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THOMAS F. MAHONY'S "MEXICAN WELFARE COMMITTEE"

As the United States entered the 1920s, it began to experience dramatic change. The backdrop was the Roaring Twenties, when flappers, jazz musicians, prohibition, and motion-picture shows were influencing American culture and dominating the news media. With the proliferation of radio stations across the country, Americans were listening to music, news reports, and sermons. While the 1920s were exciting years, they had a dark side. There were race riots, heightened xenophobia, the Red Scare, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, and the stock market crash of 1929. Like other states, Colorado was changing. Hundreds and thousands of Mexican and Hispano workers were being recruited to small sugar-beet-producing towns across northern Colorado, the Arkansas Valley, and the Western Slope. Mexicans were coming from Mexico, Texas, and Arizona; Hispanos from southern Colorado and northern New Mexico.

In this chapter I set the social and economic context in which Mexican and Hispano sugar beet workers lived in Colorado. To do this, I examine Thomas F. Mahony's "Mexican Welfare Committee" and his campaign for social and economic justice from the 1920s to the 1940s. I argue that Thomas Mahony was one of the most important, but unrecognized, activists in Colorado history. He challenged bad housing, low wages, child labor, and recalcitrant school officials who refused to enforce compulsory school laws. Along with other advocacy groups, philanthropic organizations, and university researchers, Mahony played a central role in exposing the human degradation of Mexican and Hispano workers in Colorado's sugar-beet-producing towns.

He confronted powerful politicians, sugar beet companies, sugar beet growers, and educational professionals. Yet, Paul S. Taylor, an economist from the University of California at Berkeley, and Carey McWilliams, a prominent social critic and attorney in California, are seen as the authoritative figures on this subject. Granted, Taylor's 1929 *Mexican Labor in the United States Valley of the South Platte, Colorado*, and McWilliams' 1945 *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labour in the United States* were two of the most powerful and scholarly works describing the conditions for Mexican and Hispano sugar beet workers in Colorado.¹ However, Mahony's important role in exposing the problems did not earn him the recognition he deserved in academic circles.

In *Mexican Labor in the United States Valley of the South Platte, Colorado*, Taylor mentioned the Mexican Welfare Committee as a side note. And while McWilliams did point out in *Ill Fares the Land* that "Mr. Thomas Mahony of Longmont, Colorado was calling attention to increasing poverty among Mexican sugar-beet workers; to wretched housing; to serious health problems; to serious social discrimination,"² he did not emphasize the extent of Mahony's campaign. This oversight was ironic because McWilliams, Taylor, and others were in frequent contact with Mahony. Taylor, in fact, almost always made it a point to meet with Mahony when he came to Colorado to collect data.³ He knew Mahony was a passionate activist who was performing serious work. Despite this academic neglect on the part of McWilliams and Taylor, national magazines, major newspapers, and local publishers recognized Mahony's Mexican Welfare Committee—what it represented, what it ventured to change, and what it faced.⁴ Important contributions about the plight of Mexican and Hispano workers also came from the National Child Welfare Committee, the Department of Labor (Children's Bureau), the National Council on Catholic Women, the National Council on Catholic Charities, and university researchers in Colorado.⁵ In addition to Taylor and McWilliams, Sara Brown, a child activist from the National Child Labor Committee in New York, B. F. Coen, a professor from the Colorado Agricultural College in Fort Collins, and others were in positions to write about and challenge these conditions. They were college graduates, had impressive academic credentials, and were nationally known. In contrast, major works and reports about Mexicans and Hispanos in sugar-beet-producing towns in Colorado rarely mention Thomas Mahony.⁶ What is noteworthy about Mahony was his humble background, his passion for social justice, and his courage to challenge whoever stood in his way. Unlike the trained researcher or the public policy analyst, Mahony was self-educated. He did not hold academic credentials and did not even attend school beyond fifth grade. Nonetheless, he launched a serious grassroots campaign for social, economic, and educational justice in Colorado's sugar beet districts. Who was Thomas F. Mahony?

What prompted him to pursue such a campaign in Colorado? What obstacles did he and his Mexican Welfare Committee confront?

Thomas F. Mahony was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania, in 1873. He came from a working-class, Irish-Catholic family and was raised in Ashtabula, Ohio, a port town on Lake Erie near Cleveland. Like most American youth in the late nineteenth century, Mahony attended school to the fifth grade.⁷ He worked as a butcher's delivery boy and a store clerk to contribute to the family income. Even though he left school at an early age, Mahony had a positive experience because it "left him with an insatiable need for learning."⁸ As a young man, Mahony was bookish, street-smart, and a staunch Catholic. He became an avid reader, interested in politics, and learned how to survive on the wrong side of the tracks of Ashtabula, a community in which Irish Catholics were disliked.⁹ By his late twenties, Mahony was a successful clerk in a dry goods store, but became restless. He moved west in 1902, worked for a while as the secretary for the chamber of commerce in Grand Junction, Colorado, supporting the Chicago Tribune Land Show, and spent seven years in Montana as a real estate promoter. He returned to Colorado, became an insurance salesman, and established permanent roots in Longmont, a small town forty miles north of Denver.¹⁰ In his mid-thirties, Mahony married Mattie Sullivan, a third-grade teacher in Longmont.

Mahony and his wife had a conversation in 1921 that changed their lives. They questioned their purpose in life, religious values, and commitment to social justice. This conversation took place at a time when the sugar beet industry was booming in Colorado and thousands of Mexican workers were being recruited into the state. As a resident of Longmont, Mahony witnessed the living conditions of Mexican sugar beet families: "Men, women, and children worked long hours in the fields blocking, hoeing and topping beets. School laws were disregarded in order to keep the children in the fields, especially during the late fall topping season. Disease, malnutrition and death were rampant."¹¹ Before Mahony became involved in his campaign, he learned about the sugar beet industry: how labor was recruited, how sugar beet prices were set, how wages were determined, how beet farmers operated, how children were used, and how compulsory school laws were manipulated.

At the 21st Annual Convention of the Colorado Council of the Knights of Columbus held in Salida, Colorado, in 1923, the "Mexican Welfare Committee" was created. Mahony was named chair. Frank Dolan, an attorney from Boulder, and D. L. Fitzgerald, a physician from Hartman, became members. Powerful Catholics at the Salida convention granted the Mexican Welfare Committee financial and moral support to "begin the fight."¹² More important was how John R. Mulroy, director of Denver Catholic Charity, Monsignor Matthew J. Smith, the editor of *Denver Catholic Register*, and John Henry

Tihen, archbishop of Denver, all saw Mahony as an extraordinary individual, an articulate speaker, and a passionate advocate for the disenfranchised.¹³

The Mexican Welfare Committee began a crusade to “improve the religious, social and economic conditions affecting our Spanish-speaking fellow Catholics”;¹⁴ a crusade “against the miserable conditions affecting our Mexican migratory workers that have so long prevailed”; and a crusade to “create an interest in their welfare among citizens [and] so with the help of an aroused public opinion we can obtain a measure at least of justice and fair dealing with them.”¹⁵ Soon after the Mexican Welfare Committee was formed, it began to publish annual reports. Complex issues were reported about wage labor disparities, substandard housing, child labor, the unwillingness for companies to care for their workers, and the reluctance of educational systems to enforce compulsory school laws.¹⁶ Not long after the Mexican Welfare Committee was created, prominent magazine and major newspaper stories started to report on its work. *The New Republic* wrote:

We have it on the authority of Mr. Thomas F. Mahony, Chairman of the Mexican Welfare Committee of the Knights of Columbus, that the average earnings of these workers per family of father, mother, and children from seven years up, is but \$600 a year. While they are technically employees of the beet-growers, they are recruited by the sugar companies and assigned to the farmers; they sign labor contracts prepared by the companies; and they are paid by company checks. The companies are therefore fully responsible for the situation. There are about 28,000 workers in the Colorado beet fields. Many of them are children, working an average of over nine hours a day, and in some cases ten to fourteen hours a day. Many of the children are out of school, in violation of the school laws. The shacks provided for these families frequently have only one sleeping room. . . . There is no assurance that the Great Western Sugar Company would do anything to improve labor conditions if the duty were increased; its profits are already ample.¹⁷

The New Republic briefly described how recruiting worked, the annual earnings of Mexican families, child labor, violation of compulsory school laws, living conditions, and how the industry was booming.

Other national news magazines became critical of the industry for the conditions it was creating in the state. In *The Nation*, for example, Frank Clay Cross singled out the Great Western Sugar Company. He criticized the company for its “brazen contempt for human welfare,” condemned it for only wanting to enrich its stockholders, and blamed it for reducing “the starvation wages of workers in the beet fields—by indirect action . . . to a new mini-

mum, cruel almost beyond belief."¹⁸ Great Western, however, always had the means to defend its policies, practices, and goals. From the beginning, the company asserted that in addition to the sugar factories it owned and operated in Colorado, it recruited labor for beet farmers and nothing more. Company representatives argued that beet farmers were responsible for their workers because they were the ones who were employing them.¹⁹ It seemed that no one in the sugar beet industry wanted to assume responsibility for the welfare of working families.

Whether Mexican families were moving into segregated neighborhoods or to remote sugar beet farms, townspeople knew what their living conditions were like. Substandard housing seemed inevitable in the initial years because it was difficult to accommodate the number of Mexican workers moving into these communities. The industry was not prepared for these numbers. According to the Mexican Welfare Committee's 1927 annual report, fifteen thousand Mexican beet laborers were working in northern Colorado, over three thousand in the Arkansas Valley, and more than four thousand on the Western Slope.²⁰ While some Mexican families were able to acquire suitable housing, most were occupying chicken coops, barns, or makeshift shacks. Mahony witnessed these conditions and considered them "a shame and disgrace to the state, and to the communities in it, that permit such things to exist without protest."²¹

Housing conditions were so bad that even Great Western could not ignore the problem.²² Because Great Western was responsible for recruiting thousands of Mexican beet workers into these communities, it recognized a need to address the housing issue. After 1920, the company started to develop housing projects for the workers. Known as Great Western's Colonization Plan, homes were built in remote parcels of land on the outskirts of selected towns. In many ways, these isolated colonies were similar to those of the impoverished Mexican *colonias* established along the Mexican and U.S. border. In the strictest sense of the word, *colonias* were rural communities or neighborhoods that lacked infrastructure. In some cases, they emerged in rural areas without formally sanctioned local governance. In others, they were neighborhoods within unincorporated communities. *Colonias* had high rates of poverty, which made it difficult for residents to help pay for roads, clean water, sewer systems, street lighting, and other services. Colonies in Colorado were somewhat different. In constructing colonies in sugar beet towns, building materials indigenous to the area were used. In most cases, adobe homes were constructed. They were modest dwellings. The size of the average colony home offered occupants 350 square feet of living space.²³ In Great Western territory, the company sold individual lots and the building materials to selected Mexican beet workers, who were then expected to build their homes and live in them throughout the year. Residents were given four to five years

to pay off their debt to the company. Once the company was paid in full, colonists were supposedly given titles to their homes.²⁴

C. V. Maddox, Great Western's labor commissioner, led this massive project.²⁵ The company, however, was direct about its colonization plan; it made a bold statement as to why it was doing this and what it envisioned. Maddox explained the company's intentions this way:

In order to increase the resident supply of experienced beet laborers, the Company is aiding selected Mexican families to build houses in colonies located at six towns. . . . The Company's purpose in colonizing the Mexican laborers is two-fold. There is a saving of transportation expense, which under present condition is high. Also, experienced resident workers will do better work and more timely work on the crop and increase the tonnage per acre.²⁶

Although the company sought to improve housing conditions, its primary mission was to reduce transportation costs, establish a permanent supply of experienced workers, and increase profits.²⁷ Moreover, it also tried to convince beet farmers that they needed to take responsibility for their workers on their farms.

While the colony home was not perfect, it was better than the sugar beet shack. In most cases, substandard housing for working families was the general rule. In the 1928 fifth annual report of the Mexican Welfare Committee, Mahony criticized the sugar beet industry for allowing substandard housing conditions to exist, chastised state officials for refusing to intervene, and publicly maintained that it was unfathomable for government officials to have policies in place to protect farm animals but not Mexican working families:

We require our dairymen to bring and keep their cattle barns up to certain sanitary standards as set up by the State Board of Health. Why cannot this same board also set certain minimum standards for housing the human being employed on the beet ranches—that would be at least equal to the standards fixed for the housing and care of cattle on the dairy ranches. As things stand at present, in the majority of cases the cattle have the best of it.²⁸

In many cases, beet workers' shacks were unsanitary and lacked ventilation, window screens, and clean water. Conditions were so vile, said Mahony in one of his conference presentations, that Mexican families were "drinking stagnant water from a ditch."²⁹ Colorado state officials knew the value of having "good barns for horses and cows," but could not bring themselves to pass housing standards on sugar beet farms.³⁰

Mahony, however, was never impressed with Great Western's colonization plan. There were two major problems. Similar to the *colonias*, colonies were located on remote parcels of land, often did not have access to water, and lacked simple amenities common folk took for granted. To the extent that drinking water was not available in some colonies, occupants were unable to plant vegetable gardens and establish projects that needed irrigation.³¹

When Mahony delivered a speech, he almost always took the opportunity to talk about bad housing and how entire Mexican families earned less than one Anglo-American man. At the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems in 1929, he framed the Mexican wage labor issue as a moral problem. He was convinced that America was at a point in its history when a "normal home life" meant a man was able to support his family. The idea of a normal home life, however, did not apply to all groups in the United States and certainly did not include Mexican beet working families in Colorado. In fact, the foundation of the sugar beet industry went from a "sojourner strategy" (single men hired for the beet season who left the area after topping was done) to the family unit by early 1920s. Dennis Nodin Valdes argues that by "1922 Great Western officially stopped hiring single workers because families offered a more abundant and controllable labor supply."³² When Mahony spoke about wages, he emphasized the point from J. E. Hagerty, the president of the Catholic Conference, that for a man to support a "family of five or six at a minimum of health and decency level requires an annual income of from \$1800.00 to \$2000.00." Yet, "the average earnings of thousands of contract beet worker families" (for the labor of the father, mother, and children seven and up) "will average . . . \$600.00 per year."³³

As national magazines and newspapers reported the annual earnings of Mexican beet worker families, officials from the Great Western Sugar Company consistently refuted them. C. V. Maddux challenged Mahony, claiming that annual earnings of Mexican families were higher than those reported. Maddux defended the industry by arguing that their labor contracts specified a minimum rate of \$23 dollars per acre and 50 cents per acre for each ton in excess of the twelve-ton yield. According to his figures, this came to \$24.20 per acre and, given the number of acres worked, "the average money wage for beet work per family is \$847 per year."³⁴ Mahony countered Maddux's claim and said \$600 per season was actually a generous estimate of the annual wage. On this point, Mahony cited a survey conducted by researchers from Colorado College. In their study, researchers found that of 140 families with 544 workers (men, women, and children) surveyed in Colorado's Arkansas Valley, each family earned only about \$453 per season.³⁵ But whether these families earned \$600 or even \$847 per season, their earnings did not remotely come close to the \$1,800 to \$2,000 the average American man needed to support a family in 1929. To illustrate how low these wages were, teachers in elementary

schools (usually a low-paid profession) made more than Mexican families almost a quarter of a century earlier. In 1905, an elementary male school-teacher in America earned \$1,161 per year. In the same year, elementary female teachers (usually young unmarried women) earned \$650 per year.³⁶

This debate became increasingly contentious and went beyond seasonal earnings. Mahony explained that low wages affected entire sugar beet communities. Because wages were so low, most Mexican families were unable to survive the winter months in Colorado. As a result, two scenarios generally played out: In one, Mexican families were given credit by the “company store” for food and supplies to subsist through the winter months. However, the company store credit system had devastating effects on Mexican families. Mahony explained:

Under this plan he will start to work in the spring handicapped by a debt to the sugar company which will reduce the amount coming to him in the fall. Every winter this burden of debt may be increased until in a comparatively short time many of these Mexican workers will find their freedom of contract so limited that they will be compelled to labor under whatever terms of conditions may be imposed on them.³⁷

Mahony clarified that the company store arrangement was nothing more than “a system of peonage.” It enslaved Mexican families to the industry and there was no way out.³⁸ In the second scenario, Mexican families went on “relief” during the winters. Philanthropic organizations, Catholic Charities, or the local Community Chest assisted working families.³⁹ By bringing light to the negative consequences of low wages and the company’s recruitment and retainment practices, Mahony revealed what sugar beet companies were actually doing in these communities. Mahony maintained that Great Western had “no right to expect charity organizations, Catholic and others, and the public to provide and care for their labor during the winter months until they need it again in the spring.”⁴⁰ These circumstances had predictable effects: they stripped Mexican families of their dignity, pauperized them in their communities, and enriched the sugar beet industry. This pauperization of Mexican families was well recognized in a number of colonies. One article in *The Nation*, for example, reported that “Pauper Labor [was] keeping the sugar bowls of America filled” by whole Mexican families working “under the blazing summer sun for wages that are not sufficient to meet the more essential needs of a single person.”⁴¹ Carey McWilliams also recognized this. In his words, “the company resorted to the simple device of pauperizing the Mexican so that he would not move at the end of the season. ‘Peonage,’ of course, is an ugly word; it is also a

crime. But there are many ways of creating a condition which borders on peonage without violating the law."⁴²

As an activist, Mahony was fighting for a livable wage. If Mexicans were paid fairly, he believed, workers would be able to live "in reasonable and frugal comfort" throughout the year.⁴³ In addition, because "sugar companies are paying dividends on their common stock and as high as 7 percent on their preferred stock," he said, "I cannot understand why, under these conditions, the farmer should not receive a larger price for his beets, and labor should not receive a living wage."⁴⁴ But Great Western refuted the notion that low wages were the culprit for the poverty Mexican families were experiencing. From the company's perspective, it was the Mexican's inability to manage money. In fact, Maddux said, if "the Spanish-speaking workers were more thrifty in saving and in their buying they would not suffer."⁴⁵ Thus, the company asserted that it was not a wage problem but the Mexicans' failure to budget their earnings and live a thrifty existence.

As the debate continued, Mahony raised other questions about the industry that almost always went unanswered. For instance, labor contracts continually put Mexican families at risk: They were not guaranteed payment when the work was done and the "claims of bankers, money lenders, merchants and others against growers . . . were paid ahead of the beet laborers wages."⁴⁶ Labor contracts had no dates specifying when the beet season ended. This item was important because Colorado's unpredictable weather always impacted work schedules. Mahony specified that some laborers worked "late in the winter under terrible weather conditions, without extra pay, and under penalty of losing the money they have already earned." In other words, if Mother Nature prevented families from harvesting the crops, families forfeited the wages they had already earned. Furthermore, contracts stipulated that if additional laborers were needed to harvest the crops, the cost of "extra labor [was] deducted from the amount coming to the worker under his contract."⁴⁷ Thus, Mahony advocated for a new law that would make "the wages of Mexican beet workers a first lien or claim against the crop of the employer."⁴⁸

Newspapers rarely printed articles about Mexican families not being paid. This was a pervasive problem. In a letter written to John H. Redden, the senior elder for the Knights of Columbus in Denver, Mahony explained:

These people are being robbed right and left of their earnings after putting in weeks and months getting out beets under terrible weather conditions. It isn't just an isolated case here and there—but hundreds. They are told that the grower is too poor or that he hasn't the money. Or where a few acres are frozen in so hard that they can't be plowed out: that they didn't have to pay anything until ALL the crop

is taken out. There isn't a paper in Northern Colorado that will say a thing or hardly a person who will do anything to stop this. The Mexican Consul is helping these people out of the state—but in many cases they have to leave their earnings.⁴⁹

In all, Mexican families were the last to be paid, vulnerable to unpredictable weather conditions, frequently not paid, and, except for the *Catholic Register*, ignored by local newspapers.

Considering the sugar beet industry's dependence on Mexican labor, one would have anticipated better treatment of the workers.⁵⁰ Mahony pointed out that "native [white] Americans [would not] do this kind of work" because they would not subject themselves "to the strain of long hours of monotonous, back-breaking work, under high pressure, with low pay, sometimes long deferred, with bad housing and living conditions." At a major conference, Mahony roused his audience by exclaiming that "[white Americans] will not crawl."⁵¹ The idea that white Americans would "not crawl" infuriated powerful members of sugar-beet-producing communities. In response, the editor from the *Loveland Reporter Herald* retorted that "our usually level-headed Irish friend, Thomas F. Mahony of Longmont, [had] gone on a rampage" by saying that "crimes [were being] committed on labor in the sugar beet districts."

The problem for the editor and other local elites, it seemed, was that Mahony had described the industry's horrific work conditions in front of influential politicians. Mahony vividly portrayed how women and children crawled on their hands and knees down long rows, how children were deprived of the right to attend school, how death rates were abnormally high, how impoverished Mexicans became objects of charity or were enslaved to the industry, and, finally, how Anglo-Americans would not do stoop labor. The Loveland editor admitted that "labor conditions and wages are not what they should be," but claimed that Mahony needed to be more balanced in telling the story.⁵² The editor noted:

We wonder if our friend, Tom, ever visited and observed the living conditions of the Mexicans in their native homes and compared them with the conditions under which they are living in the beet districts? Did he see them spinning around in automobiles, going to picture shows spending money for knick-knacks and baubles? He will see this in beet districts. And as for Americans "not crawling" if he will pardon personal allusions, we must say he is "all wet"—we have crawled in the fields and we are just about as good an American as our Irish friend.⁵³

While the editor admitted that conditions were "not what we would like to see them in sugar beet districts," he inferred that Mexicans were better off in Colorado than in Mexico. But the editor also seemed to suggest it was not worth the social price Americans paid for having Mexicans in their communities. In so many words, he believed that if "it were possible to dispense with the Mexicans or any other foreign laborers and grow the crops profitably we should like to see it done."⁵⁴

As the wage labor debate continued, it reached a critical point during the Great Depression. After the stock market crashed, unemployment soared and Americans became desperate. This period was especially difficult for Mexican beet working families in Colorado. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were deported to Mexico, and some Hispanos were asked to leave sugar beet towns.⁵⁵ Remaining Mexicans and Hispanos were forced to work for wages that were even lower. Conditions were so harsh that those who remained were constantly threatened by local officials with removal from relief rolls if they did not agree to work for slashed wages. Whereas the average Mexican beet working family was expected to work for approximately \$25 per acre before the Depression, officials from the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) investigated charges in 1935 that farm laborers were being forced to work for \$5 dollars per acre. This was unacceptable because the U.S. government had passed the Jones-Costigan Act a year earlier. Among its six features, the Act required an equitable division of sugar returns among beet processors, growers, and farm workers.⁵⁶ In 1933, Mahony shared with Arthur Gleason from St. Mary's College in Kansas that he had not "heard of a single beet laborer so far this year who was able to earn \$100.00 for his year's work." Mahony found that "families are coming out of the fields without a penny—in a number of cases their earnings this year are garnished for the unpaid balance on last years' grocery bill."⁵⁷ In these hard times, local bureaucrats decided who ate and who went hungry.

THE POLITICS OF CHILD LABOR

Along with the experiences of Mexican beet working families in Colorado from the 1920s to the 1940s, the related topics of child labor and compulsory schooling became controversial. The controversy arose not because the masses in Colorado wanted Mexican children out of the beet fields and in the schools but because a serious national debate was taking place about the issue. Advocacy groups across the nation were challenging child labor and trying to enforce compulsory school laws.⁵⁸ This issue was not new in Colorado; child labor had been challenged in the state since the sugar beet industry began at the turn of the century. In fact, the National Child Labor Committee had

reported the dangers of child labor in the sugar beet industry in 1916.⁵⁹ At that time, researchers explained that while they did not fully understand the effects of child labor, they said that the “continuous handling of these beets throughout the harvest season, combined with the steady stooping, involves great physical strain and is therefore a very objectionable form of work for children.”⁶⁰

That was 1916. Regrettably, very little had changed from the 1920s to the late 1940s.⁶¹ Mahony claimed that the sugar beet industry would not change because child labor had become central to its prosperity.⁶² He was right. As Bertram H. Mautner and Lewis Abbott, from the National Child Labor Committee, noted in 1929:

The use of the children brings down the cost of labor, since the work of the entire family is necessary to earn enough to maintain it even at an extremely low standard. Thus, instead of paying one laborer a bare subsistence wage, the labor of the father and several children is secured at this rate. In this way children are brought into agriculture under conditions governed by business considerations involving an effort to keep production costs low enough for the farmer to make a profit under the contract arrangement between him and the sugar company. . . . Where profit is the motive, the hours and working conditions of the child are controlled by this consideration, and the welfare of the child becomes a secondary matter.⁶³

The National Child Labor Committee, university researchers, and the Mexican Welfare Committee had been calling attention to Colorado’s child labor and compulsory school law problems for years. However, there seemed to be a national consciousness that perceived child labor as an urban problem. Because Mexican and Hispano children in Colorado were not working in factories inhaling hazardous fumes, operating dangerous machines, or suffering through graveyard shifts, beet labor was not perceived as a serious problem, and compulsory school laws were generally loose.

In fact, some high-ranking government officials in Colorado went so far as to describe sugar beet work as a wholesome activity, a worthy vocation, and good for the soul. One Colorado congressman, Mahony said, “tried to create an impression that the work done by the children is easy and is not only without harmful effects, but is beneficial to them, teaching them habits of industry.” Mahony was a pragmatist; he knew children needed to learn good work habits and responsibility and did not see anything wrong with children performing light chores on farms: “gathering eggs, bringing home the cows, riding the rake, or helping a little in the sugar beet fields.” But he resented the way politicians described the lives of Mexican and Hispano

children on sugar beet farms. As he put it, "[the politicians] picture a lot of laughing, romping children out in the beet fields with their mothers; out under Colorado's turquoise sky, breathing in Colorado's rarified air, basking in Colorado's bright sunshine, with the 'birds singing in the trees and the flowers blooming in the meadows.'"⁶⁴

This characterization was an insult to the child labor problem in Colorado and full of "poetic nonsense," said Mahony. In truth, Mexican children were contracted laborers, expected to perform "the same kind of work, in the same way, with the same kind of tools, as their fathers or mothers or other adults at their side." These children worked from sunrise to sunset "in the intense heat of spring and early summer and in the raw, cold, wet and snowy days of late fall." Although the National Child Labor Committee, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Children's Bureau, and a number of scholars were critical of child labor, it was Mahony who eloquently explained what life was like for these children:

The total length of all the rows in an acre of beets is 26,136 feet, just about 5 miles. To block and thin an acre of beets, the child straddles a row, blocks and spaces the beets to 12 inches apart and then thins, leaving the big beet. His work usually starts about 6:00 A.M. and lasts until 7:00 P.M. or later. The child, a contract worker, crawls on his hands and knees back and forth across the fields, hour after hour, all day under a blistering sun, five miles to the acre. This is but one process. There is hoeing and weeding in the summer, and pulling and topping in the fall, each process being 5 miles of rows to the acre.⁶⁵

Therefore, if one acre equaled five miles of work and the average family harvested twenty-five acres per season, each family would have tended sugar beet rows extending 125 miles.⁶⁶

There were two sides to the child labor controversy. One side claimed that sugar beet work did not have adverse affects. The other said it caused serious health problems to children. Dennis Nodin Valdes argues that many children were injured during the topping process. In his words, "[children] suffered gashes on the legs and knees, suffered loss of fingers and rheumatism, and occasionally wound up permanently crippled. Studies of child beet topping in the region also reported widespread occurrence of misshapen bodies, including underdeveloped shoulder girdles and flat feet."⁶⁷ Clearly, many Mexican and Hispano children were injured in sugar beet fields. But the most compelling point Valdes made was that the "consequences of child labor in the beet fields compared to those in the worst urban slum and sweatshops of a generation earlier."⁶⁸

Child labor drew national attention to Colorado. *The New Republic* described the problem as “medieval.” The article explained how very young children were working hours fit for adults:

[Out of] thirty-four families studied, typical of thousands of others, 85 percent of all children between the ages of seven and fifteen were found to be employed as field laborers, working from ten to twelve hours per day. Twenty-three percent of these children were under ten years of age, and 33 percent under eleven, in spite of the fact that the contracts for beet workers specified that children under eleven should not be employed.⁶⁹

The message that *The New Republic* and other national magazines conveyed to the American public was that very young children were working long hours, they were generally not in school, their health was secondary, and no one in power seemed to care.

But there was another unspoken dark side to these conditions—the effects of poverty, bad housing, and low wages. A disproportionate number of deaths occurred among children. In one study produced by the Colorado Agriculture College in Fort Collins, researchers found that out of 187 beet families surveyed, 443 of their children had died.⁷⁰ In Colorado’s Arkansas Valley, out of 140 families with 1,079 children, 308 (28.6 percent) children died. Mahony raised this problem and framed this issue in the following way: “It would be interesting to know just what action our state and county officials would take if, in some community in Colorado, there should be a 28.6% death loss among young farm animals. Would they be as indifferent to the causes as are our Public Health authorities to the conditions that are so largely responsible for the appalling death rate among the children of these poor beet laborers?”⁷¹ Convinced that people in Colorado were more concerned with the welfare of cattle, horses, chickens, and pigs than with Mexican and Hispano children, he lashed out and proclaimed that this indifference was nothing short of “race prejudice.”⁷²

By the mid-1930s, child death rates in Colorado caught the attention of the federal government. There were allegations of children dying of starvation, yet there were serious disagreements whether these deaths were actually caused by starvation. On this issue, Mahony corresponded with U.S. Representative Thomas R. Amile. Mahony informed Amile that health authorities had declared that “actual death from starvation is very rare—that people—even children may live a long time without anything to eat—and where death occurs after a long period of undernourishment . . . it may easily be attributed to some other more immediate cause.”⁷³ In other words, starvation was politicized. Authorities seemed to discount the idea that children of sugar beet working families were starving.

Mahony would not give up and shared a few cases with Amile as to how severe conditions were in Colorado. In Longmont, Mahony told Amile how a young woman came to him with an infant. She was completely destitute, he said, because "her husband has been locked up in jail, with three others, for STEALING FOOD. They had nothing to eat for three days—direct relief and work relief had been repeatedly refused—they saw some meat on a truck and took it." In another case, Mahony described a report written by a county nurse about two little girls:

The youngest had fainted at school and had been unable to attend. I visited the home and had the family take the child to the county doctor. He diagnosed the case as worms. Both little girls were greatly undernourished. Their little legs looked like rails. Their parents speak very little English—an older sister told the nurse that the little girl cried because she was 'hungry too much.' Upon questioning it was learned that she had eaten nothing except beans for a week.⁷⁴

Mahony pleaded with Amile to tell lawmakers about these conditions in Colorado—that it was "an outrage against justice . . . an outrage against humanity."⁷⁵ Indeed, it was difficult to prove that children were starving in Colorado's sugar beet districts. The bottom-line argument for Mahony was that the wages parents earned were not enough to nourish their children and that people in power in Colorado seemed more interested in the welfare of farm animals than Mexican children.

CONCLUSION

Whatever drives historians to choose one topic over another, it is clear that Thomas Mahony's campaign for social, economic, and educational justice was not regarded as noteworthy in Colorado history. Instead of being an important historical figure, he is virtually unknown. And his Mexican Welfare Committee has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. While Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, the Child Labor Committee, the U.S. Labor Department, the Children's Bureau, and researchers from Colorado universities studied Mexican families in Colorado's sugar beet districts, it was Mahony who led the charge. He consistently pointed out how the sugar beet industry flourished because it paid low wages and depended on child labor, and how its recalcitrant attitude kept children out of school.

When Mahony died in 1957 at age eighty-three, Paul H. Hallett, a newspaper reporter, wrote how Mahony was one of the few individuals in Colorado who "spoke out against employers who paid starvation wages to their laborers."⁷⁶ In this battle against oppression, Mahony challenged Washington, D. C., bureaucrats, high- and low-ranking state officials, sugar beet

company managers, and whoever stood in the way of social justice for the Mexican sugar beet workers. Despite his underdog position, Mahony used whatever recourse was necessary (i.e., the media, public talks, and the Catholic Church) to bring attention to barbarous conditions in the sugar beet industry.

Mahony was not only an articulate critic, he also offered solutions. Although his ideas were met with fierce opposition, he fought for four reforms: (1) the enforcement of compulsory school laws; (2) the appointment of a county truant/probation officer to be under the command of county superintendents of schools and the State Bureau of Child and Animal Protection; (3) the elimination of work permits to children; and (4) the elimination of family contract labor. Mahony believed that if decent wages were paid to Mexican families, adequate housing, the elimination of child labor, and school attendance would follow suit.⁷⁷

In reality, Mahony was attacking the very foundation of the sugar beet industry because its lifeblood was dependent on low wages, child labor, and a system that involved the entire family. As he often concluded his presentations, the motive of the sugar beet industry was to make money and enrich its stockholders. He told his audiences that the sugar beet industry was ruthless and cared little about Mexican families that lived in “a cesspool of poverty” or whether their children attended school.⁷⁸ It was not until after Mahony’s death that his vision for reforms started to take shape. As Hallett noted in Mahony’s obituary in 1957: “If labor conditions in the beet sugar industry are better today than they were 20 or 30 years ago, this is owing in no small part to the efforts of such agencies as the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, the Theatines, and particularly to individuals like Tom Mahony, who spoke out for justice at a time when this was least popular.”⁷⁹