Corazón de Dixie

Weise, Julie M.

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Chapter Four

Mexicano Stories and Rural White Narratives

Creating Pro-immigrant Conservatism in Rural Georgia, 1965–2004

Some farmworkers double over; others rest a full body’s weight on their knees. A few inches above the ground, cabbage peeks from the soil. The workers’ job is to pick it, whatever the physical toll on their backs or joints. It is the early 1970s in southern Georgia, most likely spring or fall when most cabbage there is harvested. The photo is black and white, but the sky has the milky look of so many warm and muggy mornings in the U.S. South’s most fertile agricultural areas (fig. 13).

The images seem to echo those blared to the public a decade earlier in the documentary Harvest of Shame. The documentary, hosted by journalist Edward R. Murrow and broadcast on CBS, brought the plight of agricultural migrant workers into contemporary popular culture for the first time since the Depression. Released in the middle of the civil rights movement, it focused largely on black workers in Florida and Mexican American farmworkers in California, seeking to generate national outrage that such working conditions could exist “in the United States, in 1960.” The program helped generate sympathy for farmworkers among middle-class viewers, contributing to the successes of the subsequent decade’s farmworker movements.

The subjects of these photographs, however, did not participate in any such movement. Upon closer examination, the black-and-white photos do not echo the documentary’s message; instead, they subvert it. Harvest of Shame presented farmworkers as American society’s greatest victims, utterly left behind by the postwar economic expansion and American narrative of progress that so many others were enjoying. Recounting the same labor, the photographs tell a different story. Rather than a white public, these photographs were produced by and for a family of farmworkers. They are preserved in a family photo album of Bernardo and Andrea Avalos, among the first Mexican Americans to move to southern Georgia in the 1960s. The Avalos family saw participation in farm labor as a choice, not a last resort; for them,

To see a selection of original historical sources from this chapter, go to http://corazonedixie.org/chapter-4 (http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3222S10).
FIGURE 13 A page from an Avalos family album: picking cabbage in Georgia in the 1970s. Courtesy of Andrea and Slim Avalos, Omega, Ga.
stooping over to pick cabbages was hard and sometimes damaging work, but it was also an integral part of their family story of self-sufficiency and upward mobility. Rather than undermine the American narrative of progress, for the Avalos family these photographs fit squarely into it.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, millions of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans journeyed through the rural U.S. South as agricultural migrant laborers and tens of thousands settled there. Like their predecessors in rural Mississippi and Arkansas, these newcomers were initially greeted as objects of curiosity that did not fit neatly into the binary racial organization of economic, social, and political life. As their numbers grew rapidly in the 1980s and they became visible in the largest swath of the South to date, they often faced hostility.

Yet the post–civil rights South and postnationalist Mexico created new possibilities and constraints for the South’s Mexicanos in the second half of the twentieth century. Migrants’ experiences in Texas, Florida, and particularly Mexico, where political consensus unraveled in the 1960s and the economy declined sharply in the 1980s, shaped their expectations of citizenship, states, and society. Unlike their bracero counterparts during previous decades, these Mexican agricultural laborers did not arrive expecting that any government would guarantee their rights and economic security. Thus, they did not focus their energies on claiming these things. Rather, they sought to exercise control over their own economic futures through wage labor strategies and to live free from violence and harassment. While organizers in Florida and a few other places in the South successfully presented unionization as a tool for Mexicanos’ upward economic mobility, in Georgia migrants pursued their goals through different means.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans in rural Georgia in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (map 5) confronted a region in transition from legal racial segregation to an evolved conservative ideology that framed social issues in terms of individual rights and responsibilities; the neoliberal ideology ascendant in Mexico also emphasized individuals and free markets rather than collective rights or state protections. In the U.S. South, this celebration of self-sufficiency eschewed group claims for redress of historical injustices as well as government “handouts,” such as welfare and food stamps. Though African Americans were the primary targets of disdain within this framework, poor white people could run afoul of its taboos as well. Mexicanos defied their difficult living and working conditions in indirect or individual ways, but the local political culture provided little encouragement or reward for open protest or organizing along lines of race or workplace. Meanwhile
in Mexico, a massive decline in the resources and power of consulates and the betrayal many Mexicans came to feel vis-à-vis their national state effectively removed the option of pursuing political action through trans-state appeals for protection. As both federal governments reduced spending on their poorest citizens in keeping with neoliberal ideology, corporations and churches—ironically, often subsidized by those same federal governments—now played a more prominent role in ordinary people’s lives than they had in the mid-twentieth century.

Thus, rather than labor or political movements, southern Georgia’s Mexicanos seized a different set of opportunities for social and economic progress in their new environments. In southern Georgia, both farmer employers and charity- and mission-minded white church leaders—representatives of the area’s two most powerful interests—sought personal and spiritual relationships with migrant workers. In their public discourses, these influential white
people framed Mexican migrants’ lifestyles as archetypical examples of upright working poor who merited the opportunity to stay in town, earn wages, attend school, and receive charity despite their foreign accents and racial difference. Mexican and Mexican American workers reciprocated the interest and did not become involved in labor or political organizing, albeit for their own reasons. Their seeming acquiescence to local mores allowed white elites’ pro-immigrant conservatism to permeate white society far beyond the ranks of labor-hungry growers. For their part, middle- and lower-middle-class African Americans trumpeted Mexicans’ arrival into the agricultural fields as proof that black people had moved up in the world; those who remained in farm labor had little power to protest their newfound competition. In this way, a fragile peace around immigration issues settled over southern Georgia and much of the rural agricultural South through the end of the 1990s, even as farmworker organizing and populist anti-immigrant backlash took hold elsewhere in the country during the same period.4

The Mexicanization of Southern Agricultural Labor

Though Mexican labor migration to Georgia did not reach the national radar until the 1990s, in fact it had begun in the 1950s (see map 5). In the fall of 1953, approximately 1,300 braceros entered southwestern Georgia to pick cotton in Crisp, Dooly, Turner, Wilcox, and Worth counties. Their stay was short, a mere six weeks to reach their hands into cotton plants to gather lint for the gin.5 That same year, observers noted that Tejanos had joined the majority-black labor force in the vegetable fields and citrus groves of Florida.6 While a decade would pass before Mexican-origin laborers again worked Georgia’s fields, the stream of workers from Texas to Florida continued unabated. By the late 1970s, Florida would join Texas as a home base for many of Georgia’s Mexican and Mexican American migrant workers.

Andrea and Bernardo Avalos were among the first Tejanos to power southern Georgia’s agricultural industries. Bernardo was a World War II veteran who had worked for a time in aluminum plants in South Texas. But the couple soon determined that migrant agricultural labor would allow them to make faster, not slower, economic progress than Bernardo’s industrial job. And so Bernardo, Andrea, and their young children joined the postwar Tejano diaspora of migrant laborers, journeying seasonally to New Mexico and eventually settling for a time in Oklahoma.7 Just as they had hoped, wages from agricultural labor allowed them to buy a home there. Now based in Oklahoma, the family continued traveling to the Midwest and Florida to
pick crops seasonally, and Bernardo was able to increase his earnings by using grower relationships to contract work for other laborers.

Around 1965, the Avaloses received a tip from a Tejano friend who had found his way to southern Georgia a few years earlier: work was plentiful in Georgia. Bernardo soon began bringing work crews to Hank Dodson, a prominent white farmer in the Tifton–Omega area. Dodson had previously relied on local workers, mostly African Americans, to plant, cultivate, and harvest his crops. But the civil rights movement and postwar economic expansion had begun to open up new opportunities for black agricultural workers away from the fields. Besides, like his grower contemporaries in the Arkansas Delta, Dodson may have felt that those black and white workers who remained were not sufficiently dependable and obedient. To encourage more migrant Mexicano crews to come in, Dodson built barracks to house this new seasonal workforce. Within five years, the Avalos family settled in Georgia. Bernardo, who came to be known as “Slim” for his tall stature, organized work crews locally, including not only Mexicano workers but also whites and blacks.

Dodson was not alone in his desire to find a new source of seasonal farm-workers, nor was the Avalos family alone in its search for new farm labor opportunities in territory previously uncharted by Mexicans and Tejanos. By the 1970s, Mexicanos had begun to join Atlantic Coast migrant labor streams, with reports of their appearance surfacing in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. They joined white and African American workers who had been following these routes since at least World War I, when Florida, the coastal Carolinas, and the Chesapeake areas first turned to seasonal vegetable and fruit farming.

Meanwhile, Georgia remained a land of cotton and sharecroppers much later than other parts of the South. By the 1960s, the changes that had fundamentally restructured the business of agriculture elsewhere began to catch up with farmers in the state. Family farms declined while corporate agriculture rose in prominence. Growers mechanized parts but not all of the harvest cycle for crops such as tobacco. And King Cotton was pushed aside, replaced by seasonally intensive vegetable and fruit farming. These developments all caused an increase in demand for hired (as opposed to family or tenant) and highly seasonal (as opposed to nearly year-round) labor in Georgia during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Initially, Georgia growers depended mostly on local laborers, particularly school-age children, black women, and older blacks and whites, to perform this new class of waged, seasonal labor. Yet in the wake of bracero-era dis-
courses that denigrated domestic farmworkers, growers were perpetually unsatisfied, grumbling that welfare checks made locals unwilling to put in an honest day’s work. Despite the ubiquity of this claim in public pronouncements, Georgia farmers admitted to researchers in the mid-1970s that the manufacturing and textile industries, not welfare, were their biggest competitors for labor. One grower acknowledged as much several years later, saying, “The local labor went to the factories, and the migrants came in to take their place.” In addition to higher wages, the manufacturing and textile industries could offer year-round steady employment—something increasingly scarce in farm work.

Texas- and Florida-based Mexicanos, however, had already developed strategies of seasonal migration and family labor that enabled them to see the potential for economic gain in the very arrangements that local white and black people had begun to reject. Vegetables in southwestern Georgia required intense harvest labor over the summer—exactly the time of year that farm work in Florida slackened. Since the 1920s, many Mexicans and Tejanos had spent their summers harvesting crops in the Northwest or Midwest; now, with the help of crew leaders, those working in Florida had to travel only a few hundred miles north to find summer employment. And so, by the mid-1970s each summer brought a noticeable influx of Mexican-origin workers—mostly Tejano families like the Avaloses but also some Mexican men and women—into southwestern Georgia. In 1975, they comprised 40 percent of the agricultural workforce there alongside an equal proportion of African Americans and half as many whites. The INS noticed them, too, raiding Tifton’s fields in June 1976 and deporting dozens of Mexican workers. Yet despite such intermittent immigration enforcement, the presence of Mexicans in Southwest Georgia continued to grow.

Experienced farmworkers, particularly bilingual Tejanos, fashioned themselves as crew leaders who used connections in Florida and Texas to provide Georgia farmers with a seemingly endless supply of workers. The Cortez family was among them. In 1980, shortly after Israel Cortez finished the sixth grade in Bejucos, State of Mexico, his parents gathered their eight children. The next morning before dawn, they would leave for the United States. “We [kids] didn’t know where we were going, where America was,” Cortez recalled. After crossing into Texas with the help of a smuggler, the Cortezes joined an aunt in Oklahoma, where they began picking cotton. But soon Florida beckoned with higher wages, and the family relocated once more. They spent winters picking oranges. While U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident farmworkers could draw unemployment during the slack summer
months and remain in Florida or return to families in Texas, the Cortez family was undocumented and had no such safety net.24 So when the orange picking wound down in late spring, the Cortezes joined thousands of other Mexicans and Mexican Americans on the road to Michigan and the upper Midwest for the summer harvest.

That changed around 1984, when a Tejano crew leader approached Cortez’s father in Florida, offering his family the opportunity to work in Tifton, Georgia. Mr. Cortez was delighted. “There’s no need for us to go to Michigan or any of those states,” Israel Cortez recalls his father reasoning, “because by the time you get up there, you’ve spent everything you’ve saved.”25 The family could now pick cucumbers, peppers, squash, and tomatoes in Tifton from April through December, then return to Florida each year for the orange season.26 Florida-based José and Anselma Gómez also saw Georgia as an appealing alternative to spending summers in the Midwest. “We got tired of traveling so far,” Anselma said, and in 1982 the family replaced summer destinations in Michigan and Ohio with Douglas, Georgia.27 Migrants who once journeyed between Florida and the Midwest formed the first large group of Mexicano laborers in southern Georgia: Spanish-surnamed children baptized in Vidalia in the 1980s were most likely to have been born in Lansing, Michigan; Fremont, Ohio; or Dade City, Florida.28

The sudden availability of a seasonal workforce—there when you need them, not when you don’t—allowed farmers to form new business plans. Previously, investing in crops that were seasonally labor-intensive posed a risk: if a grower could not recruit sufficient harvest labor locally, his high-value crops might rot in the field. Georgia farmers’ relationships with Tejano crew leaders enabled them to take their businesses in new, lucrative directions with the help of seasonal laborers. Between 1982 and 1987, the value of Georgia’s vegetable crop increased by 60 percent, and growers’ use of “contract labor”—as opposed to tenant farmers or permanent employees—tripled.29 These were the years in which the migrant labor stream turned over almost entirely to become majority Mexicano.

For example, southeastern Georgia’s local onions, now branded as Vidalia sweet onions, required a ready army of agricultural labor to pick the crop during a six-week window in the spring; farmers could not plant the crop unless they knew workers would be waiting.30 Thus, Vidalia onion production grew in lockstep with Mexican and Mexican American labor migration to Southeast Georgia. The area’s largest packinghouse, New Brothers in Toombs County, saw a twenty-five-fold increase in onion production from 1978 to 1983.31 New Brothers utilized Mexican and Tejano migrant labor recruited
by presumably Tejano crew leaders, Benny Rodriguez and Román Flores.32

Their reliance on Mexicano labor to power the rapid increase in Vidalia production was typical of the region’s farmers.33 Though the onion season was short, lasting May to June at most, workers in Southeast Georgia could remain in the area from March through November by traveling to nearby vegetable farms.34 Others supplemented their income by collecting pine straw on local forest land and selling it to businesses like Georgia Pine Straw.35

Like Vidalia farmers, peach growers in middle Georgia also had summertime labor needs, and in 1981 they began recruiting Mexican workers with the help of brothers Abel and Albert Aguilar. The Aguilars were born on an ejido, or communal land grant, in Michoacán. Their migrant path was typical for the 1970s, beginning in the fields of California and Texas and wending toward Florida by the end of that decade.36 There, they and their wives purchased homes in 1979. Like other experienced migrants, the Aguilars soon started organizing work crews. In 1981, they stopped in Peach County on their way to the Midwest and quickly found growers eager to work with them.37 “If you bring me more Mexicans,” grower Chop Evans told Aguilar as he gestured toward the black workers nearby, “I’ll let them go.” Aguilar did, and so did Evans. In 1989 the Aguilars and their families settled in Peach County for good.38

As the stories show, in the early 1980s Georgia’s fruit and vegetable growers took their place among generations of white southern farmers who purposefully sought alternatives to black laborers. Georgia’s farmers experimented with an array of migrant workers in addition to Mexicanos—Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Haitians recruited through a combination of federally run programs and informal relationships with labor contractors.39 Yet Haitian workers quickly fell out of favor, perhaps due to race.40 While Cubans and Puerto Ricans would remain in Georgia’s fields in small numbers, Mexicanos outnumbered them by far.

When the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 allowed undocumented seasonal agricultural workers (SAW) to legalize their status, families like the Cortezes rejoiced while farmers worried, “Now that people are legal aliens, are they going to change professions?”41 Nearly six in ten of the Southeast’s foreign-born agricultural workers were part of the SAW legalization process in 1989, the highest percentage of any region besides the northwestern United States.42 Growers told of cucumbers rotting in the ground and labor shortages that year.43 But what IRCA took from southern Georgia’s labor supply, it ultimately gave back with interest. Thousands of migrant laborers in traditional destinations like California and Texas used their newfound legal status to settle down, saturating low-end labor markets
As one economic crisis after the next rocked Mexico, a new generation of undocumented workers would find Georgia even more attractive by comparison.

By 1989, the ethnic composition of Georgia’s agricultural labor force had turned over almost entirely. The same was true throughout the southeastern United States. While “Hispanics” comprised just 2 percent of the region’s agricultural workforce in 1977, in 1989 seven of every ten farmworkers in the Southeast was foreign born—of these, the vast majority from Mexico. The state’s black farmworkers—mostly young, elderly, and/or female—entered poultry plants or service jobs or left the local workforce. Since Emancipation, white farmers had dreamed of replacing their black labor force with immigrants. Time and again they targeted Mexican workers, but the Depression, the end of the bracero program, or the workers themselves foiled these plans. Now more than a century after Emancipation, African Americans’ modestly rising fortunes combined with Mexico’s declining circumstances during the same period to make farmers’ dreams of an immigrant agricultural labor force come true.

“Strange Animals” in Georgia

While southern Georgia ultimately proved an attractive or tolerable location for hundreds of thousands of Mexicanos, employers’ satisfaction with their labor hardly translated into dreamy living conditions. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Mexicanos living in camps or trailers near agricultural work sites were invisible inhabitants of sparse rural landscapes. Miles of country roads separated them from their nearest neighbors, and few attended church in those early years. “We had migrant camps,” recalled Texas-born Javier González, whose family first came to southern Georgia in 1978, “and we didn’t really interact much with the larger population, mainly because we didn’t speak the language.” Since the influx of workers peaked during summertime, the few children who benefited from migrant education programs did not meet local kids in schools.

But the number of Tejano and Mexican workers steadily increased through the 1970s, and so did their ranks who settled locally, as the Avalos family did. Families of Mexican workers had settled in Tifton and Vidalia by 1983; others, like the Cortez family, stayed in town most of the year, from April through December. Migrant education teams fanned out into the fields, recruiting Mexican and Mexican American children to enroll in programs run out of local schools. There they spent at least part of the day in classes with local
white and black children. In 1983, “when we started coming on our own,” without a crew leader, “and when we started extending our stays into the school year, that is when we were forced to go into this foreign environment,” González recalled.\(^{53}\)

González and other children who entered southern Georgia’s schools in the early 1980s remembered being treated as objects of fascination, disgust, or confusion. When González first enrolled in school in the Vidalia area in 1983, people would poke their heads into the classroom just “to look and stare and to see the novelty.”\(^{54}\) Classmates asked a Mexican American girl in the Vidalia area if she was Indian. “And I would tell them no, I’m a Mexican American. . . . I come from Texas.”\(^{55}\) Robert Marín spent a few months attending school in Lyons in 1981 and recalled classmates gathering around to see how he ate.\(^{56}\) Peers taunted Israel Cortez when he entered the seventh grade in Omega around 1984. “My school years were rough, tough, and frustrating,” he remembered. Cortez craved academic success but felt confused and alienated by assignments in a language he barely understood. And then there was the relentless teasing. “I never took any food from home because I couldn’t stand [the teasing],” he said. “If I was to bring a rolled taco to school, were they going to make fun of me? Laugh at me? Think that it was gross and nasty?”\(^{57}\) In contrast, Tejana Diana Mendieta (née Avalos) enjoyed the extra attention that classmates paid her when she entered the sixth grade near Tifton in the early 1970s. When teachers and friends asked her to speak Spanish on command or answer questions about Mexico, “that always made me feel welcome, like I knew something and could be part of the class.”\(^{58}\)

In general, high school years were the worst to be a newly arrived Mexican American student; González’s high school–age brothers got into fights when classmates called them derogatory names.\(^{59}\)

Intense attention, whether violent, mocking, or merely curious, pained or pleased Mexicano children in different ways. Yet on a social level, classmates’ actions were all of a piece. The South’s rural schools had just emerged from battles over desegregation, and youths—particularly as they neared high school years—were in the midst of drawing and redrawing boundaries of race within integrated school environments. Singling out Mexicanos constituted yet another way—along with cliques and lunch tables—to draw the lines between “us” and “them.”\(^{60}\) Indeed, Mendieta remembered disputes during the early years of integration when black and white friends would ask her, “Whose side are you on?”\(^{61}\)

Newly arrived Mexican and Mexican American adults had far less contact with locals than their children did during the 1970s and 1980s. Their strongest
memories of these interactions are somewhat more positive than those of
their kids: mostly curiosity, some exclusion, all a bit uncomfortable. Anselma Gómez remembered being looked at as a “strange animal” when she first ar-
rived in Douglas in 1982. A curious passerby asked her husband, “Are you an
Indian?” Quick-witted Anselma responded for him, “We might be, I can’t lie.
What I do know is that we are Mexicans.”62 In the 1970s in Tifton, members
of the Avalos family remembered a few businesses that said, “We don’t serve
Hispanics,” and a few landlords who suddenly said the apartment had been
rented when they met their potential tenants in person.63 Yet discrimina-
tion did not define their memories. Robert Marín and his mother, Teodora,
remembered that in the mid-1980s, they were not invited into white people’s
homes but were not subjected to hostility either. Teodora felt the situation
was an improvement on Texas, where one of her sons had been beaten up
by white kids.64

Expanding opportunities for African Americans meant that the majority
of blacks, who had already left agriculture, seldom expressed open resistance
to Mexicanos’ arrival in those early years. “Back then” in the 1980s, recalled
Tejana Andrea Hinojosa of the Vidalia area, “I don’t even remember hearing
[from African Americans] that ‘We were taking their jobs.’”65 If anything,
middle-class blacks usefully pointed to Mexicanos’ arrival as evidence that
their own community had finally risen above the low stature of agricultural
labor. “We were never really concerned with the Hispanic community,” ex-
plained Jerome Woody, a former African American city councilman and
poultry plant administrator in Claxton. “It’s not a lifelong dream” to work in
the fields or on the line in a poultry plant, he added with a hint of sarcasm.
“It’s difficult work, and they do it with a smile.”66 John Raymond Turner,
an African American city councilman in Vidalia who also worked as a hotel
manager, echoed the sentiment. “Why complain about the Mexicans doing
the farm work when we’re not doing the farm work anyway?” he mused.67
Middle-class African Americans like Turner and Woody also did not perceive
Mexicanos as a threat to their political power.68

Documentary evidence offers mostly silence on the question of how black
agricultural workers felt about their Mexican counterparts in the 1970s and
1980s. But what evidence is available suggests the groups had extensive con-
tact with each other in the fields, leading to relations of tension, cooperation,
and everything in between.69 In Georgia, Tejano crew leaders Slim Avalos as
well as Flores, Hernández, and Galván led mixed crews of both Mexicanos
and blacks. African American crew leaders Clayton Clark, Charles Bank, and
L. D. and Wanita Walker had Mexicanos in their crews.70 Workers affiliated
with particular crews by choice, and the mixing suggests that blacks and Mexicanos facilitated each other’s employment and shared space in migrant camps even as Mexicanos slowly displaced blacks over time. Even when the displacement was obvious, as in Chop Evans’s peach orchard, there is no evidence that black agricultural workers—highly marginalized, with little political power, and often near the end of their working lives—publicly voiced their opposition to the Mexican influx.

In all, documentary evidence confirms migrant workers’ memories of cordial relations with underlying unease in the 1970s and early 1980s. A nun working in southeast Georgia wrote in a 1982 report that “last year 2000 migrant farmworkers came into the area and there was a great deal of tension between them and local residents.” Yet, she continued, “there were no serious incidents.”

**Majority-White Industrial Towns**

The same could not be said of northern Georgia’s majority-white factory towns, which began recruiting Mexican labor in the late 1970s. Cedartown, a mostly white town in northern Georgia, recruited Mexican immigrants to work at its Zartic meatpacking plant in 1976. Mexicans began working in the carpet mills of Dalton, Dayton Steel Company in Rome, and the poultry plants of Gainesville around the same time. While negative responses to Mexican immigration were largely muted in the agricultural southern part of the state, Mexicans in majority-white factory towns in northern Georgia suffered open hostility from the Ku Klux Klan as well as violence. The Klan long had a stronghold in the entire state of Georgia and was most active among blue-collar white men in majority-white industrial towns.

Ramiro López was the first to lose his life to Klan-supported violence. Like many of the Zartic plant’s Mexican workers, López hailed from Cuarracurio, Michoacán. He crossed the border illegally in 1979 when he heard about opportunities at the Zartic plant. López, then twenty-nine, took up residence in a Cedartown trailer park, where he began dating a fellow trailer park resident, fourteen-year-old Theresa Ann Ballew, whom newspapers later described as a “pallid blonde.” Like a growing number of white–Mexican couples in town, Ballew and López planned to marry. On Labor Day in 1981, a drunk López lost control of his car and got into an accident. A car of white men stopped, ostensibly to help López and his three Mexican companions. But soon one man, construction worker David Wayne Richardson, shot and
killed López. Richardson had openly expressed resentment toward Mexicans prior to the shooting.

A textile plant in Cedartown had recently shut down, leaving hundreds out of work and clearing the path for a revival of Klan activity among demoralized white workers; these Klan members now directed their anger at Mexicans. Signs appeared around town proclaiming, “KKK. Mexicans get out.” Another, placed in front of the trailer park where the Mexican men lived, read, “Mexican Border. Do Not Cross.” Someone fired guns at the men’s trailers. The Mexican witnesses fled Cedartown, and an all-white jury affirmed Richardson’s argument that he had shot López in self-defense. He was acquitted.

Two years later, the story seemed to repeat itself. In 1983, Dwayne Pruitt, a white man, killed Mexican immigrant Casiano Zamudio, who was married to a local white woman. The assailant said he killed Zamudio because his stepdaughter was being sexually harassed by Mexican immigrants. He had called the sheriff the prior week to say that if the situation continued, “he was going to kill him a Mexican.” In the weeks leading up to Pruitt’s murder trial, the Klan intimidated Mexican witnesses with shotguns, broke into the home of Zamudio’s white widow, and solicited money for Pruitt’s defense. Once the trial began, members sat in the audience wearing Klan buttons. One told a reporter that Pruitt “just did what any American would do, protect his home and family.” Pruitt was acquitted by an all-white jury, which accepted his argument of self-defense. Mexican American organizations active in the Southwest at the time, such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, had no involvement in the case; rather, white liberal organizations like Catholic Social Services, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution called for a federal investigation after the acquittal.

Anti-Mexican hostility in Gainesville was less violent than in Cedartown but still differed sharply from the uneasy coexistence of southern Georgia. In Gainesville, police notoriously harassed Mexicans. And when poultry plant owner Ron Gress praised the new workers in a local newspaper, a Ku Klux Klan leader called for a boycott of his products. Though less dramatic than the Cedartown murders, anti-immigrant Klan activity in Gainesville signaled a political climate in northern Georgia’s majority-white factory towns wherein open expression of hostility toward Mexican immigrants was the norm even as Mexican men quietly integrated themselves into trailer park communities and dated and married white women. The only significant exception to this trend in Georgia’s majority-white industrial towns was the carpet manufacturing center of Dalton. There local carpet mill owners used
their outsize influence to calm fears, foster pro-immigrant sentiment, and encourage local initiatives to help immigrants integrate into the community.\textsuperscript{88}

Absent the countervailing voices of powerful local employers like Dalton’s mill owners, the Klan typically led the response to Mexican workers in northern Georgia’s industrial towns. While anti-Mexican reaction remained isolated in these communities and did not spread throughout the state or region just yet, it marked the first major spate of anti-Mexican violence in the U.S. South. Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the region had suffered labor exploitation, Jim Crow segregation, and political disenfranchisement. But not until the 1980s did a powerful and violent anti-Mexican discourse rise to the public sphere, nor did anti-Mexican violence previously threaten the region’s immigrants in a systematic way.

\textit{Suffering and Resistance in the Fields of Southern Georgia}

Though community relations were tenuously manageable for Mexicanos in the agricultural areas of southern Georgia, working and living conditions were abject. In the 1970s and 1980s, workers spent the season living in trailers, houses, barracks, motels, or hotels.\textsuperscript{89} While some farmers funded workers’ housing, others charged workers for it or left them to find a place to stay on their own.\textsuperscript{90} Mexicanos in migrant camps often lived with “rats, snakes, exposed electrical wiring, open sewage, broken windows, windows without screens, excessive uncollected trash, leaking roofs, dangerous steps, toilets and showers not working properly,” wrote a state government observer in 1981.\textsuperscript{91} One camp had twelve people living in one room with no indoor plumbing but plenty of insects; at another, children played with carelessly discarded pesticide cans as though they were toys, “and the migrants informed us that when they were working in the fields and the crops were dusted with pesticides, they were dusted also.”\textsuperscript{92} At another farm, a nun observed, worker housing consisted of “2 long narrow (6 to 8 ft wide) corrugated metal buildings with walls unfinished to the top leaving an empty space between the wall and roof . . . Piles of burning trash between the units . . . no separate toilet facilities for women . . . earthen floors.”\textsuperscript{93}

State and federal government officials visited the camps, inspecting about half of migrant labor camps in 1981, for example, but did little to force change.\textsuperscript{94} If anything, local Department of Labor bureaucrats, in a pattern set by generations of southern government officials, supported planters over laborers; in this case, that meant warning farmers in advance of inspections and defending them in the media when their practices came under fire.\textsuperscript{95} One
state labor official told a reporter that workers, not farmers, were to blame for poor housing conditions. “Keep in mind, you can take the nicest place in the world and put a certain class of people in it and it’s going to look bad,” she explained. At a site that a federal labor official had called one of the “best camps in the state,” a nun found workers living in a converted chicken coop. With no meaningful oversight from state or federal officials, migrant housing remained hazardous to workers’ health.

Like their living conditions, migrants’ agricultural work routines presented daily perils. Their jobs were back-breaking, terribly paid, and physically dangerous. Between 1993 and 1997, at least three children lost legs, arms, or hands in packing shed accidents in southern Georgia. An average of one Latino farmworker died each year in the state of Georgia during the 1990s and 2000s, usually in accidents with automobiles or large machinery or from heat exposure. Most children suffered from malnutrition because of their families’ poverty wages, and a disproportionately high number died as infants. They were routinely cheated out of wages, as when a grower was convicted of pocketing their Social Security deductions in the mid-1990s.

But Georgia’s fields still generated less scandal than others nearby. Death rates were twice as high among Latino agricultural workers in Florida. There the federal government successfully prosecuted slavery cases in relation to migrant agricultural workers at least six times. Crew leaders in Florida were known for being particularly abusive, berating, beating up, and in one case routinely murdering workers who did not cooperate to their satisfaction. While such bondage and physical violence may have taken place in the agricultural fields of Georgia, there is scant evidence of it in oral history interviews, newspaper accounts, or Mexican consulate records. It is difficult to know if this means such things did not transpire or that workers did not have anywhere to take their grievances. It is possible, however, that Georgia’s considerably smaller farms meant crew leaders had a less powerful role there than in Florida, where growers running gigantic operations gave tacit permission for middlemen to extract more productivity by whatever means necessary. Physical intimidation in Georgia could be more restrained. One social services staffer recalled a farmer quietly placing his gun on the table during discussions with a worker about unpaid wages; the worker did not get hurt, but he also did not get paid.

While some Mexicanos achieved substantial financial progress through migrant labor, others barely subsisted. Most would start at the bottom as laborers subject to the whims of both farmers and crew leaders. In that situation, crew leaders’ cut and housing and food deductions often left migrants
with little take-home pay. At one camp, for example, migrants earning $25 a day were spending $21 per day for room and the remaining $4 for board. In other words, their take-home pay was zero. Food stamps could have mitigated the poverty of many, but farmers insisted that workers did not need them and blocked access when government employees attempted to sign them up. Like their Mississippi Delta counterparts in the 1930s, Georgia’s growers wanted to ensure that farm labor was local workers’ only means for subsistence.

Yet for countless Mexicanos, life on the road with a crew leader was a worthwhile investment because it could be the first step toward family autonomy. As workers became more experienced, learned some English, and acquired their own car or truck, they could develop direct relationships with farmers. Israel Cortez remembers that as a boy, his translation skills enabled his father to communicate with farmers and get out from under the crew leader system. “That’s when we realized how the business worked and how much some of the crew leaders made,” he said. “We realized that what we were getting paid was pennies” of what their labor actually was worth. Dealing directly with farmers, an entire family at work in the fields could earn enough money to save for the eventual purchase of a house or trailer that would, in turn, free them from the need to live in run-down farmworker housing under the constant surveillance of farmers.

While the promise of such advancement kept many workers silent in the face of abuses, others found ways to push back. Enrique Flores Ortiz, an undocumented worker, and his companions in the Vidalia area used county courts to sue their boss for unpaid wages in 1986. In subsequent years, more migrants used the courts to claim their rights as once-undocumented workers legalized their status through the IRCA, thus becoming eligible for Legal Aid’s help and less afraid to come forward. Others, like the Contreras family in Byromville, sold their labor freely, to the dismay of crew leaders who had already contracted it out to a particular farmer. Indeed, leaving one farm or crew for another was likely the most common way that Mexicano agricultural workers throughout the rural South asserted what little power they had.

No union, workers’ center, or other form of collective protest took root among Georgia’s Mexicano agricultural workers during the 1960s through 1990s. There is no evidence that even small groups of Mexicano agricultural workers walked off the job or staged a protest together anywhere in Georgia during that period, though it is possible, if not likely, that such actions occasionally transpired but escaped the written historical record. Still, reluctance to take collective action made Georgia’s Mexicano farmworkers exceptions...
among their peers in those decades. In nearly every other region where Mexicanos worked in farm labor, these were years of strikes, boycotts, and collective movements for justice. From the fields of California, the Mexican American–led farmworker movement spread to Oregon, Texas, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio. Though the 1971 farmworkers’ unionization effort in nearby Florida was powered by black migrants, in 1976 a majority-Mexican labor force in Immokalee went on strike for higher wages. By the 1990s, Latino farm labor organizing even reached one agricultural community in eastern North Carolina. During that decade, Latino agricultural workers in Immokalee, Florida, and poultry workers in Morganton, North Carolina, organized themselves without the agitation or resources of any formal union, ultimately conducting successful strikes and boycotts for higher wages and a greater say in the conditions of their own workplaces. Mexican and other Latino workers in this period certainly were not “un-organizable” just because they were poor, migrant, indigenous, undocumented, or did not speak English.

Furthermore, Mexicano workers in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas had sporadically organized coordinated actions to protest conditions in the U.S. South earlier in the twentieth century. They decamped together from their work sites to protest subpar conditions, fought for educational rights, and won admission to white public spaces. The binary racial organization, anti-labor environment, and stark inequalities of the South’s agricultural areas did not inherently foreclose all possibility for Mexicanos to take collective political action in their own interest. Tejanos and Mexicans working the fields of southern Georgia in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s could well have organized themselves, or been organized, into a collective political unit.

But they did not. Both evidence and logic suggest that Mexicano workers in southern Georgia knew about contemporary farmworker movements elsewhere, connected as they were to communities in Texas, Florida, and the Midwest. Furthermore, those who hailed from Mexico’s ejidos, communal land grants, had experienced the wave of peasant organizing that swept the Mexican countryside during the 1970s. In Georgia, however, they chose not to emulate the oppositional strategies of their peers elsewhere. True, they were never the target of a concerted organizing campaign by an established farmworkers’ union as, say, cucumber pickers in Mount Olive, North Carolina, were. But they also did not initiate walkouts or protests on their own like their historical antecedents in Mississippi and Arkansas or their Latino contemporaries in Morganton and Immokalee. Structurally, Immokalee farmworkers were at least as disempowered as southern Georgia farm-
workers; oppression alone cannot explain the different paths these migrant communities chose.

Rather, these disparate strategies reflect the contingencies of the migrant experience itself. Workers who came of age in Central Mexico in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s had different expectations of citizenship and ideas about labor than earlier Mexican immigrants, immigrants from southern Mexico, or workers like those in Immokalee and Morganton who had resisted oppressive regimes in Haiti or Guatemala. Work regimens and paternalistic growers on Georgia’s comparatively smaller farms subjected Mexicanos to some forms of exploitation but not others that their compatriots protested elsewhere. And Georgia’s charity-minded white church people alleviated the worst of migrants’ poverty and isolation, brokering Mexicanos’ relationships with local authorities and creating opportunities for them to recreate away from farm labor camps—opportunities that were attractive, yet not conducive to organizing.

Citizenship after Mexico’s Golden Age

When José Luís Landa and Manuel Gallegos led sixty-five of their fellow braceros in a work stoppage on an Arkansas farm in 1948, they chose September 16, Mexican Independence Day, to begin the strike. These men had come to the United States with both the Mexican state’s promise of protection and the Mexican nation’s mandate for the individual and collective improvement of rural men like themselves. But much had changed in the following thirty years. Mexican migrants of the 1970s–90s, families like Israel Cortez’s, had come of age during and after the decline of the Mexican state’s economic and rhetorical support for social justice and the poor. Leaders of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI) increasingly used violence on their own people over the course of the 1960s, culminating in the massacre of student protesters in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco district in 1968. The massacre highlighted the state’s loss of control over the narrative of Mexican political development, exposing severe internal fissures both nationally and internationally. The economic crisis of the 1980s, known as Mexico’s “lost decade,” cemented the loss of public faith in the PRI while depriving the state of the resources needed to fund its huge apparatus. It also accelerated the ruling party’s withdrawal from the policies of economic protectivism, state intervention in the economy, and rural land redistribution that had marked Mexico’s golden age. By 1992, two-thirds of rural Mexicans were laborers, not landowners. Presidents
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and party leaders now promoted the notion that Mexican nationalism and sovereignty would be best advanced not through cross-class solidarity but rather by assuring Mexico’s competitiveness in the global market.129

Raised in this new historical moment, most Mexican immigrants looked to the United States not as a beacon of modernization and improvement but rather as a place where they could earn enough money to halt or at least slow the steady decline in their standard of living. Teodora Marín, for example, was landless in Guerrero while Petra Soto and her children were poor in Coahuila; both migrated to Texas and eventually to Georgia in the 1980s.130 The Sotos, Maríns, and other families like them expected that, over time, their sacrifices would pay off in dollars. They also believed that agricultural labor was a respectable vocation and that they should be able to live and work in the United States without suffering physical violence or harassment.

Developments in Mexico not only shaped Mexican immigrants’ expectations of citizenship and labor; they also neutralized what had once been their most important ally in the U.S. South: Mexican consulates. The demise of the bracero program constituted one element of the Mexican state’s retreat between 1960 and 1990. U.S. employers were still hungry for labor but unwilling to negotiate bilateral contracts with Mexico because of both liberal criticism and agribusiness greediness, so migration streams from Mexico to the United States became increasingly undocumented. The new undocumented immigration eliminated Mexican bureaucrats’ erstwhile role as middlemen with the power to cut off the labor supply from uncooperative farmers. Though Mexico opened a consulate in Atlanta during the late 1970s, it dealt with business and trade matters, not migrant protection, in its early years.131 Even once the Atlanta consular staff began visiting migrant work sites in the mid-1980s, they involved themselves only in individuals’ legal matters, mostly supporting criminal defendants or workers trying to collect unpaid wages.132 The consular corps’ retreat from its onetime role as defender of Mexicans’ collective rights in the U.S. South reflected the new emphasis on individual over group claims in Mexican political discourse as well as a lack of sufficient budget and personnel to meaningfully complete the work of protección.133

From the perspectives of migrants, the disaffection was mutual. Having lived through “the end of faith in the Leviathan” of the Mexican state, Georgia’s Mexican immigrants mistrusted and evaded consular officials rather than turning to them for support.134 When Mexican officials visited Cedartown in 1985, for example, Mexican workers at the Zartic plant reported that they had not “been harassed by any group or person in this town”—a finding belied by the anti-Mexican violence surrounding the murder case just two years
earlier. Similarly, when officials responded to a newspaper article about anti-Mexican discrimination in Gainesville, they were told by immigrants there that “at the moment they did not have any problem with authorities or civilians in this community.” While the South’s Mexican immigrants three decades before walked dozens of miles and risked employer retribution to involve consuls in their struggles, by the 1980s they no longer believed that Mexican citizenship gave them, poor emigrants, the ability to make claims on the Mexican state.

Migrant Labor, Migrant Life

Mexican immigrants to the United States in the 1970s–90s, including those in Georgia, largely hailed from rural areas in Mexico. But by the 1980s, most did not have their own land and a quarter had first migrated to Mexico City or the border region in search of wages. Both their lived experiences and the Mexican government’s new discourse of individual self-sufficiency and global competitiveness had already exposed them to the restrictive and thankless qualities of low-wage labor.

Yet for all of its privations, migrant farmwork offered certain advantages over other forms of low-wage labor. Rather than dispersing to different factories or parts of the assembly line, families could spend all day in the fields together. Many preferred outdoor work to indoor and believed in the inherent worth of farm labor. “I preferred the field to a factory because I was in the open air,” explained Anselma Gómez, who had previously worked in a shrimp-processing plant in Texas. And perhaps most important, Mexicanos expected that once they got a foothold in the region, they would be able to contract their own work directly with farmers or even become crew leaders themselves.

While documentary evidence from journalists and government officials has allowed for a reconstruction of migrants’ routes and work routines, they reveal little about migrants’ own understandings of life and labor in the 1970s and 1980s. Diaries and other written records from their perspectives are not available, nor did scholars conduct interviews with migrant workers in Georgia during that time. Oral histories recorded two or three decades later provide insight but may be colored by nostalgia, particularly among those who have since “made it” into the middle class.

Yet there is one type of enduring document that Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants produced constantly as they labored in the fields of Georgia in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s: family snapshots and photo albums.
Mexicanos had used family photographs to assert their own identities against U.S. society’s racialization of them since the 1920s. By the late 1970s, access to cameras had expanded dramatically on both sides of the border, as U.S. Americans of all income levels purchased them in equal shares and the market for cameras in Mexico grew by double-digit percentage points each year. For this generation of Mexican migrant workers—indeed, for most of the hemisphere’s families in the twentieth century—personal photographs rather than written records thus constitute the most extensive archive of daily experiences available to historians. They document the stories that families created and passed down about themselves, revealing the ways migrants saw the world, rather than just how the world saw them. Migrant photographers’ choices of what to include and exclude, migrant subjects’ choices of which expression to wear when facing the camera, and migrant family historians’ decisions about which photos to keep and how to arrange them in albums all reinforced particular ideas about the meaning of family and the place of migrant labor within it.

The personal photo collections of three migrant families who settled in Georgia, two Mexican and one Mexican American, show that family togetherness, self-sufficiency, and most of all independence were prized components of these families’ narratives both during their years of farm labor and in subsequent decades. To be sure, these families represent the subset of the migrant population that was successful enough to remain in the area, though not all rose to be crew leaders. Furthermore, it is difficult to account for the ways each member of each family understood each album.

Yet considered alongside oral history interviews, the albums as a whole provide a precious window into the ways migrant parents conceptualized the relationship between their labors and their lives. Photo albums of white middle-class families have usually excluded images of employment or housework, thus erasing labor from the family story and reinforcing a divide between labor and leisure. An earlier generation of Mexican farmworkers also shied away from sharing images of themselves performing degrading agricultural labor. In contrast, Mexicanos who migrated and labored together with their families in 1970s–90s Georgia snapped, developed, and preserved copious photographs of themselves working in the fields. Albums made no separation between farmwork, on the one hand, and family or leisure time, on the other. For the two families who hailed from Mexico, the message was doubly clear: unlike the braceros and male migrants who had once departed their villages alone, these families traveled and worked as a unit.

The economic structure and work routines of migrant agricultural labor...
bore little resemblance to those of smallholder production in rural Mexico. Yet once families owned their own cars and began to arrange work directly with farmers, they retained a sense of independence and control over their own time and labor. Teodora Marín recalled in an oral history interview that she did not like moving around so much; she hoped her family’s years of constant migration would be few. Yet she still devoted an entire page from her family’s album to photos of their station wagon, the trailer of possessions they carried behind them, and the view from the windshield of the highway stretched out ahead (fig. 14). The photos demonstrate a conscious attempt to document the Marín family’s travels as they were taking place and to incorporate those travels, however difficult, into the family story. Three photos depict the station wagon and trailer at the side of the road, indicating that a family member paused amid the driving routine to capture the moment for future reflection. Seemingly out of place among the photos taken of and from the family station wagon in outdoor settings, the album maker included an interior shot of a toddler sitting on a leather couch. The photo’s place on a page of car and road shots might have elicited sadness in Mrs. Marín, who regretted the need to travel for work. Yet it also highlighted the mundane pleasures of family life, which the Marín family could enjoy in part because of the wages and independence that migrant labor afforded them.

The pages of the Gómez family album from the 1970s also blend images of migrant labor with those of family and leisure time. Having cars “in good condition” was always important for the family, Anselma said, and their albums show this. As in the Marín album, one page of the Gómez album includes a Polaroid of the orange-and-white family station wagon alongside one of a baby (fig. 15). Below sits an image of a family trip to Busch Gardens in Florida. Again, the story of each photo depends on the others that surround it: the mobility of the station wagon enabled the nurturing of the baby and the leisure of the theme park. The album pages confirm Anselma’s recollection that she appreciated farm labor’s seasonality because it allowed the family to visit relatives for weeks at a time—unlike the shrimp-packing plant where she got only one week of vacation per year. The family’s use of a more expensive Polaroid camera rather than a traditional film camera signaled their investment in viewing these images of themselves instantaneously.

The orange-and-white family station wagon appears again on a subsequent album page (fig. 16). Here it sits in the cucumber fields of Georgia a few feet from Gómez family members as they perform stoop labor in 1984. “I always taught my kids . . . that farm labor is not denigrating, but something to help you get a better life,” said Anselma Gómez in an interview; the album page
Figure 14. A page from a Marin family album depicting the family’s journeys north from Florida in the 1970s. Courtesy of Teodora Marin, Cedar Crossing, Georgia.
shows that her children at least nominally agreed. Two family members in the photo ignore the camera, perhaps unaware that they are being photographed as they focus on the task at hand. But two others smile at the photographer, offering their agreement that agricultural labor was a worthy subject for a picture. The presence of the station wagon at the edge of the frame and the exclusion of other laborers who may have been present in the fields that day helped the Gómezes remind themselves that, however difficult their actual work, they performed agricultural labor on their own terms, moved about in their own car, worked together as a unit, and exerted some control over their own financial progress. Anselma did not want “someone looking over me to say what I do or don’t do,” and the photo’s framing conveys that she achieved

FIGURE 15 Gómez family album, Florida, 1970s. Courtesy of Anselma and José Gómez, Nicholls, Georgia.
just that in the fields of Georgia. Again, the album page further joined the joys of family to the hardships of wage labor by placing the photo in an album alongside one depicting the family life cycle—in this case, a wedding.

In one case, the Gómez family utilized a photo caption to explicitly transmit their values to their offspring. A loose Polaroid of farm labor (fig. 17),

*Figure 16* Gómez family album, Georgia, 1980s. Courtesy of Anselma and José Gómez, Nicholls, Georgia.
taken in Georgia in 1983, has written on the back, in English, “At Work.” It depicts four male farm laborers, indeed at work, an overseer observing and directing from a tractor, and a woman riding in the tractor’s rear flatbed. The Gómezes’ English skills were limited; why would they have captioned the photo in English, “At Work”? Most likely, the choice invited their descendants at some future date to see the photograph and marvel at how far the family had come from its humble beginnings in the United States. After all, once their grandchildren were born, the Gómezes would take them out to pick tobacco for a few hours in order to instill an appreciation for the grueling nature of farm labor. The message was, in Anselma’s words, “Study, and God will bring the reward.”

Historians have shown that factories run according to Fordist principles of welfare capitalism enabled workers, including Mexican American workers, to view their workplaces as positive sites of identity formation in the postwar years. While it may be more difficult to imagine that racialized low-wage agricultural workers viewed their places of work with similar pride and loyalty, the interviews and photo albums show that many of those traveling in family groups did see it this way. Such a perspective certainly would not have precluded labor organizing, as indeed it did not for industrial workers. Yet if Mexicano agricultural workers were receptive to the analyses of farmworker organizers in Ohio, labor progressives in Wisconsin, Chicano...
movement veterans in Oregon, and Haitian farmworker activists in Florida, so too were they able to view their work life within the metaphors of self-help that southern Georgia’s white farmers and church people would ultimately offer them.\textsuperscript{159} While Mexicanos never denied the exploitative dimensions of farm labor or erased them from their memories and accounts, it was this latter story of independence, self-sufficiency, togetherness, and progress that most ultimately chose to tell themselves.\textsuperscript{160}

\textit{Postwar Liberalism and Migrants’ Brief Great Society}

Of course, more critical analyses of poverty did circulate in the United States in the 1960s through 1980s, and these ideas had a long history in southern Georgia as well. African Americans in the area had flocked to black nationalist Garveyism in the 1920s and participated in interracial packinghouse unionization drives in the 1940s. Yet over the subsequent twenty years, the area’s white residents recommitted themselves to preserving segregation through any means necessary, including violence.\textsuperscript{161} As a result, the civil rights movement struggled mightily to make gains in southern Georgia.\textsuperscript{162} Still, events on the national stage in the 1950s–70s familiarized African Americans and Mexican Americans nearly everywhere with the era’s ideologies of rights, citizenship, and redress of historical inequalities. Scholars have shown how Mexican Americans seized this historical moment to claim their place as Americans with the full rights of any other citizen, most notably in South Texas, where they were the demographic majority, and in places with more progressive political traditions, like California and Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{163}

Though black agricultural workers in Florida had led a unionization drive in 1971, no such activity took place among black workers in Georgia.\textsuperscript{164} The area’s African American working class had forged earlier movements for justice, but black students and professionals led southern Georgia’s most prominent postwar civil rights struggle, in the city of Albany.\textsuperscript{165} While black farmworkers in nearby states were largely interstate migrants, those in southern Georgia were cut off from that circuit; they were locals, many elderly, who enjoyed little political support from the rising black middle class.\textsuperscript{166} Their work devalued on a communal level, they had little incentive to organize an industry they hoped to soon leave behind.\textsuperscript{167} As the movement’s gains opened new opportunities for African Americans’ economic and physical mobility in the 1970s, those who remained in farm labor did have extensive contact with Mexicano migrants but did not engage them in cultivating an alternative politics. José and Anselma Gómez remembered having wide-ranging discus-
sions of politics and society with their black fellow farmworkers. These men and women suggested that the Gómezes were foolish to work so hard for so little money when they could receive government support instead. Anselma insisted back, “I want something that’s my own.”168 Though such conversations allowed blacks and Mexicanos to compare notes about work, wages, and strategies for survival, they did not lead Mexicanos to adopt an openly critical stance toward the area’s race and labor relations. If anything, these interactions helped Mexicanos strengthen their own family narratives of independence and hard work by contrasting themselves with African Americans, echoing the public discourse of local white elites.169

In Georgia, Mexicanos did benefit from the political legacy of the civil rights era through participation in War on Poverty programs as clients and, occasionally, as administrators. Yet both timing and geography caused their participation to be much more limited there than elsewhere. In southern Georgia, social service programs such as Head Start, food stamps, and migrant health clinics started reaching out to Mexicanos in the 1980s, nearly two decades after Lyndon Johnson first declared the “War on Poverty”—and at precisely the moment that President Ronald Reagan’s administration declared that war “lost” and began to attack its foot soldiers.170 For example, the first Migrant Head Start program in the Vidalia area opened in 1982—the same year a local migrant health program that had “worked very well” was defunded.171

Furthermore, federal programs distributed resources via local agencies, and these agencies’ interest in serving Mexicano migrants was decidedly mixed. Migrant Education, for example, was indirectly beholden to local power holders, including farmers; thus social services workers were dissuaded from challenging labor and political relations.172 Though the food stamps program did not rigorously monitor immigration status at that time, only 163 of the thousands of migrant farmworkers in Georgia were enrolled in the program in 1980. Two college interns at the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) social program noted that public health services were vastly underutilized by migrant women because of language barriers and transportation problems. “More unwillingness to cooperate existed among the WIC staff than among the migrants,” they wrote.173

Legal Aid, which served as an important means for farmworkers to redress grievances in other parts of the country, was also pushed into retreat just as it began to serve Mexicano clients in Georgia. In 1983, Ronald Reagan’s administration forbade federally funded legal aid programs from representing undocumented immigrants; shortly thereafter, the Georgia Legal Services
Program tried to transfer several undocumented workers’ cases to the under-resourced Mexican consulate. growers who had paid major judgments to farmworkers with legal aid representation pressured politicians to crack down on “troublemaking” lawyers. In nearby North Carolina, Farmworkers Legal Services won several judgments against growers and soon found itself under investigation at the urging of Senator Jesse Helms. Though no violations were found, legal aid agencies in states where growers held substantial power knew that they had been put on notice.

If Mexicanos in southern Georgia had little opportunity to benefit from Great Society programs, they had even less opportunity to lead them. Struggles over community control of Great Society social service agencies served as a catalyst for pro-migrant political activism in more liberal environments such as Milwaukee. But local conservative politics notoriously hampered the implementation of antipoverty programs in rural southern communities. In Georgia, participation in Great Society institutions as clients did bring Mexicanos into contact with sympathetic middle-class African Americans, some of whom had experienced the region’s civil rights struggles. These social service workers quickly came to regard Mexicanos as their primary clients, learning a bit of Spanish to communicate with them. But they too had learned to tread lightly in the overall conservative climate of southern Georgia. While some local NAACP chapters attempted to register eligible Mexicans and Mexican Americans to vote, middle-class blacks in southern Georgia never adopted the immigrants’ cause as their own.

Of course, those Mexican Americans who moved to Georgia from Texas or Florida as young adults had come of age in places where the liberal ideologies of the civil rights era manifested differently. One person with such migrant experiences, Andrea Hinojosa, would eventually use the tattered remains of the Great Society—dwindling federal antipoverty funds—to challenge southern Georgia’s political order as so many Mexican Americans elsewhere in the United States had done. Florida’s more developed migrant education program gave Hinojosa her first job away from the fields around 1980. She returned to farm labor for a few years thereafter, joining her sister who had settled in Lyons, Georgia. There she joined the newly opened Head Start as a paraprofessional and went on to social services and organizing positions funded by various antipoverty federal grants. Such a grant helped Hinojosa found the Southeast Georgia Communities Project (SEGCP) in 1995. SEGCP initially targeted migrant camps for health education outreach. But as the only Latino-run agency in the area, the project quickly expanded beyond social services to challenge local officials on matters including migrant education.
and racial profiling by the local sheriff’s deputies. For years the area’s first major Latino organization received hate mail from locals unconvinced by the public consensus that Latinos were good for the rural economy.\textsuperscript{182}

Attuned to the risks of challenging the status quo, the vast majority of Mexican and Mexican American workers used antipoverty programs primarily for basic subsistence needs, if at all, rather than as springboards for political empowerment. Coming of age as migrants and immigrants a half-generation later than their counterparts elsewhere who were active in the 1970s, these workers missed the heyday of such programs’ influence in the lives of minority communities—an influence that had been always been more limited in the rural South. As a whole, the liberal ideologies of the civil rights era and the Great Society did not have much opportunity to shape the lives, politics, and expectations of Mexican and Mexican American migrant workers in Georgia.

\textit{Pro-God, Pro-business, Pro-Mexican}

Yet if Georgia’s Mexicano migrant workers arrived a bit late for the liberal ascendance of the 1960s and 1970s, they came just in time for the conservative resurgence of the 1980s. By that decade, white people in the rural South were actively rebuilding their worldviews after the civil rights movement discredited their previous conservative ideology, white supremacy.\textsuperscript{183} The arrival of Mexicans and Mexican Americans at this moment provided local whites with an ideal building block for their celebration of color-blind conservatism, individual self-help, and Christian values. Soon, a pro-immigrant, pro-“Hispanic” stance became an integral part of the area’s new conservative belief system.

The moral power of evangelical Protestantism increasingly aligned itself with the economic power of large business during this period, and southern Georgia was no exception.\textsuperscript{184} Growers and churches had separate motivations to prevent a populist backlash against Mexicano and other Latino workers, but those motivations were grounded in a common ideological sensibility. Though neither group alone had the power to shape public discourse, the two worked on parallel tracks to achieve a common goal: for more than three decades after the arrival of the immigrants, no movement opposing their presence took root in rural southern Georgia.

More so than their counterparts in Florida or California, Georgia’s fruit and vegetable farmers had personal contact with their labor force on a regular basis. Though southern Georgia’s farms expanded in size over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the vast majority were still owned by local individuals

\textsuperscript{150}  \textit{Pro-immigrant Conservatism in Rural Georgia}
and families through the 1990s. Comparatively, they remained small. In 1987, most of the harvested crop land in Georgia was in farms of 500 acres or less, while in Florida most was in farms of 2,000 acres or more. Growers in southern Georgia still generally lived on or near the farm property and were intimately involved in its daily operations. They were acutely aware of their increasing dependence on Mexicano labor. And they were powerful voices in local communities, affecting local politics, culture, and institutions, including law enforcement.

Growers’ choices about how to relate to their Mexicano workers thus encompassed multiple considerations. They sought to maximize profit by spending as little money as possible on labor. They sought to retain access to Mexicano workers by actively promoting positive images of them in the community and discouraging police harassment. And for some farmers, this relationship held an additional possibility. For them, being good Christians and good people meant that obviously poor employees should also be objects of charity and goodwill across boundaries of race and nation. The terms of this imagining had evolved from previous forms of paternalism in southern agricultural labor relations.

Certainly, farmers’ first priority was to earn a profit. Increasingly squeezed by competition from cheap imported fruits and vegetables, they turned to high-value specialty crops like Vidalia onions but needed reliable, seasonal, and inexpensive labor to make their investment worthwhile. As such, they assiduously resisted each round of implemented or proposed U.S. Labor Department regulations that would require them to provide toilets, water, hand-washing facilities, or child care to workers, referring to such measures as “just another government regulation that . . . adds to the cost.” Even more odious to farmers were proposals to make it easier for farmworkers to sue them or to hold growers accountable for the labor violations of their crew leaders. To justify their opposition to regulation of their fields, powerful growers publicly praised Mexican laborers for their apparent willingness to work hard under unfavorable conditions. They made it known to local officials that their economy depended on Mexicanos’ willingness to work in the area, curtailing police harassment in some times and places.

For some growers, however, Mexicano laborers were not just productivity machines whose praises needed to be sung in public. In a local culture with strong Evangelical influence, Mexicano workers comprised so many souls who could be saved and poor people who could be uplifted. In this way, growers could conceive of Mexicano workers as physically and spiritually needy members of the human family who could be grateful recipients of charity and
love rather than low-wage laborers with interests opposed to those of their bosses. This attitude grew in part from the newly ubiquitous idea in Christian circles that service, not domination, should guide missionary work now that colonialism was no longer defensible. After four Mexican workers in Fort Valley died in an auto accident in 1994, for example, Jeff Wainright, the owner of the orchard where the deceased migrants worked, explained why he was paying for the funeral and expenses to transport the bodies back to Mexico. “I cared about them,” he said. “And not just as employees.” There is no reason to doubt Wainright’s sincerity; for him, Mexican workers were “not just” employees who enhanced his bottom line. They were also human beings who he believed could connect with him emotionally across barriers of race, nation, and power.

White church leaders, too, sought to transcend boundaries in their relationships with migrant workers. Most of the white churchgoers who became active in migrant ministry were middle-class professionals or business owners, not farmers, and so had fewer competing prerogatives in their work with migrants. Yet like farmers, they had to mind their own reputations in small-town life; church leaders showed little appetite for conflict. They did, however, show a voracious appetite for charity work with Mexican migrants. One Catholic Church official assessing the parish in Vidalia mused in 1985, “One wonders if the interest in migrants were as much as in the negro and white natives, if evangelization among blacks and white natives would not be significantly higher.”

But for both Catholic and Protestant church leaders, Mexicano migrants offered an attraction that black and white Americans could not. White Christian southerners’ belief in the universalism of humanity demanded “bridge building” and reconciliation across racial and national lines, particularly in the wake of segregation. They trusted that individual acts of racial reconciliation and Christian love, rather than structural changes, would help redeem black communities from poverty and “dysfunction.” Yet white churchgoers in the post–civil rights era found that charitable work with African Americans was fraught with pitfalls. Their worldviews were shaped by a post-1960s conservatism that emphasized the individual not only in spiritual matters but also in matters of political and economic justice. Rural white Evangelicals thus recoiled against black Protestants’ insistence that reconciliation required structural change, antidiscrimination legislation, and a robust welfare state. And besides, the simple act of venturing into black parts of town could provoke fear in even the most well-intentioned middle-class white churchgoers.
With Mexicanos, in contrast, white church leaders could fulfill their moral ambitions to forge personal charitable relationships across racial boundaries without encountering objectionable political ideologies or menacing black neighborhoods. Charity with Mexicano migrants did not bear the taint of longtime racial struggles. Rather, it inspired the same idealism, adventurousness, and volunteers as foreign mission work. For Mary Ann Thurman, work with Mexican men was “the fulfillment of a childhood dream, to be a missionary.” Baptists Sonny and Ruth Bridges did not notice Moultrie’s Mexican migrants until they returned from a mission trip to Honduras in 1996. Sonny bought two Spanish dictionaries and used them to start teaching himself Spanish; on the weekends, he would hang out in the local Walmart to practice with the Spanish-speaking customers. Over the coming years, Sonny and Ruth Bridges would take more than twenty missionary trips to Mexico and Central America while also throwing themselves into Baptist migrant ministry efforts in Moultrie. “I just enjoy being involved in a different culture,” Sonny Bridges explained.

Nearly all Mexicanos were Catholic on arrival in Georgia, but most were nonetheless reluctant to attend Catholic churches there in the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s, however, Mexican men who were single or migrating without families began filling the pews of Catholic churches. The Thurmans noticed the newcomers at St. Juliana Catholic Church in Fort Valley and soon organized dozens of volunteers to teach English, provide refreshments, donate clothes, and, in one case, offer free weekly free haircuts to the men. The Thurmans were distressed to learn that some workers were so hungry that they ate the chrysanthemums near the orchard where they worked. So the couple engaged local Protestant churches, Kiwanis clubs, and stores to start a food bank for the migrant workers. Soon Mary Ann Thurman found herself driving Mexican young men from migrant labor camps to church each Sunday, unable to understand the Spanish-language sounds that filled her car.

Protestant denominations, particularly Baptists, seized the opportunity to extend the mission work they had conducted for decades in Latin America. Baptist schoolteacher Carolyn Flowers came to migrant ministry after a series of personal encounters with Mexican migrants near Tifton. Around 1983, Flowers saw a young Mexican woman talking on a public telephone, distraught that her husband had been jailed. Flowers helped the woman place her call and recounted the incident to her missionary women’s group, which began paying visits to migrant camps. One day shortly thereafter, a truck of Mexican migrant workers drove past Flowers, and she flashed on
the biblical instruction to entertain strangers because they might be angels in disguise. For Flowers, outreach to Mexicans in migrant labor camps was an ideal opportunity to put her devout Christian beliefs into action. One Baptist minister in Oglethorpe wanted to construct a cinderblock church near the migrant camps since "his congregation is not in favor of welcoming Mexican-Americans into their own building," but many more churches took the opposite tack, encouraging contact between white and Mexican parishioners. Growers Wendell and Janis Roberson's Victory Tabernacle Church of God, for example, offered Spanish classes for English-speaking parishioners, arranged simultaneous translation of worship services, and conducted fundraisers to help finance migrants' transportation to the main church.

Concerned white church leaders who sought out Mexicano migrants all had to start their efforts at the same place: with local growers. Most migrant workers still lived in housing provided by growers or crew leaders, and there could be no access to migrants without their employers' consent. Protestant churches had the advantage that many growers, such as the Robersons, sat in their own pews on Sundays. Sonny and Ruth Bridges received permission from Kent Hamilton to visit workers on his produce farm near Moultrie. Catholics, a sometimes-suspect minority in these parts, could have a more difficult time. Sister Patricia Brown was at first rebuffed by some farmers who she surmised were "wary of any outsiders who might criticize the work conditions, housing or wages." Still, other farmers were "very cooperative" in pointing out their camps to Brown and introducing her to crew leaders.

If growers initially feared that church volunteers would decry their labor practices, their qualms were fast allayed. In the public sphere, farmers' discourses and church leaders' were of a piece—and occasionally were coordinated. Rather than criticize farm labor conditions, church volunteers became trusted local voices insisting that Mexicano migrant workers were good people whose values mirrored those of local communities. White church leaders in rural Georgia self-consciously pursued a role as mediators between Mexicano migrant workers, growers, and would-be instigators of anti-immigrant backlash. Ruth Bridges drew on her missionary experiences to admonish skeptics, "If you would go to their country you would understand why they're here. You would understand that they come here to work and they send most of their money home." One hundred miles north in Fort Valley in 1988, Mary Ann Thurman met privately with peach grower Duke Lane and pushed him, gently, to improve migrants' housing conditions. "I want to help you, too," she offered in a follow-up letter. "As you must know, many people are very opposed to the migrants being in our area. . . . I think that if the people in
this community share in helping the Mexicans, it will help them to become more tolerant." Church leaders like Ruth Bridges and Mary Ann Thurman worked self-consciously and deliberately to prevent private anti-immigrant grumblings from rising to the level of prominent public discourse.

They also indirectly protected growers from criticism by providing for the basic needs of migrants who otherwise did not earn enough to subsist. Mary Ann Thurman openly acknowledged the inadequacy of migrants’ pay in her appeals to fellow church people for funds. The appeals naturalized this shortfall, rather than questioning it. “At the present, the Mexicans are thinning the young peaches,” Thurman wrote in April 1991. “We expect another lull in the work between the thinning and the picking of the peaches. Supplementary food will probably be needed then, too.” Church volunteers and officials thus described Mexican workers as charity cases, both eliding the basic fact that the workers worked and carefully avoiding any implication that farmers might bear some responsibility for their poverty. Whatever church volunteers’ personal views, their public actions strategically touted the migrant cause in ways that accepted the local status quo.

Given the ubiquitous influence of churches in rural Georgia, charity projects directed at Mexican migrants quickly spread to other quarters. In 1990, a Spanish teacher at the Westfield Christian private school in Perry...
brought high school students to visit with Mexican migrant kids at a local camp and sponsored an Easter egg hunt and lunch for them. Several of the high school students had already been going to the camp regularly to serve as Big Brothers and Big Sisters to the migrant kids (fig. 18). The Westfield School had been founded in 1969, a year that saw a boom in new Christian private schools as the Supreme Court and Internal Revenue Service moved to deny tax-exempt status to private schools explicitly defined as whites only. In a county that was nearly half black, this school founded to avoid integration eagerly pursued charity toward the Mexicans who comprised just 1 percent of the local population. What the Mexican poor offered that the black poor could not was an experience that highlighted international exchange rather than the legacy of segregation.

*Envisioning Pro-immigrant Conservatism*

The actions and attitudes of white growers and middle-class Christians in rural Georgia opened a new phase of paternalism in the history of southern labor and race relations. Historically, paternalism—as practiced under the slavery or sharecropping systems—was the opposite of free-market capitalism. Growers would (at least theoretically) provide for the basic needs of “their” workers in exchange for labor. Little, if any, money changed hands between the parties, denying workers the ability to sell their labor or cotton to the highest bidder. Paternalism could also be political, as when white progressives claimed themselves to be adequate advocates for blacks’ “uplift” but created no space for blacks to forge their own political movements on their own terms. Such paternalism was often associated with the efforts of religious, particularly Protestant, denominations.

Now the paternalistic expressions of southern Georgia’s white leaders offered Christian, universalistic, and humanistic responses to post-1960s concerns about local and global inequality. Planters were not economically paternalistic, as they preferred not to be responsible for workers’ housing and food if they could avoid it. Rather, they and their church-based allies espoused a belief that although Mexicans were poor because Mexico was backward, their poverty demanded a loving response from good Christians. Mexicans were assuredly human beings just like white growers and church leaders, equal in the eyes of God. Christians should thus respond to their poverty by creating bonds of intimacy and charity. Absent from this view was an acknowledgment of the vast gulf in power between migrants and their white patrons. While earlier white progressives believed that their way of life was superior to that of...
blacks and immigrants, the post-1960s version insisted on the parties’ equality against all evidence of a profound power imbalance.  

Among growers, Tifton’s Janis Roberson best exemplifies this attitude toward the Mexican men who worked for her and her husband, Wendell, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Roberson recalled that the first Mexicans and Mexican Americans to plant, cultivate, and harvest greens on her farm arrived in the mid-1980s. In 1989, she and her husband were among the first farmers in the area to contract Mexican workers under the H2A agricultural guest worker program. The program brought foreign workers to labor in the fields of the United States on contracts that limited their stays and effectively tied them down to one employer. While employers were technically required to provide workers with a minimum wage and meet certain standards for their housing, they had the ability not only to fire men who called for enforcement of the contract but also to jeopardize their ability to remain in the United States altogether. “We never had any trouble with any of them,” Roberson remembered. “If any of them caused any trouble, we would just ask them to leave.” Structurally, then, the Robersons held an enormous amount of power over their workers.

Yet Janis Roberson chose to perceive her relationship to the workers as more intimate and charitable than economic. She would greet returning workers with a hug as they disembarked from their buses (fig. 19). “And whenever they got off the bus, they’d become my children.” In an interview, Roberson consistently referred to the farmworkers as “the children” or “the kids.” She made a point of celebrating each worker’s birthday—or, at least, “the birthday they told us they had” on their immigration documents. Hearing stories of the purchases workers made back in Mexico using their wages from Georgia, Roberson came to believe that her employment of Mexican workers was akin to an act of benevolence. “We felt good about it,” she explained, “that we were helping.” As evidence that the feeling was mutual, Roberson warmly recalled the sight of H2A workers vying to be pallbearers at Wendell’s funeral and filling the church beyond capacity for his memorial service. Fundamentalist Christians, the Robersons also facilitated workers’ attendance at Victory Tabernacle Church of God by donating a bus to the church for the purpose of transporting Mexican workers to worship services.

There is indeed some evidence that Roberson might have afforded workers more amenities than other farmers in the area. When other growers complained about new requirements for drinking water, toilets, and hand-washing facilities in 1987, Roberson told a reporter that she already provided
those things for her workers and had no problem with the new regulations. “These are human beings,” she explained. “We’re not going to treat them like animals.”

Roberson prided herself on having more than just a financial interest in the Mexican immigrant workers who made her farm profitable.

What explains the gap between Roberson’s worldview and that of larger-scale growers in nearby Florida? For white growers and church leaders as for migrant workers in southern Georgia, photo albums can provide a window into a worldview unlikely to be recorded in a written journal. White people who interacted with Mexicans as employees or charity cases extensively documented these relationships with cameras. In so doing, they joined a global trend of the late twentieth century. Because it could supposedly be understood across barriers of language and nation, photography promoted the idea, rooted in liberal humanism, that those societal differences did not matter because all people belonged to the same human family.

Many of Roberson’s photos, such as those of her greeting migrant workers with a hug, depict togetherness across divides of race and nation. For example, one album page is dedicated to a quinceañera that took place on the farm.
In three photos on the page, Wendell Roberson is featured alongside young Mexican women in taffeta dresses and three white children, presumably Roberson’s grandkids. The resultant image echoes a multigenerational family photo, in this case interspersing the grower’s generations with the workers’ (fig. 20). Other album pages include photographs of the Robersons and their workers enjoying social and recreational events together: Christmas and birthday parties, hunting and fishing trips, and a July 4 barbecue.
But in other ways, the albums surely reminded Roberson that Mexican migrant workers were just that to her—workers. The bulk of the three albums’ pages were filled with simple posed portraits of two to three men at a time (figs. 21 and 22). The purpose of the photographic records, Roberson explained, was to help her learn the men’s names and remember them from one year to the next.230 Roberson created a total of sixty-three pages of labeled worker portraits within three photo albums dedicated to documenting the Mexican workers on her farm. In the photos, the men stare at the camera; while a few smile, the vast majority do not. They appear to have dressed for
the occasion: most are wearing impeccably clean shirts, some button-down, that do not bear dirt, sweat, or other evidence of farm labor. Under each photograph, a typed label notes each man’s name as well as his internal control number for the Robersons’ payroll system. The men were human beings, as Roberson liked to emphasize. But they were also employees, identified by number for the purposes of labor management. The contradiction irked at least some of the men. Roberson recalled that some workers would run away and try to avoid being snapped. She believed they wanted to test her memory of their names. Another possibility, perhaps more likely, is that H2A guest


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workers, unlike their family migrant counterparts, did not view Georgia farm labor in emotional terms. The request to pose for these photos came from a boss, not a wife or brother.\textsuperscript{232} Having been hired to harvest vegetables, not pose for photographs, these men may have resisted Roberson’s attempts to literally capture the employer–employee relationship and reconfigure it as somehow familial.

Like local growers, white church volunteers developed intimate emotions about the Mexicano migrant workers they got to know. Mary Ann Thurman did keep a written testimony of her experiences working with Mexican migrants, in which she wrote of how “helping” them also helped her recover from the trauma of her son’s recent death in a car accident. One night shortly after she began teaching English classes, “I woke up realizing that I had been praying in my sleep. It was a prayer of Thanksgiving for these men and boys that the Lord had sent to me…. It was [as] if after losing one son, the Lord had given me 100 more to love.”\textsuperscript{233} Though both Thurman and Janis Roberson used metaphors of family to discuss their relationships with Mexican workers, church leaders were far less compromised than growers in their ability to develop mutually satisfying relationships with migrants. While farmers’ economic ambitions (maximizing profit) conflicted directly with workers’ economic ambitions (maximizing wages), church leaders’ moral ambition to serve God and the needy was largely compatible with Mexicans’ desire for a life away from the farms, connections in local communities, and a sense of themselves as striving, upwardly mobile workers.\textsuperscript{234}

The photos taken by Mary Ann and Howdy Thurman and by Ruth and Sonny Bridges emphasized the crossing of boundaries and the integration of Mexican migrant workers into white families and church communities. Rather than liberal realist images of poverty and desperation in the tradition of \textit{Harvest of Shame}, they showed the values of Christian universalism and liberal humanism in action. For example, a photo of an English class at St. Juliana in Fort Valley depicted a casual camaraderie among whites and Mexicans sitting around a table like any group of peers (fig. 23). Ruth Bridges invited a camp full of Mexican migrant workers to a few of her birthday parties in the late 1990s and captured the moments on film (fig. 24). Both couples preserved photographs of migrant workers celebrating Christmas in their homes (fig. 25). Sonny Bridges enjoyed teaching Mexican men to make ice cream and also enjoyed looking back at photos of the lessons (fig. 26). In all, the church volunteers’ photographs came to serve as visual proof that, in Sonny’s words, “they want our friendship . . . they’re human beings just like I am.”\textsuperscript{235}
Figure 23  English class at St. Juliana Catholic Church, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. 1988. Courtesy of Mary Ann and Howdy Thurman, Fort Valley.

Figure 24  Ruth and Sonny Bridges invited Mexican workers to Ruth's birthday party in the early 2000s. Courtesy of Ruth and Sonny Bridges, Moultrie, Georgia.
Figure 25  Mary Ann Thurman in her home with migrant workers at Christmas, 1988. Courtesy of Mary Ann and Howdy Thurman, Fort Valley, Georgia.

Figure 26  Sonny Bridges teaching a Mexican agricultural worker how to make ice cream. Courtesy of Ruth and Sonny Bridges, Moultrie, Georgia.
Mexicans’ Views of White Employers and Church Volunteers

Examined closely, church leaders’ photos can also reveal something else: that Mexicano migrant workers reciprocated church leaders’ interest in personal relationships, if not in exactly the ways that church leaders hoped. Mexican migrant workers look far more at ease in the photos by Sonny and Ruth Bridges and those by the Thurmans than in Roberson’s. One man pictured at Ruth Bridges’s birthday party raised his pointer finger in the back of the group, grinning as he called attention to himself (see fig. 24). In a photograph from around 1988, a migrant family prepared themselves for the Thurmans to take their picture (fig. 27). They posed in the style of U.S. middle-class family portraits: groomed for the occasion and gathered together to smile directly at the camera. Journalists never captured them this way, and the family likely appreciated the respect that the Thurmans’ approach conveyed.

Most Mexicano migrant workers did not concern themselves with the underlying ideologies of pro-immigrant conservatism. Rather, they understood that white people had more power than they did. Relationships with white volunteers gave Mexicano workers social connections in otherwise alienating places. Middle-class white volunteers in church vans could negotiate with growers to whisk migrants away from isolated farms to English

Figure 27 Mexican migrant family, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. 1988. Courtesy of Mary Ann and Howdy Thurman, Fort Valley.
classes, field trips, and worship services, and they could intervene in sticky situations with local authorities. After a Baptist-sponsored event to introduce Mexicanos to white community members in Douglas, Anselma Gómez recalled that “people didn’t look at me so distrustfully. It was a change.” Mexicanos also knew that growers were among the most powerful men in rural Georgia—successful and respected people whose opinions mattered. White growers and church volunteers sought relationships with Mexicanos to reaffirm their beliefs that borders of race and nation did not matter; Mexicanos sought relationships with these white people because they knew that they did. The disconnect could occasionally lead to disappointment, as when Mary Ann Thurman was “just heartbroken” that a particular migrant family left town without saying goodbye. But mostly the different worldviews underlying the mutually pleasing activities were never spoken. Albeit for their own reasons, Mexicanos’ interest in their white admirers was real.

For the majority of workers who did not have their own transportation, a church service, a party at the home of Sonny and Ruth Bridges, or English class at St. Juliana provided a space for something that migrant camps and work sites did not: a spiritual life—a communal life—a life away from the farm and as something other than a worker. Mexicans flocked to the Thurmans’ English classes not only to improve their skills but also to actively claim their own full humanity in a space over which they had more control. In migrant camps, “they had rooms, but no meeting place,” explained Mary Ann Thurman. “So, church became their meeting place.” After English class, the men could socialize with cookies, donuts, coffee, and Kool-Aid in hand. Between forty and ninety men attended each class. One scholar has asserted that “the defense and recovery of community may be the most unrelenting of all challenges faced by poor and marginalized peoples around the world.” In white churches, Mexicano workers found a space outside the direct control of farmers and crew leaders where they could gather at least partly on their own terms.

While the reactions of migrants to the outreach of Carolyn Flowers and Ruth and Sonny Bridges must be interpreted from those volunteers’ interviews and photos, the Thurmans preserved written evidence of migrants’ interest in them—letters that migrant workers had sent them from Texas, Florida, and Mexico. The letters convey emotions of love, respect, and gratitude for the Thurmans and in some cases share intimate details of family life. Margarita, who did not sign her last name, wrote the Thurmans in Spanish from Malinalco, State of Mexico, in December 1988. In her letter, she echoed the familial metaphors that white church volunteers favored. “My dear family,”
she wrote, “I miss you and remember you so much.” Margarita confided that she was worried about her husband as she had not heard from him and was afraid he did not understand that her delay in returning to Georgia was under doctor’s orders due to her pregnancy. If the Thurmans saw Mario around, could they communicate the message? Jesús and María sent a postcard from Guadalajara, saying, “The very nice treatment you gave us has remained in our memories.”245 Eujenio Moreno wrote from McAlpin, Florida, in 1990, asking Howdy and Mary Ann to send him a Spanish-language Bible “or something with the word of God to read” since there was no Spanish mass in his current location.246 Bernice Gallegos, daughter in a migrant family, wrote Mary Ann from Nixon, Texas, that same year. “We always remember everybody. I hope we can see you again one day.”247 Long gone from Georgia, with no more coffee to drink or donuts to eat, Gallegos and her family affirmed the emotional bond they felt with the Thurmans.

Mexicano migrant families who worked directly with growers or contracted work for others also affirmed personal bonds with their employers. They did this not just for growers’ benefit but also for their own. For example, the Gómezes placed a framed photograph above their television depicting grower Roscoe Meeks, to whom they brought labor crews for more than a decade (fig. 28). “The man in this picture, he was my boss,” Anselma Gómez

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Figure 28. Funeral program of former employer Roscoe Meeks, 2006, which sat framed on the television in the Gómez household in 2008. Courtesy of Anselma and José Gómez, Nicholls, Georgia.
explained in 2008. “This man saw us as people, like a part of himself.”248 The Marín family in the Vidalía area took several photographs of Angelina Marín, one of the first Vidalía-area Mexicanos to leave the fields for a factory, with her bosses from that factory (fig. 29). And the Avalos family preserved a photographic Christmas card sent to them by longtime boss Hank Dodson (fig. 30). “He was a good boss,” recalled Andrea Avalos. “He thought well of us.”249 In their oral narratives, both Avalos and Gómez explained that beloved employers pictured in their photos had shown them respect and kindness. Those sentiments acquired their meaning in the power imbalance between migrants and growers: the growers had treated Mexicano migrants well even though their superior power meant they did not have to. Workers not only reciprocated the friendship directly to farmers; they preserved these images in their personal albums, evoking the men who had respected them as people, not just low-wage workers.

Ultimately, those Mexicans and Mexican Americans who settled in southern Georgia drew on the approval of white people to reinforce the narratives of perseverance and independence that had brought them there in the first place. “I’ve told my story a hundred times” to Georgians, said former migrant worker Israel Cortez in an interview. “This country opened its arms to my family, and we’re all proud.” When his family gathers, Cortez told an inter-
viewer, they talk about “the things we accomplished in this country that we could not have accomplished if we’d stayed in Mexico.” The early years were hard: “We had people call us bad names, people throw us out of houses, people not giving us work, people telling us to leave.” But ultimately those things were not the most important part of the family story. “We don’t dwell on those things,” Cortez explained. “We just keep going forward…. We have progressed.” Javier González also described growing up in a migrant family as “difficult,” yet insisted, “It wasn’t a typical American childhood but it was great because I learned a lot of valuable lessons. I have a six-year-old son now that is never going to experience cold or wet, or smelly, and any of that.” Photo albums show that the first generation of Mexican migrant families told themselves such stories not only in hindsight but also during their early years of agricultural labor in Georgia.

Yet their recollections of poverty and discrimination show that even the most successful Mexicanos in southern Georgia were under no illusion that whites’ approval had alleviated the potency of race and difference there. “Whites have always treated me well,” insisted former migrant worker Petra
Soto. Still, Soto knew she was not one of them. “I have done my best not to get too involved with the people here,” she explained. “Because you know where you will be accepted, and where you won’t be.”

For Israel Cortez, fitting in in southern Georgia was a constant and Herculean effort. “I have made some drastic changes through the years,” including learning English and converting to Protestantism, he explained. “I have adapted myself, assimilated myself to the system and the culture. I have a Georgia accent. I have tried . . . to fit in.”

Soto, González, Cortez; the Avalos, Marin, and Gómez families; the Aguilar brothers; the workers who wrote to the Thurmans and smiled for Sonny and Ruth Bridges’s photos; and other Mexicano compatriots were proud of their accomplishments in Georgia and grateful to the white growers and volunteers who had given them opportunities to work, recreate, and pray. Their own pride in independence, family togetherness, and self-sufficiency perfectly mirrored white conservatives’ post–civil rights emphasis on those traits. But Mexicanos could not reflect back their white admirers’ underlying pro-immigrant conservatism: that both Jesus and the civil rights movement had erased the salience of racial, national, and economic barriers, making all people one and the same.

Nonetheless, the contingencies of the migrant experience in Georgia set migrant workers there apart from their compatriots in California, Florida, the Northwest, the Midwest, and the few unionized Latino workplaces in nearby North Carolina. In those places, Mexicanos’ pride in lives dedicated to farm labor made them receptive to the critical analyses of labor organizers, Chicano movement veterans, and immigrants with histories of resistance in Haiti, Central America, and the indigenous communities of southern Mexico. In Florida, growers with huge farms delegated all labor management to unscrupulous and violent crew leaders, while in Georgia they retained more intimate control themselves. Georgia’s church volunteers and other middle-class white people found in Mexicano migrants seemingly perfect recipients of charity who could reinforce their Christian commitment to serving the poor across lines of race and nation without threatening their conservative positions on welfare and color-blindness. And in church vans, pews, social halls, and volunteers’ living rooms, migrants found places to build valuable social relationships, pray, recreate, and forge community—but not organize.

And so, southern Georgia in the 1970s through 1990s was a place neither of anti-immigrant violence and backlash nor of pro-immigrant or pro-labor activism. White people there once suspiciously regarded migrants as “strange animals,” but through time they forged a pro-immigrant conservative consensus that spared Mexicanos the worst fates of their compatriots elsewhere.
Rather than labor organizers, Mexican and Mexican American migrant workers met church volunteers who praised their values, alleviated their hunger, and offered them spaces to re-create themselves and each other away from growers and crew leaders. In these spaces, migrant workers also found affirmation for their inclinations to narrate their stories as tales of self-help and progress rather than poverty and discrimination. One scholar has observed that “Mexican Americans adapted their lives to the many identities and ideologies in the United States.” Mexicanos did not adopt rural Georgia’s conservative ideologies and identities wholesale, but adapt to them they did.

“Bullying Tactics”: Georgians versus Federal Immigration Enforcement

The locally rooted accommodation between Mexicanos and area white and black communities ensured that as other parts of the country turned to anti-immigrant politics in the 1990s, southern Georgia continued to accommodate a conservative pro-immigrant sensibility. White power holders lauded Mexicans’ role in local economies and communities while middle-class African Americans used them as evidence of their own social mobility. As Republican-led anti-immigrant movements pushed President Bill Clinton to vastly increase enforcement efforts in the 1990s, conservatives in rural southern Georgia resisted immigration enforcement as an unwanted intrusion of federal outsiders. Like their counterparts everywhere, southern Georgia’s farmers openly resented federal immigration raids in their fields; one Echols County man reportedly claimed that the INS had violated his farm’s airspace by flying its helicopters overhead. But the South’s rural agricultural areas were unique in an important way: thanks to the pro-immigrant conservative consensus, prominent white and black leaders, including politicians, openly supported farmers’ positions with little apparent fear of a populist anti-immigrant backlash.

As during the bracero years, a major goal of immigration enforcement in the 1990s was to push farmers into government-sanctioned temporary migration programs, in this case the H2A farmworker visa program. The IRCA reforms of 1986 had established fines for employers who hired undocumented workers, and a few Georgia growers, including the Robersons, petitioned for H2A workers shortly thereafter. But like their counterparts in Arkansas fifty years before, southern Georgia’s growers found that government-managed migration created additional hassles and expenses. They also had little incentive to abandon their now-routine practice of hiring undocumented immi-
grants. While the INS had sporadically raided Georgia’s fields since the 1970s, officials often told farmers exactly where and when to expect enforcement actions. Diana Mendieta remembered growers instructing her father Bernardo “Slim” Avalos to keep undocumented crew members out of the fields on those days.259

That changed in the late 1990s when a new southern INS district director began fighting for resources to step up enforcement and warned the region’s farmers and politicians that action in Georgia’s fields was imminent. Growers, he advised, should pursue legal H2A workers rather than continue to rely on undocumented farm laborers.260 But when growers looked into the process, what they saw was “the epitome of a bureaucratic nightmare” that failed to offer the benefits they had derived from migrant labor in the first place: flexibility and rock-bottom labor costs.261

Turning to their congressional representatives for help, growers found support not only among their fellow white Republicans or conservative Democrats but also in the offices of liberal black Democrats. In 1997, Representative Sanford Bishop Jr. and civil rights hero Representative John Lewis worked with Republican representative Saxby Chambliss to ease the path for Georgia’s growers to import guest workers with minimal regulations and oversight.262 In lobbying on growers’ behalf, Bishop directly undermined the black farmworkers in his vast agricultural district, yet nowhere in his written communications did he mention the effects that H2A contracting would have on them.263 Powerless and ever smaller in number, Georgia’s black farmworkers were still invisible to middle-class African Americans and other potential advocates. Their public silence contributed to southern Georgia’s consensus that Mexican immigrants were good for business and communities while strict federal immigration policies and enforcement were unwelcome intrusions.

The local-versus-federal struggle over immigration reached its apex in 1998. Early that year, Vidalia growers did petition for H2A workers, but their application was rejected because they did not promise to pay the local prevailing wage, demonstrate a good-faith attempt to employ domestic workers, or submit an adequate housing plan. Rather than reapply for guest workers, Vidalia farmers decided to rely again on undocumented laborers that year.264 The INS struck back, launching the raid “Operation Southern Denial,” on May 13, 1998, in Toombs and Tattnall counties. Mexican consul Teodoro Maus quietly gave the raid his go-ahead because he believed the H2A program was a better deal for workers and afforded his own government more leverage to protect its citizens abroad—leverage it had lost since the decline
of the bracero program. Some local police chiefs offered logistical support to the INS, but others said they were too “busy”—or, more likely, too sympathetic to labor-hungry growers—to help. By design, the raid’s effect was more psychological than practical: it resulted in the detention of just twenty-one workers, though the overall estimated Vidalia harvest workforce was 3,500–5,000. But many workers, legal or not, were reluctant to come to work in the days that followed, angering farmers who feared their highly valuable Vidalia onions would rot in the fields.

White Republicans defended farmers’ interests apparently without fear of an anti-immigrant constituent backlash. Senator Paul Coverdell chastised the INS for its “indiscriminate and inappropriate use of extreme enforcement tactics against Vidalia area onion growers . . . [interfering with] honest farmers who are simply trying to get their products from the field to the marketplace” while Chambliss referred to INS “bullying tactics.” Coverdell strong-armed the local INS into suspending enforcement during the picking season, a move some called a “temporary amnesty.” Though the truce stipulated that farmers must seek H2A visas the following year, they once again deemed them too expensive. As the struggle between growers and the INS continued through the 1990s and early 2000s, the battle lines remained clear: southern Georgia’s white political leaders, with the acquiescence of their black counterparts, wanted the Mexicans to stay with or without the federal government’s blessing.

Pro-immigrant Conservatism under Pressure

Yet while rural politicians displayed a united front of pro-immigrant conservatism in 1998, the seeds of Georgia’s later turn to statewide anti-immigrant politics were beginning to take root hundreds of miles away from the onion fields. In 1995, home owners in the majority-white Atlanta suburb of Smyrna mounted a small anti-immigration letter-writing campaign. One man, identifying himself as a “property owner” in his letter to Georgia’s governor, protested that “the growing tidal wave of illegal immigration threatens to drain our economy dry.” An ex-Californian wrote that the Los Angeles suburb where he was raised “has been invaded by people from Mexico and all points south. . . . Can you imagine Smyrna looking like Mexico City? Well, drive done [sic] parts of Buford Highway and you will see it starting to happen.” Like the man distressed by the sight of Buford Highway, this campaign was an import from suburban California, where voters overwhelmingly approved a statewide anti-immigrant initiative, Proposition 187, the year before.
allegations of an immigrant “invasion” spread outward from the West, southern Georgia’s pro-immigrant conservative consensus came under pressure from all sides. The state’s coming legislative battle over immigration would pit suburban Republicans against rural pro-immigrant conservatives while inspiring rural Mexican American and Latino youths to break with their parents’ strategic political silence.

Though there is little evidence of organized anti-immigrant politics in southern Georgia during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, by the end of that decade those who did not subscribe to the pro-immigrant bent of local conservatism began to make their views known publicly. In 1997, Omega police officers harassed attendees at the hugely popular La Fiesta del Pueblo, and the following year its city council wavered on permitting the event again. This agricultural community needed Mexican workers in the fields but quickly tired of seeing them in central public spaces. Yet if La Fiesta del Pueblo was unwelcome in Omega, it did not have to look far for a new home; in 1999 it took its place downtown in nearby Tifton, drawing support from local politicians as well as thousands of fiesta-goers. Embarrassed by the negative publicity and missing the economic boon of the fiesta, Omega officials called the event’s organizer and asked her to return the fiesta to Omega. She declined.

Over the following five years, Mexican guest workers and Mexican American youths violated the unspoken terms of rural Georgia’s pro-immigrant conservatism by publicly challenging local power holders. These efforts relied on U.S. federally funded antipoverty agencies—a mirror image of the bracero era when Mexican government support was pivotal for emigrants and even some Mexican American workers in the U.S. South. Throughout the early 2000s, H2A workers with the help of the federally funded Georgia Legal Services Program repeatedly sued local growers and almost always won their suits. Blas Pozos Mora and Armando Rosales Pozos, pictured at the bottom of Janis Roberson’s album page, “2nd Busload to Leave, June 15, 1995” (see fig. 21), joined with other H2A workers and legal aid lawyers to sue Roberson in 2004 for violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act and again in 2010 for retaliating against the workers who had pursued the original suit. For Roberson, the lawsuits felt “like somebody just stuck you in the heart. . . . We just thought we were all one big happy family,” she said sadly in a 2010 interview. After the lawsuits began, she said, “We quit doing a lot of things,” like throwing birthday parties for workers. These workers challenged a power structure whose very existence Roberson had once denied.

Two years later and a hundred miles away in the Vidalia area, Mexican American youths, joined by the children of Central American immigrants, of-
fended pro-immigrant conservatives in a different arena. Even after the area’s Toombs High School had integrated, black and white seniors there continued to hold separate proms. In 2004, Latina girls were allowed to buy tickets to the white prom, but a white girl buying a ticket for her Latino boyfriend was told that he could not attend. Distressed, the students turned to Andrea Hinojosa, the Tejana former migrant worker who had formed southern Georgia’s answer to a Latino community-based organization, the Southeast Georgia Communities Project. With Hinojosa’s help, the students set about planning a third, “Latino,” prom, which welcomed all students.279 Asked about the segregated proms, African American school principal Ralph Hardy said that while one prom for all students would be preferable, “I don’t think that tradition right now, and history, would allow that to happen. . . I think I’m going to leave it alone.”280 Television cameras and journalists from around the world arrived to Toombs County to cover the seeming throwback to an earlier era, embarrassing local elites who blamed Hinojosa and the students for creating a problem.281

These suburban activists, guest workers, and second-generation youths disturbed the myths of pro-immigrant conservatism but did not unseat the ideology from southern Georgia. When the U.S. Senate introduced a bipartisan immigration reform bill in 2005 and House Republicans countered it with a punitive anti-immigrant proposal, HR4437, rural Republican sentiment in the South was far more contested than national party politics suggested.282 Journalists and pundits noted that “big business” and “law-and-order” Republicans were on opposite sides of the measure, but few saw the regional dynamics at play: while suburban and exurban Republicans led the anti-immigrant faction (including the House bill’s primary sponsor, Representative James Sensenbrenner, who represented the outskirts of Milwaukee), those in rural agricultural areas, particularly in the South, staked out more moderate positions or followed behind their suburban counterparts in the name of party discipline.283 Now a senator answering to suburban as well as rural conservatives, Saxby Chambliss, who called the INS a “bully” during Operation Southern Denial, suddenly supported tough anti-immigrant measures. But South Carolina’s conservative Republican senator Lindsey Graham became an “absolute hero” to the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) thanks to his “practical” approach to immigration reform.284

A microcosm of the national battle raged in the Georgia statehouse. No sooner did Republicans gain a majority there than state senators from the Atlanta exurbs and a majority-white upstate district joined with one southern Georgia state senator to cosponsor get-tough-on-immigrants legislation,
It passed almost exactly on party lines and awaited the governor’s signature. “People are always calling me and saying, ‘Greg, what are you going to do about immigration?’” explained cosponsor Greg Goggans, an orthodontist whose southern Georgia district included heavily agricultural Coffee and Echols counties.285

When Mexican and other Latino immigrants filled the nation’s streets to protest the federal anti-immigrant bill in April 2006, southern cities including Atlanta saw massive demonstrations, but Latinos in Tifton were among the few to march in an agricultural area. There an estimated 2,000 people joined the protest, holding signs that opposed not only the national HR 4437 but also the statewide anti-immigrant bill, SB529. The march ended at a park with a festival of Hispanic culture, allowing the protest to blend with the area’s more cautious tradition of public “fiestas.”286 Unmoved by the protests, Republican governor Sonny Perdue signed SB529 the following week.

Southern Georgia’s Latino youths heeded national calls for a Latino economic boycott that May 1 even as their parents proceeded with caution.287 Playing by the rules of pro-immigrant conservatism, more established Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans had long emphasized individual hard work and had not built independent political power. The next generation had other ideas; some Latino schoolchildren wore white T-shirts to school that day and expressed disappointment that their community’s adults did not take to the streets as urban immigrants had done. Other southern Georgia youths—in some cases more than a third of Latino pupils—skipped school to show their solidarity with the “Day without an Immigrant” action.288 As pro-immigrant conservatism came under assault from the Atlanta suburbs, so too did Mexican American and Latino youths cast off their own parents’ version of that conservatism, which had eschewed collective action in favor of individual effort.

The polarizing national debate of 2005–6 challenged but did not overwhelm the ethos of pro-immigrant conservatism in southern Georgia.289 There anti-immigrant voices still competed for airspace with those who hewed to the terms of the conservative pro-immigrant consensus. Even as suburban Republicans drafted anti-immigrant legislation in the statehouse, Tifton mayor Paul Johnson, a former agricultural extension agent, flew the Mexican flag outside city hall for six days to honor six local Mexican men who had been killed in a robbery. When distressed listeners called a popular local talk radio show to protest, the host was unmoved. “We have to have [the Mexicans] here,” he insisted. A popular white barber well known for his political prognostications concurred, “I think everybody realizes the farm-
ers got to have them.” The flag remained in place for the full six days. The following year, an immigration raid on a Stillmore chicken plant prompted the town’s mayor to openly compare immigration agents to the Gestapo. A white mother told a reporter that she worried about the psychological effects on her adopted Mexican American son. A mobile home park owner flew the American flag upside down for several days as an act of protest. And an African American shoe saleswoman insisted that the poultry plant could not attract local workers anyway—“not to cut no chickens up.”

Even once the national Republican Party fully coalesced around an anti-immigration agenda in 2010, many rural conservative whites in Georgia remained unmoved. Though he supported the conservative agenda on most issues, Sonny Bridges did not subscribe to that movement’s views of “illegal immigrants.” “I’ve got no problem with them,” he said simply in a 2010 interview. “They accept me, and I accept them.” Faced with the idea that immigrants use up too many social services, Carolyn Flowers, a staunch Evangelical conservative, begged to differ. “If a person is hungry,” she said, also in 2010, “if they don’t have food for their kids, you feed them.” White or black, elite or middle class, many southern Georgians continued to hold a different kind of conservative position on the increasingly divisive immigration issue.

In 2011, suburban Atlanta state senators once again joined with those from majority-white northern Georgia areas to propose get-tough anti-immigrant legislation, this time called HB87. Once again, Republicans from southern Georgia followed along to approve the measure and a Republican governor signed it into law. And once again, many conservatives on the ground in southern Georgia remained unconvinced. The Valdosta Daily Times editorialized, “Georgia needs [immigrants], relies on them, and cannot successfully support the state’s No. 1 economic engine without them,” and went on to suggest that legislators caught up in “anti-immigrant fever” come to southern Georgia to pick the crops themselves. When the ACLU challenged the law in court, a Republican mayor, Paul Bridges of Uvalda, in the Vidalia area, was a plaintiff. “Everything about HB87 is not Republican,” he insisted. “They title this bill anti-immigration but they should have titled it anti-business. They should have titled that bill, let’s grow the government.” Like farmers and church volunteers before him, Bridges employed images of family to erase differences between whites and Latinos. So many Latinos had married whites in his town that “they have become a part of our societal network,” he explained. Bridges noted that he himself could be branded a criminal for “taking fellow parishioners to church” under the law’s harsh terms. The press called Bridges an “unlikely” ally in the fight for immigrants’ rights, but

Pro-immigrant Conservatism in Rural Georgia
the long history of pro-immigrant conservatism in southern Georgia shows that his public stance was decades in the making.

When Bridges held a roundtable on immigration at the Uvalda Community Center in May 2011, local Republican state legislators had to defend their support for the law in the face of community members and farmers who used Nazi comparisons and decried the law’s effect on children. Half-heartedly defending their votes, one protested, “I did not write the bill,” while another said he’d like to change the law in the future to “lessen the blow.” A third legislator lamented of his party’s anti-immigrant wing: “They’ve got the votes.” These representatives had cast votes on behalf of party discipline or their own future political careers, not their constituents in southern Georgia.

In the end, the conservative consensus fostered by southern Georgia growers, church volunteers, and Mexicanos succeeded in staving off the national anti-immigrant movement for more than three decades—but not forever. Though that movement still failed to win the hearts and minds of many white conservatives in southern Georgia in the early twenty-first century, the state-level legislation it spawned radically disrupted life for the region’s immigrants anyway. In Atlanta and the college town Athens, advocacy groups such as the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, Freedom University, and NCLR’s new Atlanta office challenged anti-immigrant laws and policies on the state level. But southern Georgia’s Mexicanos had built no infrastructure to raise a political voice. Instead they voted with their feet, abandoning the area’s agricultural jobs in droves.

Why did white suburban Republicans spew such vitriol against the immigrants who plainly powered swaths of the state’s economy, and how did their movement acquire enough power to politically steamroll the more varied local cultures around immigration in the U.S. South? What options did the Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in those politicians’ backyards have in the midst of this assault? The next chapter explores the experiences of Mexicanos in the South’s suburbs and exurbs, telling the story of their encounters with a new politics of exclusion.