Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson: Politics and Race

Jennifer Anne Meredith

Abstract

Scholars have portrayed Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson as both a racist and a pragmatist in his dealing with minority groups. The paper argues that Johnson followed his constituency’s changing opinions on the proper treatment of Mexican immigrants. By looking at his two terms as Colorado Governor in the thirties and then the fifties, it demonstrates that during the Great Depression he heeded the call of his supporters to provide jobs for American citizens by deporting migrant workers. In the fifties, when economic tensions had lessened, Johnson championed better working conditions for those same migrant workers. By analyzing both Johnson and the populaces shifting attitudes, it demonstrates the ease in which poor migrant workers fortunes can change leaving them extremely vulnerable to market fluctuations.

Jennifer Meredith is a PhD candidate in history at the University of Utah. Her major field is Modern American history with an emphasis on the American West and religion. Her minor fields are Modern Latin America and gender studies.

Jennifer is a member of the Alpha Rho chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.
Ramone Ruiz and his family were driving through the desert, taking in the beautiful landscape on their way to Colorado. It was a beautiful picturesque day, the sun was shining brightly, the air had a little bit of a bite, but the sky was clear and tranquil. Ramone looked at his wife and smiled. She was holding their youngest girl in her arms, rocking her to sleep with a soft lullaby. Their four other children plus two friends were crammed into an old jalopy for the journey to Colorado. Ramone’s wife looked up at him and smiled back. They were happy to be on their way to Colorado, as they were hoping to find work in the sugar beet fields. Ramone and his family had worked in Colorado every beet season since he and his wife had been married. It was hard grueling work taking care of and harvesting the beets, but at least it was work.

It had been a hard winter; the family had to accept relief money because there were no jobs. Even for white people times were tough. In New Mexico, where they lived after beet season was over, Ramone could usually find work, fixing things or small construction jobs. His wife could usually find work in someone’s kitchen or cleaning, she was a great cook, but this last winter, nothing. But now, they were hopefully on their way to better times. The whole family would work in the fields through harvest and make some money. This year, their second youngest, would be seven years old, old enough to help in the field. The baby would stay in the field under a tarp where they could keep an eye on her.

They were almost to the border when Ramone saw something disturbing. At the New Mexico/Colorado border, there were men in uniform stopping automobiles before they entered Colorado. A huge sign said “Martial Law-Slow-Stop.” Ramone swore softly.

---

1 Sugar beets are extremely labor intensive, often requiring whole families to tend about nine hours a day. Valerie Jo Maes, “Repatriation and Blockade in 1930’s Colorado: An Explanation of the Events,” (MA thesis, University of Northern Colorado, 1973), 19.

2 Many states, such as Arizona, passed laws to ensure that only citizens were eligible for jobs, forcing Mexican immigrants to apply for welfare in the interest of their family’s survival. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), created by the new deal, also mandated that only American citizens were eligible for their work projects, unless they had served in the United States armed forces or with one of their allies. Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2006) 90-91.

3 This was a common practice, children as young as five years old were reported working in sugar beet fields carrying water jugs for the family, and families often placed babies in the beet fields while they worked if the mother’s labor was needed to tend the field. Charles Gibbons, Report statement of conditions relating to Sugar Beet Workers In Colorado. August 11, 1933, attached with a letter from a concerned citizen to Governor Edwin C. Johnson, Box 26903, “Edwin C. Johnson papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.

under his breath. His wife looked up sharply and gasped in alarm “Oh no, what’s happening?” Ramone bit his lip and said uneasily, “I don’t know, don’t worry it will be fine.” Inside he was quaking. He had heard rumors of blockades in California, but not in Colorado. There had been warnings in the Mexican newspapers back home, from the Mexican consultant, telling them not to leave the state and stating there was no work elsewhere.5 Ramone and his family worked hard for their money, they would rather work than take relief.6

Ramone stopped at the border and a uniform man approached.7 He wanted to know where they were coming from and where they were headed. Ramone told him they were coming from Albuquerque to work on a sugar beet farm. The man told him he had to turn around, that he was not a resident and jobs were reserved for citizens of Colorado. Ramone pleaded with the man; he told him his family had worked on sugar beet farms for at least nine years. The man asked him if he had any money. Ramone had three dollars but apparently, it was not enough, and the man turned him away His wife looked at him with tears in her eyes “What are we going to do? Do we have enough money for gas to get home?” Even though he was quaking inside, Ramone smiled at her and said “Don’t worry, I will think of something. It will be fine.”

Introduction

This historically-based fictional scenario illustrates the dilemma many migrant workers faced as they attempted to cross the Southern border between New Mexico and Colorado in April 1936.8 Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson had closed the southern border to indigents and non-resident migrant workers who were trying to find work or aid in Colorado. He felt their presence would incite “lawlessness and social disorder due to depression conditions.”9 On April 18, 1936, Johnson declared martial law, ordering the National Guard to seal Colorado’s southern border and turn away poor travelers and non-citizens of the state. Colorado’s General Kimball quickly organized his men and established Camp Johnson two days later near the Colorado-New Mexico corridor.

6 Many Mexicans considered not taking relief a matter of pride. They, much like their American counterparts, preferred to work for a living. The shame and guilt they felt about taking government handouts would scar them for years. Balderrama and Rodriguez, 90.
7 This uniformed man was a member of the Colorado National Guard. Leonard, 77.
8 I loosely based this scenario on one found in Leonard’s book on page 70.
border. Kimball’s men fanned out along the entrances and stopped all motor vehicle traffic attempting to enter Colorado. Guardsmen also stopped trains and ordered transients to walk back to the border. Highway patrolmen surveyed other entrances into Colorado to make sure people were not thwarting the southern checkpoints. Even though many people supported the blockade, due to pressure from other states and the federal government, Johnson ended the blockade less than two weeks after it began on April 30, 1936.10

During the Great Depression, mass unemployment and the fear of starvation made many Americans embrace a nativist perspective. Due to lack of employment opportunities, many Americans began to call for the removal of non-citizens, either through repatriation or through deportation, so they would not have to compete with them for jobs. Some were outright racists who viewed this as a chance to rid the nation of some of its non-whites, but many did not consider themselves racists. They felt that in this time of financial difficulty, employers should exclude applicants who were not citizens of the United States or the states and counties in which they were applying for work.

Delving into this perspective as context, I will add to historian Valerie Joe Maes and William T. McCarthy arguments that Johnson instituted the blockade because he was reacting to his constituents’ pressures during the Great Depression for employment. I will argue that Johnson and the majority of his constituents wanted steady work rather than government handouts. This desire led to resentment against minorities, who many white citizens viewed as stealing their employment opportunities. In this time of depressed economy, nativist sentiments that had been present in the twenties flared up. Mexicans were an easy scapegoat because they were a highly visible minority in Colorado and the United States.11 Johnson understood his constituents’ feelings towards Mexicans, and as a politician, he used this knowledge to exploit Mexicans and transients to gain support from the majority of Coloradans. Johnson did this because he sought support in his bid for the U.S. Senate. Johnson held a genuine belief that job creation was a better solution than welfare as shown by his sincere effort to establish projects to stem unemployment. However, he shamelessly scapegoated Mexican migrants to gain political support. Johnson understood that the Mexican minority, especially those here

10 Leonard, 75-78.
11 In the 1930’s, the census estimated foreign-born Mexicans in Colorado at about 57,676. They were the largest minority present. Maes, 18.
illegally, did not have much political power. Those here illegally did not have the right to vote and were therefore expendable. Even though Johnson used them to appeal to voters, and may have been racist as his actions suggest, he followed his constituents’ wishes in dealing with them, as I will prove from his earlier record as Governor of Colorado as well as actions from his later Governorship of Colorado in the fifties.

The paper begins with a brief introduction on the severity of the Great Depression highlighting the government’s belief that job creation was better than welfare, which echoed Johnson and many Coloradans view. Then, I will discuss how Colorado was slightly buffered from the Great Depression’s immediate effects, showing how dashed hopes led to uprisings and demonizing of transients, non-citizens and Mexicans. Also discussed will be the influence of the Ku Klux Klan on Colorado, illustrating why racism against specifically Mexicans flared. The influx of transients from other states put pressure on Colorado’s welfare funds, which led citizens of the state to turn against non-citizens. Using evidence on how other states dealt with the unemployment crisis, I will show that Johnson’s actions were not unprecedented. Other states, such as California, which used migrant labor, tried similar tactics to boost employment for citizens. This will give context to Johnson’s actions, and show he was following models set down by other states in targeting Mexicans. Other states used repatriation, deportation, and blockades against non-citizens and transients, and the federal government sanctioned deportation and repatriation. Next, Johnson’s actions during his terms as Colorado’s Governor in the early thirties and fifties will show he followed Coloradans feelings towards Mexicans. He was a politician in tune with his constituent’s desires, and he needed their support. Mexicans were a mostly powerless minority he targeted for political gain. This helped dictate his actions towards Mexican migrant workers. As the voter’s attitudes shifted toward migrant workers, Johnson’s views followed. As the monetary crisis of the depression ended and people felt financially secure, they began, once more, to try to improve the predicament of migrant families; Johnson’s thought also followed this trend.
Job Creation Rather Than Welfare

The Great Depression caused mass unemployment and panic in the United States. In the first couple of years (1930-1931), private and public institutions increased relief spending from eleven million to over thirty-eight million in an attempt to keep people from starving.12 As the unemployment rate approached its highest levels of nearly 30 percent in 1933, private funds could not keep up with the demand. Head of the Association of Community Chests and Councils, Arthur T Burns, said to President Herbert Hoover, “I am stating that the funds we have are altogether inadequate to meet the situation, and we are not aware that local public funds have been appropriated in any such amount to meet the situation.”13 The federal government also desperately tried to boost the economy. Even though President Hoover did not believe in welfare, the government gave large grants and loans to the states for public relief and public work projects so people would have jobs and could support their families. By the time Roosevelt took office, there were over five million workers and farmers already receiving government assistance.14

Roosevelt instituted the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA) to create programs to aid the unemployed and impoverished. He appointed Harry Hopkins to assess the needs of the country and implement change. Hopkins and his aides were concerned about protecting American values, which included the belief that hard work led to prosperity and happiness. They, like Hoover, wanted to limit government handouts to those who were able bodied and could labor.15

During this period, private social agencies also believed that material relief16 was abhorrent. They thought that material relief encouraged dependency on the government rather than self-reliance. President Cleveland aptly expressed this idea during another economic downturn in the late nineteen hundreds “though the people support the Government

---

14 Jeff Singleton, Location 63-67, 81-86, 96-100,
16 Aid in the form of money and material goods such as food or clothes.
the Government should not support the people.\textsuperscript{17} This attitude influenced the President and Governor Johnson to focus on job creation. Deportation and repatriation were a way to open scarce jobs for citizens. It targeted the Mexican population unfairly, but it made sense in the context of their beliefs.

During the depression, Johnson appealed to his constituents needs by proposing a general sales tax to help relieve the suffering of the unemployed and their families. He wanted to use the money generated to set up soup kitchens for immediate relief and create jobs for long-term relief.\textsuperscript{18} Johnson pushed for a constructive work program, which the sales tax would finance, so Coloradans would not have to rely on welfare. He strongly believed people should work hard and not count on government handouts.\textsuperscript{19}

Johnson’s life reflected this belief. Raised on a cattle ranch in Nebraska, he was used to working long days. When he was older, he worked on trains, starting as a section hand and worked his way up to train dispatcher. After tuberculosis struck him, Johnson and his wife moved to Colorado, and after a short stay in a sanitarium, he started homesteading in Craig County. Johnson believed that the fresh air and hard work made him healthy, and he stated, “I did everything anyone else could do in the way of hard work…I got my health back and some to spare.”\textsuperscript{20} Johnson’s farm was not overly productive, so he also taught school in the winter and had a “summer job of freighting with a four-horse team.”\textsuperscript{21} Hard work seemed natural to him, and he had no respect for those who seemed unwilling or lazy. After Coloradans elected him Governor in 1932, he stated “Those who are unwilling to work…should be dealt with firmly.”\textsuperscript{22} This view helped guide his belief that the best way to help families during the depression was through job creation. Due to the scarcity of work, “…Johnson led the crusade in limiting ‘the possibilities of employment…for only native sons.”\textsuperscript{23} This was, in part, why he tried to

\textsuperscript{17} McElvaine, 7
\textsuperscript{22} Colorado General Assembly, House Journal, 29th Session, January 10,1933,70.
\textsuperscript{23} Balderrrama and Rodriguez, 89.
deport non-residents and eventually instituted the “bum blockade” of 1936. The blockade was a symbol of saving jobs for Governor Johnson and not just about race. A.P. Hoffman, who was associated with the Sterling District Beet Laborers Association, sent a telegram to Governor Johnson complaining that local labor lost beet contracts and the farms were importing labor from Nebraska and Kansas. Resident labor found itself without employment while non-residents took their jobs.24 Other Citizens wrote to Governor Johnson begging for any kind of work. A letter from Mr. E.W. Pinkerstaff to Johnson illustrates this,

Through inability to collect wages earned during the summer and to get any amount of work, since, I have been placed in such a position that I have been forced to apply for relief. This I do not want and have been making every effort to get placed on the Fraser River and Moffat Tunnel Division work. I will work on any project available. If there is anything you can do…25

Governor Johnson did not have his secretary answer his mail; he personally replied to almost all who wrote him. As a result, Johnson understood the desperation, fear, and anger his constituents felt. This is evident from the many letters he sent to Mr. Oscar Woods, head of the Reemployment Service, on behalf of those who wrote to him wanting employment.26

Colorado’s Buffer from the Depression and Backlash

Coloradans had reached a static state by the end of the 1920’s; hence, the Great Depression seemed gradual. The state had not enjoyed the industrial growth and prosperity prevalent in other parts of the country, and for this reason, the effects of the stock market crash were less instantly severe. Unemployment seemed a non-issue at first, because the lack of large-scale industrial plants. Not a lot of people had been laid off so citizens felt safe.27 Agriculture and mining, two of Colorado’s major economic interests, had experienced post war depression due to a drop in prices. Migration to the state had slowed significantly because of lack of

employment, except for an influx of migrant workers that were concentrated in agriculture. As a result, Colorado did not experience the level of prosperity during the twenties as was prevalent across most of the United States. Instead, it remained static and insulated from the beginning of the Great Depression. There were even indicators that Colorado would prosper as the east reeled from the crash.28

In 1929, the prices in agriculture rose and farmers’ profit level increased almost to 1920’s levels. This caused a feeling of optimism among farmers and made the stock market crash seem an eastern problem. One-fourth of Colorado’s work force was involved in agriculture and felt hopeful about their prospects. Tourism grossed an all-time high at eighteen percent above the average, boosting retail sales, which also helped foster false expectations that Colorado would prosper.29

Manufacturing, the state’s second largest source of income also recorded an increase. Even though it was below the national average, manufacturing had risen substantially for the state in 1929, with wholesale meat packing exceeding other Colorado industries. Wickens reports, “The net sales of $540 million worth of these [whole-sale manufactured goods] and other whole-sale products in 1929 combined with the nearly $498 million in retail sales to shatter many business records throughout Colorado that year.”30 This increase in profits from agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, and retail, combined with the non-prosperity in the twenties, not only buffered Colorado from the first effects of the Great Depression, but it instilled a false sense of success and security. Unfortunately, that sense would vanish as unemployment rose and the populace would look desperately for help and someone to blame.

1930 was less prosperous for Colorado but not alarmingly. A few banks closed, but that was the state’s trend since 1919. Profits from tourism and agriculture fell slightly, but most people assumed the next year would bring better returns. Rising unemployment became a minor concern at the end of 1930, but it was not until 1931 that Coloradans really felt the depression. By then, a number of banks had failed and agriculture production had decreased dramatically due to drought and dropping farm

29 Ibid., 2,5-6.
30 Ibid., 4.
Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson: Politics and Race

prices. The unemployed and their dependents looked for aid from private and public sources.

Aid was slow in coming due to the governor’s fiscal beliefs and lack of funding. In Colorado Springs, people who held jobs were asked to donate half a day’s pay for a period of six months to help families in need. Private sources who relied on fund raising and donations found their resources strapped. The Unemployed Citizens League of Denver, formed in June 1932, struggled to form a cooperative to feed and employ families and individuals who needed aid. It sent its members on jobs, usually unskilled to earn their food. An example is when the collective sent people to pick fruit and vegetables. They exchanged their work for a portion of the food from farms, which could not afford to hire labor. Unfortunately, these attempts did not solve the situation and the Governor at the time, William H. Adams, believed that cuts into government spending and tax cuts would boost the economy and create jobs without government handouts.

As unemployment rose, many Coloradans began to realize the depression had hit Colorado hard. Citizens started to resent and blame non-citizens who had jobs. Whites easily targeted Mexicans “because they still attempted to preserve their culture and identity.” Many-Mexicans practiced Catholicism, ate strange foods such as tortillas, and had darker complexions than whites. Anger mounted and people began to call for the deportation and repatriation of immigrants. For example, Edwin Miller, Chairman of the Joint Labor Committee sent a telegram to Johnson stating he should make jobs available only to residents and “make examples of those being brought in.” Periodic acts of violence began to break out, such as hungry mobs looting grocery stores, and an angry crowd of people even marched into the state capital demanding relief in 1934. Governor Johnson quelled the angry throng of malcontents; however, it brought home the realization that he needed to

31 Ibid., 9-10.
33 Wickens, 10.
34 Wickens, 13; Athearn, 276; Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith, 300-301.
35 Athearn, 275, Wickens 17,
36 Maes, 37.
37 Ibid., 63.
act swiftly or the populace might revolt. The Mayor of Manitou wrote Johnson a letter warning that “Only one man in four is able to secure employment and naturally [people are] not in too amiable frame of mind over it.” By focusing on ridding the state of bums and non-citizens (mostly Mexicans), he appeared to try to create jobs for citizens. This in turn, made him popular with his constituents.

**History of Racism in Colorado**

Johnson understood that many Americans in the state of Colorado and the United States at large supported deportation of non-natives because of racism and the lack of employment. Mexicans were an easy target because they looked different, had a different culture, and an identifiable accent. They also had very little legal power. Due to the immigration laws, if any immigrant lost his/her job and needed to apply for relief, the government had a legal right to deport them, with their permission. However, many Mexicans were scared the government would deport them without their consent. Lobbyist for big business made sure the wages of migrant workers stayed low and any attempt to strike business thwarted by bringing in more workers. Most citizens of Colorado applauded Johnson’s initial idea to deport nonresident Mexicans to Mexico. Bess Miller, a resident of Colorado, wrote Johnson and stated she “approved on taking aliens off relief and deporting them.” It would not only create jobs for locals, but deportation also tapped into some citizens’ deep-seated racist tendencies. Mexicans had dealt with racism in Colorado long before the depression, and the economic downturn made it more pronounced.

Ever since the number of Mexicans started too noticeably rise, due to cheap labor demands by employers, white Americans felt their culture was threatened. Immigrant or minority labor was nothing new in Colorado. German, Japanese, and Native Americans all worked in the fields too, but a restrictive Immigration Act passed in 1917 effectively shut out many other minorities. Lawmakers loosely applied the act to Mexicans and the

---

39 Wickens, 75-76.
41 Maes, 37
42 Maes, 32, 34.
companies began to recruit them in large numbers. Commercial farms, railroads and mines in Colorado demanded cheap labor to maximize profits. The Great Western Sugar Company expanded its beets fields in 1920 by over one and a half times more acreage from the previous year and three times as much planted in 1914/15. The company requested over fourteen thousand Mexican workers, making up twenty percent of the field labor. Migration to Colorado by Mexicans laborers tripled that year, and increased every year after. This influx of Mexicans changed the demographics in many towns and was frightening to many whites. For example, in Weld County, Mexican born inhabitants increased over 700 percent in ten years, also the Spanish American population increased substantially. This upswing of identifiable minorities, in a once almost all-white community was alarming and many complained of the new “…invasion of aliens.”

As the demographics shifted, racism became more prevalent and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) rose in power in Colorado. Unrest after World War I was common in Colorado. The fear of Bolshevism and anything that seemed un-American (including foreigners) propelled the group into power. No longer targeting only African Americans, the Klan expanded its program to include Mexicans, Catholics, Jews or anyone it deemed not 100 percent American, racially or culturally. Rather than term their dislike ”racism,” the Klan claimed that they promoted America and American values. During the twenties in Colorado, the KKK took control of much of the state politics by 1924, leading one historian to say, “The success story of the western Klan was in Colorado.”

The Klan played on people’s fears that lawlessness and a breakdown of American family values would occur if Colorado did not pass stringent laws protecting the morality of citizens. After the war, the Klan argued, both public and private morality had broken down, and Klansmen wanted to see American values celebrated and followed. The KKK attempted to pass legislation that would enforce prohibition to the point that Catholics could not use wine in their sacraments. They also wanted to cut jobs for those not sympathetic to their cause and create positions where the

---

46 Athearn, 243-245.
47 Ibid., 244.
applicants would have to pass a rigorous test proving their “Americanism.” Fortunately, their stint in Colorado politics did not last, and they declined after their heyday in 1928, as Coloradans’ fears of un-Americanism and immorality mellowed when Communists and lawlessness did not overrun the state. However, during the Great Depression, many Coloradans would remember and use the nativist sentiments and propaganda endorsed by the Klan.48

Governor Johnson, forever the pragmatic politician, did not endorse or condemn the Ku Klux Klan. Progressive Democratic Governor, William Sweet, lost reelection in 1924 because he attacked the rising Klan movement, and Johnson would not make the same mistake. The Klan was involved in both major political parties in Johnson’s legislative district and had candidates in the local elections of April 1925. The KKK had a political advantage because of its secrecy; no one knew its true strength. Therefore, Johnson was careful and did not alienate Klan supporters and voters. He did help to defeat some of the Ku Klux Klan’s radical proposals, but he was cautious about denouncing them completely, and they rewarded him by endorsements from some of their former members in the 1936 U.S. Senate Election.49 Johnson knew many people would agree with his call for deportation of non-residents and the blockade because of the deep thread of racist beliefs that many Coloradans held. He had dealt with the power of the Klan and understood many Coloradans supported them. The nativist sentiments spouted by the Ku Klux Klan appealed to many residents of Colorado as the Depression continued.

Transient Problem in Colorado

Colorado had dealt with a mass influx of migrants or transients who were citizens of the United States but not Colorado. These transients were mostly white, male and female, unskilled laborers looking for work or assistance hoping to find something, somewhere. By late 1931, the non-citizens caused substantial strain on local relief efforts. The city of Denver initially took on a portion of transient care, but it was extremely expensive and in 1932, Denver purged many who did not want to work. The Denver Welfare Department instituted a program where transients could earn a meal and a place to sleep and those who refused received no aid.50

48 Ibid., 244-245.
49 McCarthy 22-23.
50 Wickins, 67.
FERA consolidated and absorbed much of the transients’ relief under its transient division and set up camps to shelter them. There were five camps in Colorado by 1935 that held approximately two thousand men apiece. The camps provided vocational training in an attempt to improve employment prospects, and many of these individuals labored on work projects including home construction and roads under the Works Progress Administration. Unfortunately, the program encouraged migration because it showed that the government would help transients, but the real problem lay when officials tried to close the camps. The camps were supposed to be temporary, and officials wanted the transients to return to their states and apply for relief there or find employment, but many had become accustomed to life in the camps and they refused to leave. Colorado was struggling to employ its citizens and could not bear the extra burden from other states. Local agencies attempted to “force them onto other counties and into other states.” As money and goods became scarce, Americans felt forced to choose between helping strangers and themselves. Colorado did not just try and limit Mexican alien workers, but it was so desperate they began to turn on other citizens of the United States that were not native to the state.

**California: A Model for Repatriation, Deportation, and Blockade**

Deportations of non-United States citizens, repatriation of Mexicans and blockades to keep transients out of the state to save relief money for citizens of that state did not just only occur in Colorado. In fact, deportation and repatriation orders for aliens started with the Federal government under President Herbert Hoover in the early months of 1931. Hoover endorsed a strict policy of curtailing legal and illegal entry of aliens and deporting those considered undesirable, because he felt they were taking jobs that should rightfully belong to United States citizens. Edwin Johnson echoed these sentiments years later when faced with the same problem. Hoover appointed William N. Doak as secretary of labor to find a solution for rampant unemployment. Doak shared the President’s (and Johnson’s) belief in the need for job creation and he proposed ousting illegal aliens to create jobs for citizens. Even though Doak’s campaign affected many different ethnic groups, illegal Mexicans were the hardest hit. From 1930 to 1939, 46.3 of all persons deported

---

51 Ibid., 68-70.
52 Ibid., 69.
54 Ibid., 39-41.
were Mexican, but they were only one percent of the total population in the United States.\footnote{Balderrama and Rodriguez, 67.} Deportations, however, required hearings to justify the forced removal of parts of the population, even if they were in the United States illegally. Not surprisingly, given the level of hostility focused on Mexicans due to hard economic realities, most people did not speak out in defense of alien rights.\footnote{Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, \textit{The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans}, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 160-161.} Doak centered the campaign on Southern California, and the deportation, repatriation, and even its own blockade served as model and a justification for other states, including Colorado.

The round ups, repatriation and deportations from the federal level operating in California coincided with county campaigns to repatriate destitute Mexican families so they would not drain relief money for citizens. Repatriation did not require hearings, Frank L. Shaw, supervisor of Los Angeles County’s Second District, and chairman of the board of supervisors’ charities and public welfare committee, looked into the legality of repatriation and found as long as the people were willing participants it was legal. He organized trains to take Mexicans down to the border, and they soon became routine.\footnote{Hoffman,86, 93-94.} Of course, many Mexicans did not want to leave their homes, some having lived in the United States for over ten years. Numerous Mexican families’ children were born in America and were citizens even if their parents were not. Often times, the rampant racism and pressure from officials who wanted them off relief roles prompted their decision to repatriate.\footnote{Balderrama and Rodriguez, 126-127.}

California’s blockade served as a model of desperate actions in desperate times. It also showed some remarkable parallels with Colorado’s blockade. California’s “bum blockade” also occurred in 1936 but two months before Colorado’s took place. Fear that transients and immigrants seeking shelter and aid could overrun California was a reason for the blockade. A report had circulated from the Committee on Indigent Alien Transients stating that California was in danger of a mass influx of people because the federal government had announced it would no longer give aid to transients. It recommended stationing National Guard along the borders to keep the unwanted out. Police Chief Davis of Los Angeles believed the report and ordered 150 officers along the borders of Oregon, Arizona,
and Nevada. For a couple of weeks the officers stopped vehicles and harassed people trying to enter the state. The officers stopped one poor woman with six kids and insisted she pay a California auto license fee of three dollars. When the woman started crying and told the men she had only three dollars and forty cents to buy her children food, they let her enter without paying.

The blockade only lasted a couple of weeks and many people were outraged. Oregon and Arizona threatened retribution, and Nevada residents banded together to pay for a sign that read, “STOP! LOS ANGELES CITY LIMITS!” Those in California who did not support the blockade included the state’s highway patrolmen, and the state attorney advised it was unconstitutional because it infringed on peoples constitutional right of free movement. Finally, the blockade ended when the Civil Liberties Union took the case to federal court. Police Chief Davis backed down and sent his men home.

Although many people opposed the effort, there were many who supported the action. Davis had a plethora of supporters, including “The Times, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the city prosecutor's office, some judges and public officials, railroads, the sheriff, the county Department of Charities, and hard-pressed state relief agencies.” The Times supported the blockade and ran an article entitled "Let's Have More Outrages" in answer to charges that the blockade was an outrage. The paper heralded the blockade “as an answer to the waste of taxpayers’ ‘hard-got tax money.’ Although, there is no record of Johnson specifically citing California as his inspiration, from the media coverage of the blockade Johnson did know what happened, and the similarities suggest he used some of the same tactics.

61 Stein, 74.
62 Rasmussen.
63 Ibid.
Similarities and Differences in Colorado

Coloradans supported repatriation and deportation for illegal aliens, but when Johnson instituted the blockade, his support vanished. Mexicans felt pressure to repatriate and citizens’ demanded the government deport them. As the Depression deepened, “No Mexicans Served Here and White Trade Only” 64 signs became prevalent. Sometimes anti-Mexican riots broke out in areas of dense Mexican population. Posters appeared proclaiming, “Warning, ALL MEXICANS, and all other ALIENS to leave the state of Colorado at ONCE, by order of: COLORADO STATE VIGILANTIES.65 Local relief agencies in Colorado, seeing a huge influx of Mexicans on relief roles, began their own program to repatriate Mexicans. They raised the money on their own, without the help of the Mexican Consulates. From 1932-1935, they repatriated approximately 20,000 Mexican families, even though many of the children were United States citizens.66

Governor Johnson was aware of these sentiments and this prompted him to begin a deportation program targeting Mexicans. He encouraged the removal of illegal Mexicans from relief roles, and in March 1936, Johnson announced he wanted to “roundup all aliens in the state.”67 From there, he proposed to detain them in camps until he could deport them to Mexico. Some people had mixed views, so Pueblo City Hall held a public debate entitled “Shall We Deport the Aliens?” Three hundred Puebloans attended the debate as speakers from across the spectrum debated the merits and flaws of the program. Some felt it was blatantly racist, while others felt protecting jobs trumped the race card.68

Johnson instructed General Neil Kimball to inquire into the legality of his proposed action, so Kimball called the Attorney General’s office for a legal opinion. Paul P. Prosser, Attorney General, wrote a letter back to Kimball stating, “There is no law in this state authorizing any wholesale deportation of aliens.”69 Johnson decided to try his plan anyway and contacted New Mexico Governor, Clyde Tingley, to see if he minded the deportees traveling through his state to Mexico. Governor Tingley stated

64 Wickens, 102-103.
66 Deutsch, 165.
67 Wickens 104.
68 Kulkosky, 127.
he would help, and might even adapt Johnson’s plan for his state due to some incidents involving aliens, which resulted in deaths.\textsuperscript{70} Even though he understood his plan was not legally sound, Johnson knew it would be popular with his constituents. He went ahead and deported thirty-two Mexicans. The State Department reprimanded Johnson and told him to cease immediately his actions, because it turned out twenty of those deported were United States citizens.\textsuperscript{71}

To be fair, it was hard for authorities to ascertain if Mexicans were legal citizens of the United States because many had applied for citizenship, received their first papers and assumed they were now citizens. They did not realize that was just one of the steps in the process. Also, if born in rural areas (as many migrant children were), they did not possess birth verifications.\textsuperscript{72} During this time, most Mexican children were born at home with the help of an untrained midwife, family member, or friend, especially in poor and rural areas.\textsuperscript{73} Unfortunately, for many Spanish and Mexican people, the lack of papers or proof of birth led to deportations of American citizens because they looked foreign.

Most of his constituents applauded his actions, as was evident from the numerous letters praising his deportation plan from The Red Cross, Spanish Americans from Powers County, Hospitals, Police Departments, the Latin Club, and newspaper publishers from the \textit{Pueblo Chieftain} and \textit{Pueblo Star Journal}, to name a few. Most glorified his actions for protecting scarce employment opportunities.\textsuperscript{74} Letters he received from citizens and newspaper articles make this abundantly clear. The \textit{Pueblo Chieftain} ran an article on March 26, 1935 stating there were twenty million aliens on relief roles that the government should deport. It railed against aliens who held jobs and claimed half of Mexican illegals were on relief. It heralded the Governor for “trying to deport all aliens from Colorado.”\textsuperscript{75} Johnson wanted his constituent’s support in the upcoming election. He

\textsuperscript{70} Clyde Tingley to Edwin Johnson, April 9, 1935, and Secretary W.H. Maims to Edwin Johnson, April 15, 1935, box, “Governor Edwin Johnson Papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.
\textsuperscript{71} Leonard, 74.
\textsuperscript{72} Wickens, 103.
\textsuperscript{73} Deutsch, 186.
\textsuperscript{74} Letters to Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson from his constituents, Box 26903, File Folder #13, “Edwin Johnson Papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.
understood, from their letters, that they supported his actions. This had bearing on his decision to institute the deportations and blockade.

Some people in Colorado supported the “bum blockade” of the Southern border. The Denver Post heralded his efforts, stating he had saved over one thousand jobs for residents.76 One constituent, Edith Finch, wrote to Johnson warning him about a group of Mexicans she had seen beyond the blockade. In effect, she was trying to turn them, which illustrated her support of the blockade.77 Another family, the Williams, also wrote a letter to the governor stating, “We are right behind you, in your move to keep the Mexican race out of our state.”78 These letters show support for the Governor’s actions, and they demonstrate that people understood that Mexicans were the specific target of the ban.

Johnson had support from some of his constituents, who did not care if the plan was racist, yet most of his supporters detested his new plan as too radical and blatantly racist against Mexicans, because he only closed the border with New Mexico. The banning of his citizens outraged Governor Tingly of New Mexico. He threatened to ban all products and stop any incoming trucks from Colorado. He said, “We’ll stop every truck bringing shipments into New Mexico and force truckers to unload.”79 M.B Ratner wrote to Johnson accusing him of using the blockade as a publicity stunt, and he points out California attempted the same action and failed.80 Many Spanish Americans, who were citizens of the United States and Colorado, had supported Johnson’s idea for deportation because they were desperately trying to find work in order to support their families, and they agreed with the assertion that non-citizens and nonresidents should not receive work over them.81 This is evident in some of the letters by the Spanish Americans. The President of the Spanish Lodge in Salida Colorado wrote:

76 Leonard, 78-79.
78 Deutsch, 166.
79 Ibid., 79.
81 Kulkosky, 129
We are writing to say, that we, the Spanish American people of Salida Colo. in lodge convened, want to give you all the positive assurance that we are squarely behind you 100% in your drive which pertains to the Aliens which are now, and have been holding jobs which can just as well be filled by citizens of this United States and Colorado voters who are mostly tax payers in this district.82

From these letters he knew they supported his actions and that might lead them to vote for him. Now, however, the blatantly racist act infuriated them.

Much like in California, the blockade ended because of questions of its legality and pressure from other states. Johnson only closed the border to New Mexico, so people considered the ban aimed at the Mexican immigrant population and it violated the freedom of movement guaranteed in the constitution. Johnson called off the blockade on April 29, 1936, stating, “Unforeseen complications of a serious nature prove it unwise to longer continue…the embargo.”83 Privately, he admitted one of his main reasons for ending the blockade was due to the threats made by New Mexico Governor, Tingley, and the loss of support by his constituents He wanted to gain votes, not lose them, so he ended the blockade but still maintained that jobs should only go to citizens of Colorado.84

How Johnsons Views Changed with his Constituents

The deportation and blockade that clearly targeted Mexicans were racist acts. Johnson was obviously trying to gain support for his election by playing on his constituents’ fears. He knew from letters, newspaper reports, and signs in towns banning Mexicans that racism was rampant mostly due to the horrible economic conditions. Johnson decided to use this to his advantage to gain votes for his bid for Senate. However, Johnson’s earlier acts in his governorship and later acts when he was governor in the fifties show he followed his constituent’s desires, regardless of his personal feelings. He was a politician who sensed his constituent’ wishes, and took advantage to gain popularity. Johnson scapegoated Mexicans because they had very little political power and did

83 Wickens, 106.
84 Ibid.
not vote. When the federal government supported Mexicans and made him stop the deportations, he tried another tactic. He also believed he was saving jobs for citizens. Because of his upbringing, he felt employment was more beneficial than government handouts. This was also consistent with the general population’s preference for work rather than welfare.

A reason for believing that Johnson’s deportation and blockade schemes were really a way to gain favor with voters, is that he reversed his stance from a year earlier. In March of 1935, Governor Johnson changed his position and attacked FERA for providing relief to nonresident Hispanics. Just a year earlier, Johnson had sent a telegram to the Federal Relief Administrator, Harry Hopkins, asking him to reconsider his decision to cut beet laborers (mostly Mexican migrant workers) from relief roles.85 This was in response to a letter he had received from Thos Mahoney, Chairman of the Mexican Welfare Committee Colorado State Council, Knights of Columbus. Mahoney brought to Johnson’s attention the deplorable conditions in the sugar beet fields. Mahoney states that even though Mexican laborers worked, they did not make enough to support their families. Mahoney also pointed out that private relief could not bear the full burden of these workers, leaving their families destitute and starving.86 Johnson was aware, from Mahoney’s letter, that Mexicans had little power to help themselves because they required his help. He also followed Mahoney’s request even though his later acts were racist. In reply, Hopkins sent a letter back stating that he was cutting beet laborers to entice them to work, because he believed they would rather stay on welfare than toil in the fields.87 A year later, closer to the Senate elections of 1936, Johnson attacked FERA’s relief of aliens, claiming he had to deport them so relief would go to residents of Colorado. 88 This change of heart coincided with the rising movement against non-residents and specifically Mexicans in Colorado, and his decision to run for Senate. Illegals did not have the right to vote, and, therefore, Johnson used them to gain support from people who could.

Even after twenty plus years had passed, Johnson maintained people misunderstood the blockade; he was trying to create jobs for those on

88 Leonard, 74.
relief. He was attempting to stem the importation of labor from other states, when there were over “35,000 people on relief, mostly in Denver.” Johnson claimed he had tried to talk to the beet farmers and the railroads that were bringing in workers from other states to convince them to hire off the relief roles. They would not listen; hence, he instituted the blockade and deportations so they would have no choice but to hire Colorado citizens who were unemployed. Johnson was also upset because he claimed there were many seasonal workers who had not left the state, and they now were on the relief rolls not working and could take these jobs. He was trying to create jobs for those in his state and felt they should take precedence over non-citizens. As the depression waned, the country became involved in World War II, and America needed labor; people began to welcome Mexican migrant labor again.

Edwin Johnson welcomed them as well, and even tried to improve their condition as he had in 1934. Mexican laborers were once again working in the sugar beet fields in Colorado. They were still largely recruited and imported from other states, because many migrant workers followed the different growing seasons of fruits and vegetables and moved accordingly. While Johnson was Governor from 1954-57 there were a series of accidents in which trucks bringing migrant workers and their families to the farms in Colorado or through the state to Wyoming were involved. Many died due to the overfilling of people in the trucks and the open truck position. Big Business did not care about the safety of their workers, as there were now plenty to farm their fields and keep wages low. There were other instances of babies smothering because of the rampant overcrowding, and Governor Johnson received letters from concerned citizens who wanted to help migrant workers receive better conditions. Johnson responded to his constituents desires by supporting legislation in Colorado to improve conditions. He supported an experimental program funded by the Federal Children Bureau and the State Department of Public Health to find out what services they needed and would use if available. Johnson also supported providing health care and decent housing to migrant families in the camps situated near the beet

90 Ibid.
91 U.S. Congress, President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 1951.
92 Richard B Craig, The Bracero Program; Interest Groups and Foreign Policy, (Austin: University of Texas, 1971), 46.
fields. Many people heralded him for his actions as a letter by a Virginia Millikin illustrates. She writes, “We commend Governor for his prompt action expressing the states concern for the mishandling of transportation of migrant workers in and through Colorado, and we offer our support for legislation to provide decent housing, health and educational facilities, as well as transportation.” A newspaper editorial also praised him for his actions, stating that Johnson had tried to stop the problem but was “met not only apathetic lack of cooperation but also outright resistance.”

Governor McNichols, who was Johnson’s protégé, issued an executive order in 1957 ordering the cessation of truck traffic entering the state in order to check the overcrowding and safety of vehicles holding migrant laborers. If authorities found the trucks too crowded, they removed people, and Colorado provided transportation by bus or other means to their destination.

In his later and earlier years as Governor, before and after his bid for Senate, he tried to help the Mexican migrant workers in Colorado or traveling through the state. These actions demonstrate he was willing to help Mexicans as long as it reflected what his constituents wanted. No longer faced with mass unemployment, civil unrest, or needing votes for a Senate race, he tried to improve Mexican migrants’ situation.

**Conclusion**

These actions illustrate that Johnson followed his constituents’ desires even though his personal views might have been racist. He was a politician who needed Colorado citizens’ votes, because he was planning on running for Senate in the 1936 election. Johnson knew any action to help promote jobs for citizens would help him in the Senate race. They had voting power while non-citizens did not. Mexicans also had very little political power to oppose Johnson. People desperately wanted work during the depression so they could support their families. They preferred employment over government handouts as did the Federal Government and Governor Johnson. Johnson’s family raised him to believe in hard work as was evident from his employment history. Mexicans became a target due to the already racist threads that were woven into the

---

94 Box 66091, "Edwin Johnson Papers" Colorado State Archives, Denver.
96 James Corriell, Newspaper Editorial received by the Governor’s office on April 19, 1957, Box 27128, “Steve McNichols Papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.
97 Box 27152, file Correspondence on Migrant Workers, “Steve McNichols Papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.
community from the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's and because they were easily discernable for their different culture and features.

Johnson’s actions were not unprecedented as the comparison with California proves; even the federal government deported and repatriated Mexicans. Colorado turned away a huge influx of transients in Colorado, who were citizens of the United States and not Mexican, because the state could not afford to help them. As the depression worsened, people turned on each other as is evident by this action and Hispanic societies calling for the deportation of their Mexican brothers. People were concerned with how to help themselves and their families than others they did not personally know. As goods became scarce, so did compassion. Johnson was also trying to stem violence that Coloradans engineered against non-citizens once it became clear that Colorado would not escape the Great Depression unscathed.

The blockade and deportation of Mexican’s was unquestionably opportunistic. Johnson knew he would have most people’s support for deportation because of the call for repatriation and deportation in his state and others. Due to the overwhelming outpouring of gratitude from his constituents, he instituted the blockade once the federal government made him stop the illegal deportations. His support largely dried up, as most people labeled the blockade blatantly racist because he only chose to close the southern border. Under threats from the Governor of New Mexico and disapproval from many Coloradans, he ended the blockade and Colorado elected him to the Senate.

His actions before his bid for Senate and after he became Governor of Colorado in the fifties, show he held no ill will against Mexicans. Johnson tried to help them gain relief so their families would not starve before his election for Senate. He changed his tune when he needed to gain favor for the election. They became the perfect scapegoat, with their limited political power. In the fifties, Johnson tried to pass legislation helping the transport conditions of Mexican migrant workers coming in and through the state at the behest of his constituents. When his constituents demanded he help the migrant worker, he did proving he had no personal vendetta against the race. Thanks partly to his efforts, Colorado addressed the transportation crisis of migrant workers, and if the Ruiz family had tried to enter Colorado in the fifties, authorities might have stopped them at the border but the situation might have looked like this:
Ramone Ruiz and his family were on their way through the desert to beautiful Colorado. It was a hot day and Ramone looked at his wife and five children with worry. She was holding their youngest girl in her arms, attempting to rock her to sleep with a soft lullaby, but it was so crowded and hot in the back of the truck transporting them to the sugar beet fields that the baby kept screaming and would not be soothed. Ramone’s other four children were also crammed in the back of the truck along with over fifty other migrant workers hired to work in the beet fields. They were on their way to a camp, but it was so crowded and hot in the truck that Ramone was afraid the children might develop heatstroke or end up smothered by the throng of people. They had heard stories of this happening and his wife had been reluctant to make the journey, but this was their only way to get to the beet fields.

All of a sudden, Ramone felt the truck beginning to slow and the driver started cursing under his breath. They had taken a different route than the year before, and Ramone thought they might have a flat tire, then, the back of the truck opened and men in uniform stood before them. Ramone became alarmed as the men ordered everyone off the truck. What was happening? Were these men going to try to deport them? Ramone’s wife looked at him in alarm, and he murmured reassurances to her as they climbed out of the truck. The men explained there were too many people on the truck and they were obtaining transportation for the overflow. Ramone was amazed and his wife was thrilled that they would not have to be in such a cramped space. It was going to be fine.

---

98 Employees often tried to cram as many workers into one truck to save on transportation costs. Box 27152, file Correspondence on Migrant Workers,” Steve McNichols Papers,” Colorado State Archives, Denver.

99 Camps were set up by order of the bracer program, which mandated clean living conditions for migrant workers imported from Mexico. Ibid.

100 Reports of deadly accidents and children found smothered were in the media. Ibid.

101 Often times, the trucks took alternate routes to hide from law enforcement officers to avoid fines for overcrowding. Ibid.
Bibliography


Colorado General Assembly, House Journal, 29th Session, January 10, 1933.


