 and 2004 provided a venue for participants to begin to understand important changes affecting communities in Missouri. Several of the researchers who made presentations at these conferences were asked to prepare papers about their research findings. This section included invited papers from the 2003 and 2004 conferences.

Papers 2004

New Latino Farmers in the Midwest: The Case of Southwest Michigan

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Latino immigrants and ex-migrant farmworkers are increasingly becoming crop producers in the United States. Our conference paper briefly presents findings of a qualitative study on how Latinos are entering and remaining in farming. The USDA's Office of Outreach funded the study, "Farm Worker Transition to Farm Ownership: Lessons from Mexican-Origin Farmers in Southwestern Michigan" (grant number 00 68-3A75-9-41). Over a two-year period, from 1999 to 2001, data was gathered through both formal and informal interviews with Latino farmers in Van Buren County, Michigan. Given their concentration in blueberry growing, the research focused on Latino blueberry farmers. Other Latinos in surrounding states are also becoming farmers; often using their own resources. How are they getting started in farming?

Van Buren County, Michigan

Van Buren County is a major agricultural area situated in southwest Michigan, along the Lake Michigan shore. With a series of smaller lakes near Paw Paw—the county seat—and a scenic coastline on the lake and the historic port of South Haven, it is a major tourist destination. Comprising 607 square miles, anywhere from 600 to 900 feet above sea level, its gentle rolling hills are interspersed with quaint towns and small farms connected by a maze of county roads. In all, there are nearly 40 incorporated and unincorporated communities in the county, all with populations under 6,000 inhabitants. The major communities, those with municipal services, are Bangor, Hartford, Lawton, Mattawan, Paw Paw, and South Haven.¹

Van Buren County, one of 82 counties in the state, leads Michigan in fruit-crop production. Known as "Michigan's Fruit Basket," it is a leading producer of blueberries, apples, grapes, and plums. In fact, more blueberries are grown in Van Buren County than in any other county in the nation. Driving down the county roads, some paved and others covered with gravel, one discovers vineyards in the eastern side of the county around Lawton and Paw Paw, blueberry bushes in the western and northern portion, and apple and some plum orchards scattered around the county. In these areas, the soils, the high water tables, and the climate are ideal for the production of these perennial species.²

Originally inhabited by the Potawatomi, the county has been inhabited by a large number of immigrants—foreign and native-born—who have settled there since its creation in 1836. According to Census 2000, 76,263 residents resided in Van Buren County at the turn of the century.³ The population increased by a little over 9 percent or 6,203 inhabitants since the 1990 decennial Census.⁴ The majority, nearly 88 percent, were classified as White, a little over 7 percent Latinos, and the remainder Asians, Native Americans, and others. Latinos increased from 2,254 to 5,634 residents from 1990 to 2000, an increment of nearly 150 percent, while the African-American population, the largest minority group in the county until Census

¹ Anonymous, County Profile-Van Buren, Michigan, 2001.

² Anonymous, Horticulture, MSUE, Van Buren County, 2001.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, QT-P3. Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2000, 2002.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, DP-1. General Population and Housing Characteristics: 1990, 2002

2000, decreased from 4,690 to 4,001 inhabitants, a decline of nearly 15 percent.⁵ Latinos became the second largest ethnic group in Van Buren County in 2000, surpassing the African-American population by 1,633 people or by a little over 40 percent.⁶ Though found in all the communities of the county, the largest concentrations of Latinos are in and around Hartford and Lawrence.⁷

These Census figures, it should be noted, do not include the thousands of migrant workers who harvest crops in Van Buren County from April through October. Annually, farms in Van Buren County hire anywhere from 8,000 to 8,500 farmworkers.⁸ Migrants, who make up the majority of the paid farm labor force in the county, begin to arrive—alone or with their families—in early April and move from one farm to another picking blueberries, cucumbers, or other produce until late October.⁹ During these months—when not harvesting and packaging—they also weed, prune, and irrigate.¹⁰ In October, at the end of the harvests, some migrants move to other regions of the country and continue working, while others return to Texas in the winter. Some of the migrants work for Van Buren County-based, corporate farms that grow produce in Florida and Michigan.¹¹ They work in Florida in the winter and return to Michigan in the spring.

Latino Farmers in Van Buren County, Mich.

Thirty-one of the estimated 34 Latino farmers in the county were included in the USDA study. These farmers are Mexican immigrants and ex-Tejano migrants. The immigrants are ex-peasants from the state of Michoacán in central Mexico who, through a process of chain or step migration, immigrated to Van Buren County from Chicago. In Chicago, they worked in light manufacturing, construction, and in the service industry. The ex-Tejano migrants are from the “Valley” in South Texas. Since the early 1960s, they have migrated to southwestern Michigan with family members to harvest crops, and over the years, some have settled out of the migrant stream.

The Latino farmers range in age from 26 to 64 with the majority in their thirties and forties. Nearly all, except for three, are males. The three women own blueberry farms. With respect to education, the Tejanos have received more of a formal education than their Mexican counterparts. Some of the Tejanos have attended college.

Twenty-two of the 31 Latino farmers grow blueberries—others corn, grapes, and apples. Twenty of the 22 Latino blueberry farmers cultivate 835 acres. Together, members of the Llerena family grow blueberries on 541 acres, nearly 65 percent of the known Latino-held blueberry acreage. Five other Latino families grow blueberries on significant holdings, respectively, on 65, 40, 40, 35, and 30 acres. The remaining 10 Latinos grow blueberries on 20 acres or less.

Latinos purchase small blueberry farms knowing that the acreage will not yield enough to support their families. For them, the farm is more than a business enterprise; it is also a means for pursuing a traditional way of life. Since their smallholdings do not generate farm sales sufficient to support a family with children, nearly all of the Latino farmers are employed off the farm. Both husbands and wives work for local food processors, light manufacturing, and service industries in the county. Besides an income, employment off the farm also provides some of them with medical insurance and other benefits. Occasionally, some of the Latino farmers also work as farmworkers in the area, helping out their kinsmen and friends during peak harvest periods.

Obstacles

Buying blueberry farms and staying in business is not easy for Latino farmers or, for that matter, any

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, QT-P3. Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2000, 2002.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, QT-PL. Race, Hispanic or Latino, and Age: 2000, 2002.

⁸ Willie Dominguez, interview, 2001.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Felipe Llerena, interview, 2001.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

prospective producer. The Latino farmers—blueberry growers and non-blueberry growers alike—cited a number of difficulties in breaking into farming. The salient ones are as follows:

Purchasing a Farm

Today, as in the past, a major obstacle in getting started is acquiring a farm or land to be cleared for crop production. Farmland is costly to purchase in the county. The going price for a blueberry farm ranges from \$5,000 to \$7,500 per acre. Operation expenditures also add to startup costs. Such expenditures range from \$1,500 per acre, if the berries are mechanically harvested, to \$3,500 per acre, if harvested by hand. As a group, Latinos have a difficult time obtaining loans, including government-guaranteed loans. Low incomes, together with poor or nonexistent credit ratings, often make them ineligible for loans.

Infrastructure Development

Related to the purchase of the farm is housing. Some Latino farmers in the county, both Tejanos and Mexican immigrants, need housing for themselves and their seasonal workers. Single-family houses on the farms require repairs—some of them costly, such as adding or replacing a foundation. On the properties without a home, adding an infrastructure for a trailer hookup is costly as well.

Technology Availability

Some of the younger Latino farmers in the county, mainly Tejanos, viewed the lack of access to Internet services in the area as an obstacle. They argue that they are not able to have access to farming information online.

Familiarity with Crops in Van Buren County

Mexican immigrant farmers were not familiar with blueberries, apples, grapes, and other crops grown in the county but learned how to cultivate them upon buying their farms. Tejanos, on the other hand, learned about these crops as migratory workers in the area and were familiar with them when they became growers.

Language and Culture

Language and cultural differences between Latino farmers and the larger society were another challenge identified in the interviews. It is difficult to set up a farm or any other business in a foreign language. Starting a business involves complex arrangements, paperwork, knowledge of regulations, and markets and institutions that provide technical and financial assistance. The majority of the Latino farmers are monolingual Spanish speakers with limited English comprehension. Embarrassed by their accents and grammatical errors, the small number of Latinos who speak English prefer not to use it. A couple of them also mentioned that racism and discrimination, aggravated by a recent rise in nativism, was also a barrier. They felt excluded from activities and membership in local organizations because of their ethnicity.

Participation in USDA Programs

Latino farmers in the county make minimal use of USDA programs. The majority of them, except those who have been growing crops for a decade, do not know of their availability. Mexican immigrant farmers, in particular, have little contact with agricultural extension and other USDA agencies. Some of them feel uncomfortable attending USDA-sponsored meetings and workshops held in the English language. Others, as a result of a public backlash against immigrants, are under the misconception that they are ineligible to participate in federal programs. There is also a distrust of government among some of the Latino farmers.

Regardless of the reasons given for not participating, when asked how USDA may assist them in their farming operations, they made the following recommendations:

- Housing development assistance for rehabilitating houses and trailers on farms and for establishing housing for workers

- Low-interest loans or loans for individuals with little or no credit history
- Farming infrastructure development (well drilling and road openings)
- Mechanisms for direct marketing of blueberries and other products
- Health insurance for small farmers
- Spanish-language courses on how to grow blueberries
- Courses to learn farming vocabulary in the English language
- Business management courses in the Spanish language
- Computer and Internet service

Social Capital Networks and Overcoming Farming Obstacles

Latino farmers in Van Buren County are using social capital to obtain resources for purchasing farms and growing crops. This capital consists of social relationships among individuals and groups that are useful in obtaining economic resources. Based on trust and reciprocity, these relationships are organized around kinship, friendship, or other significant social ties in the community. The use of social capital for business startups is common among immigrants, ethnic minorities, and other groups with limited capital. They have learned that their status in society does not always give them access to formal institutions and their resources. Excluded, they have come up with their own institutions, such as social networks that serve a similar purpose. These social ties are used to obtain capital and other production-related resources to enter and stay in farming.

Social relationships, or networks, among the Latino farmers are primarily based on a circle of kin and close friends of *confianza* or trust. Four social networks of Latino farmers were identified in Van Buren County. All four of them are organized around influential Latino farmers. One of the networks is organized around an apple grower (Santos) and the other three around blueberry producers (the Llerenas, Barajas, and Alcarazes). Some of the Latino farmers are members of more than one network and belong to a number of social circles, such as friendships at work (if employed outside of the farm) and church groups. These social circles are concentric and overlap. As members of different groups, individuals have access to various networks simultaneously, and they may seek assistance from multiple sources at any given time.

Social networks are also not site-specific; that is, they include persons and groups outside of Van Buren County. As discovered, they also include family members and friends that reside in Chicago and Mexico. These family members, particularly the ones in Chicago, are a source of loans.

Two of the four Latino farmer social networks in Van Buren County are presented as case studies in the report. Both of them are bridging social networks. Such networks are large and diverse. They consist of kin and other community members, and resource allocation is not restricted to family and close friends but includes others. The other two networks, not presented as case studies, are bounding social networks. Such networks are small and relatively homogeneous. They center on immediate family members and other close kinsmen, and resources are shared with them before anyone else.

Both types of social networks—bridging and bounding—are conduits for the flow of a number of resources. These resources are as follows:

Information

Information about farming is important in getting started and staying in farming. New farmers seek and receive advice regarding pesticide and herbicide applications, plant-disease threats, caring for the blueberry bush and berries, and marketing.

Land

In Van Buren County, land is scarce. Some of the Mexican immigrant farmers have come up with creative ways of obtaining farmland, such as practicing *presta nombres* and collaborate production arrangements with kinsmen.

Labor Sharing

Labor sharing is another resource within social networks. During the harvest, when labor is scarce, members of the same social circle, or group, share workers.

Loans/Financial Assistance

Money, like land, is a scarce resource and not made available to everyone in a social network. Loans are seldom made outside of the immediate family. The same is true for cosigning on a loan.

Other Farming Resources

Other farming inputs, such as fertilizer and machinery, are also made available to group members. There is the expectation that the individual being assisted in this fashion will do the same in the future.

Mutual Assistance

Mutual aid consists of lending a helping hand when needed. Network members help harvest, repair machinery, or plant blueberry bushes.

Conclusion

The Latino farmers in Van Buren County have accomplished much using social capital. Through their social ties, they have managed to obtain resources to buy farms, increase production, and stay in farming. Some of them, mainly the English-speaking Tejanos, have also used USDA programs to meet these objectives. Despite the need, however, Mexican immigrants do not participate in USDA programs and, as a result, do not use resources they subsidize through tax contributions. These programs would help them stay in farming, grow food, and provide employment to local and migrant farmworkers.

Latinos in Van Buren County and elsewhere in the United States are keeping an American tradition alive—the family farm. In fact, they are entering farming at a time when land concentration is on the rise, and the family farm of old is under the imminent threat of vanishing. More than individual initiative and hard work, farm ownership among the Latinos is made possible through social capital available in social networks. Making USDA resources available to Latino farmers will allow more of them to become farmers and to continue growing food for the region and the nation.

Livelihoods, Vulnerabilities, and Opportunities in Rural Missouri

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Introduction

The issue of immigration has never been an easy one. This is also the case in the U.S., a country of immigrants. As of late, the U.S. has received massive numbers of immigrants, of which 80 percent were considered “people of color”; 75 percent of these were of Spanish-speaking origin (OBLEMA, 2000; Census, 2000).

Unlike the past when immigrants (Latinos or Spanish-speakers) tended to favor metropolitan areas, current settlement patterns have been widely dispersed throughout the U.S. According to Frey (1996), immigrant settlement patterns differ from those of migrants who have been in a country for a long time. Small American towns that offer jobs, such as meatpacking, jobs that require relatively unskilled labor and pay relatively low wages are especially appealing to immigrants. These communities have experienced booming immigrant population in search of work.

Globalization has brought along with it labor demands, with direct implications for immigration and economic development. This is an age when capital and labor flow across borders, and old filters designed