

Hard Times at Chula Vista

10

Braceros made community in Wilder's migrant camps.

by Anna Webb

Issues of the *Wilder Herald* from the late 1930s and 1940s in Idaho depict an agricultural town concerned with what one might expect: news of the harvest, society notes about citizens traveling here or there or passing on to the great beyond. There are photographs of new brides headed for lives on nearby farmsteads. There are recipes, lists of local boys serving in the wartime military, and ads for swank hotels in Salt Lake City. One article details a collision between a calf and a car that resulted in more damage to the car than the calf. The story made the paper, which says something about the nature of life in Wilder at that time.

Other writings, news reports, and oral histories reveal different narratives—stories of hardscrabble times, tough work, and transient populations that represented a more ethnic and geographic diversity than that typically associated with Idaho.

Wilder is located between the Boise and Snake rivers in the western part of Canyon County. Vast swaths of sagebrush dominated the landscape until homesteaders, anticipating the arrival of irrigation, settled there in 1904.

Like other rural communities in Idaho and elsewhere, Wilder was home to Depression-era labor camps. Over the decades, the camps, some privately owned, some owned and operated by the federal government, housed a variety of people with very different backgrounds, but who had certain circumstances in common: poverty, need, and, frequently, marginalization.

The Farm Security Administration (FSA) founded the Wilder Labor Camp on the western outskirts of town. By 1941, the mobile camp was thriving and attracting workers from across the United States. The camp began as an optimistic place, a harbor for American families fleeing the dust bowl. These families sought literally greener pastures.

In later years, the camp was home to Braceros (Mexican workers) brought in to stem the wartime labor shortage, then to Japanese Americans newly released from internment camps, then to generations of migrant workers. A reinvention of the camp



in the mid-1970s into Chula Vista Acres, a project of the Wilder Housing Authority, was in some ways a return to those earlier, more hopeful times of the New Deal.

The former labor camp is emblematic of similar camps that never closed down or went away, but that were continually inhabited and reinvented.

Today, Chula Vista Acres is a 30-acre complex of tan duplexes located at Wilder's western edge on Idaho State Highway 19. It's home to 95 families. Most are of Mexican descent. Most of the residents are employed in agriculture. Most live at Chula Vista year round in a city that is now 75% Latino.

In Search of a Better Life

Chula Vista's roots were in the New Deal. The FSA and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration, were New Deal programs created to help poor farmers and their families weather two overwhelming challenges: the dust bowl and the Great Depression. Beginning in the late 1930s, the FSA built 34 government-owned labor camps, including those in the Idaho towns of Wilder, Caldwell (which today is Farmway Village), Ola, and Shelley. The camps were intended as rural reform measures, havens for desperate people. The camps were tools for "social rehabilitation," wrote Erasmo Gamboa in his book, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947*.

In Mountain Shadows: A History of Idaho, by Carlos A. Schwantes, includes an observation by Senator William Borah about itinerant farmers of that era in search of a better life. "Drive out on any of the main highways of our state and you will see cars, sometimes almost caravans, fleeing from the devastations of the drought."

As great experiments in communal living, the government farms provided work for struggling farm laborers. They also offered community amenities like shower rooms, laundry facilities, medical clinics, grocery stores, and more. The Wilder FSA camp and others like it became stopping places for families that took on the now less than politically correct



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appellations “Okie” and “Arkie” for their roots in the American South. The narrative of “dust bowl migrants” spread through popular culture. The Joad family, central to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, striving to better their lot in life, found shelter in government labor camps.

Wilder native and former Idaho Governor Phil Batt recalled in a 2015 interview his father’s farm and the work crew that joined Batt and other family members in the fields before the war. “Dad had a 10-man crew who worked year round. Okies and Arkies,” said Batt. “Dad loved them and had a lot of good things to say about where they had come from. Most brought their families. They were a good community.”

Oral histories offer more details about life in the Wilder labor camps. The California State College, Bakersfield Oral History Project includes an interview from 1981 with Bobby Glenn Russell, the son of a family from Arkansas who traveled west in the 1930s in search of work. Russell’s reminiscences included Idaho (and Wilder) as one stop on a long, rough path through the West. “We learned early that there were fruit tramps, cotton tramps and pea tramps. Each group had their own trail. There were gathering points for slack seasons. The pea tramps would hit Edison (California) then go into Oregon, Washington and over into Wilder, Idaho then back down through Santa Maria and winter in Brawley and Calipatria (California). It was just a run they made. They’d fill in picking strawberries.”

The Idaho State Archives and Research Center houses the oral history of Wilder resident Glenn Osborn, who served as the city’s chief of police, public works superintendent, and fire chief. Osborn’s own family came to Idaho from Missouri in 1938 during the Great Depression, lured by the promise of “an abundance of food in Idaho.” Osborn recalls Wilder’s labor camps, “tents and shacks” inhabited by “Okies and Arkies” who worked 10-hour days in the fields for 10 to 15 cents an hour.

Once its camps were up and running, the Farm Security Administration needed to show the public that its programs were successful and that its farm labor camps were, as intended, providing support for large numbers of struggling

Americans. The agency hired photographers to travel across the United States to document American life, including life in the camps, in the largest photography project ever sponsored by the U.S. government. The project, which some said showed America at its most vulnerable, is arguably the



RUSSELL LEE (U.S. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION)

Migrant farmer

most lasting legacy of the Farm Security Administration. The photo project cemented the careers of photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, and others. Bold black and white images showed Americans what the Great Depression looked like. Images of Idaho are among the comprehensive photo collections (publicly available and searchable online) held by the Library of Congress and Yale University.

Chicago-born Russell Lee was the FSA photographer who traveled to Idaho to document camp life in Wilder and other Idaho communities in 1941. Lee's photographs of Wilder reveal people living modest lives but lives that were also undeniably hopeful and forward-looking: a worker watering down the dusty ground near his tent; farm workers unloading their belongings into the tent where they would live; doctors and nurses in crisp white in "trailer clinics," tending to farm



RUSSELL LEE (U.S. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION)

Child living in the migratory labor camp



Russell Lee promotes the FSA resettlement program, Wilder, 1941.

workers’ children; the interior of a farm worker’s car strung with good luck trinkets. Lee’s caption for the photograph of the tent notes that the tents had floors. The fact that farm workers had running water, a community building for entertainment, and other benefits, Lee remarked, made it a better place to live than the tents might have suggested.

After photographing FSA labor camps in Wilder, Caldwell, and other Idaho communities, Lee continued his work in the West, documenting Japanese American internment at Camp Minidoka, now a national monument.

The World Comes to Wilder

The outbreak of World War II meant that some white itinerant farm workers left the labor camps to join the war effort. Others found more lucrative jobs in urban wartime factories. This created an urgent labor shortage for American

farm owners. New populations of workers moved into labor camps in Wilder and elsewhere to fill the gap.

Wilder Herald articles from 1943 mention “Gypsy pea pickers” who organized a strike for better wages. Phil Batt remembered Jamaicans working the fields in Wilder. Glenn Osborn recalled Puerto Ricans working in Wilder during the same era. German prisoners of war, too, were held in a Wilder labor camp east of town. An article from the *Spokesman-Review* from 1945 tells of three German soldiers ranging in age from 19 to 22 who escaped from the camp. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that the men were caught not 24 hours after escaping.

Wilder’s camps also housed Braceros (literally “strong-armed men”), who were part of a U.S. program to bring Mexican agricultural workers to the Northwest to work in food production beginning in 1943. Historian Gamboa said it was common for Braceros to move into FSA camps, although they were frequently segregated. The mission of the camps, too, had shifted, from providing social support and rural rehabilitation for poor American laborers to providing lodging for workers to ease the way for American farm owners who needed cheap labor.

The production of food was vital to the war effort. But the fact that they were performing vital work did not guarantee good conditions for Braceros. Schwantes wrote in his book *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*, “Migrants complained about living conditions: their housing often amounted to little more than tents in the winter and their food was often spoiled or dust covered, as was the case in a mess tent in Wilder, Idaho, where strong winds blasted through the facility and seasoned the food with grit.”

The social climate was, it seems, a mix of discrimination and indifference. As a Wilder native born in 1918 into a farm family, Phil Batt was in a unique position to witness both sentiments. Batt was known throughout his political career for his human rights advocacy. As a Republican governor (1995-1999), he advocated for the state to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday, an unpopular position at the time. As



IDAHO PUBLIC TELEVISION

Phil Batt, former governor of Idaho

a state senator in the late 1960s, he held informal hearings on minority issues in Idaho. He also pushed, successfully, for the legislature to establish the Idaho Commission on Human Rights.

Public Television featured an interview with Batt as part of *The Color of Conscience*, a series produced by Marcia Franklin in 2011. Franklin asked him about his hometown. “There were a few people who were definitely racist, and one of them would be a store-keeper who had a sign, ‘No Dogs or Mexicans’ in his window,” said Batt. “Of course that was disturbing to most of us. For the most part I don’t think the people thought much about race at all. They just thought their own insular affairs were what dictated their lives.”

The Mexican government refused to send workers to Idaho because of the discrimination, abuse, and poor living and working conditions. The U.S. government discontinued the Bracero program in Idaho in 1948. The FSA farm labor camp program had also wound down by then. Camps across the United States came under the governance of local entities, including, in some cases, farmers associations. The Wilder Farm Labor Sponsoring Committee took over the former FSA camp and a second camp known as the West Valley Camp. Individual farmers also continued to build and run private labor camps on their property.

The end of the Bracero program in Idaho did not mean the end of Mexican workers coming to Wilder and other rural communities. Instead, more migrant workers, and eventually their families, came to the area independently of the Bracero program and made their temporary homes at the labor camps.

By the mid-1960s, according to the governor’s *Report on Idaho Migratory Labor Camps*, 13 camps were operating within a roughly 10-mile radius around Wilder. These reports noted a variety of living conditions for workers. Some camps were well-kept. But in many cases, the conditions were poor, including lack of running water and adequate waste disposal.

Hard Work and Strong Community

“El campo de Wilder. It was crazy,” said Arnold Hernandez, now director of multicultural affairs at the College

of Idaho. Hernandez came to Wilder with his family in 1969 when he was 10 years old. The family moved into the Wilder Labor Camp. “We came from South Texas. A compadre of my dad’s said, ‘You know what, if you go to El Norte, there will be work there for you and your whole family.’ We had no idea where we were going,” said Hernandez.

His recollection of camp life included a mix of the grim and the good. The Wilder Labor Camp, he said, seemed like a large family with everyone living together in small quarters with a vital social sphere that included good food, music, and gossip. But he also recalls mattresses infested with bed bugs and roads filled with potholes and mud. Residents who were



OREGON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Braceros pick potatoes, 1944.

new to the camp and had no seniority lived in barracks made from old train cars. Hernandez recalled cinder block showers and a communal bathroom in poor repair. “When ladies went to the restroom, they always took someone with them who could stand in front of the holes in the wall to give them some privacy,” said Hernandez.

Poverty was rampant in the Wilder Labor Camp, he said. “But at the same time, we didn’t know what poverty was. To us life in the camp was richness, culture and families. After a while, everyone becomes extended family around the labor camp.”

SECRETARY OF FOREIGN RELATIONS, MEXICO



A Mexican pea-picker pauses for a photograph with his children at migrant camp in Idaho’s Teton County.

Hernandez and other children living at the camp worked in the fields along with their parents and older relatives. Children wore big hats, coats, and baggy pants to look bigger and older. “Some of those rows of beets and onions were a quarter of a mile long. We would work the far end of the rows so the farmer who owned the fields couldn’t see how young we were,” said Hernandez.

Trips to Caldwell for Mexican dances were one of the highlights of camp life, Hernandez said. “You’d get KFC,” he

recalled. “You’d dance with young ladies. The next day you’d be working in the fields, talking to your friends about the girls. ‘They were crying all over me,’ you’d say. ‘Yeah, they were crying alright,’ your friends would say, ‘because you smelled like onions.’”

For some years, Hernandez and his family lived the typical migrant lifestyle, returning to Texas during the winter or traveling for agricultural work in Oregon and Washington. The family eventually settled permanently in Wilder. When Hernandez turned 16, he left school to work full-time in the fields. He was fortunate to get another job working for a bookmobile that traveled from labor camp to labor camp. That second job, he said, changed his life. He impressed his bosses, who immediately recognized that he was a smart kid. “Someone saw something in me,” Hernandez said. “They told me I was college material.”

Hernandez studied and got his GED in a mere 2½ weeks. He enrolled in Boise State University with help from the College Assistance Migrant Program and majored in education. Now, as director of the multicultural program at College of Idaho, he works with students who have histories similar to his own, some with roots in Wilder and at Chula Vista.

Beginnings of Reform

Raquel Reyes was born in the 1960s and raised in Wilder. She now works as the grant specialist for the Community Council of Idaho, formerly the Idaho Migrant Council, founded in 1971. The Community Council provides an array of social programs, including migrant Head Start, medical clinics, housing assistance (mostly in eastern Idaho), job training, and career counseling for farm workers who want to transition out of the fields into professions with better pay and opportunities for advancement.

Her father, the late Ramiro Reyes, a community leader and minister, began migrating to Idaho for work in agriculture in the 1950s. He founded Iglesia Evangelica, a bilingual, bicultural church in Wilder in 1962. In later years, Reyes worked to improve living conditions for migrants.

The 1960s was an era when some reforms were beginning to take place in support of migrant laborers. In 1956, local religious organizations formed the Southern Idaho Migrant Ministry. In 1955, the Idaho State Legislature created the Governor's Migratory Labor Committee. Both organizations were concerned with improving the lives of migrants, including improving their housing in labor camps.

The Reyes family was among the first former migrant families to buy a home in Wilder. Raquel Reyes did not live at the Wilder Labor Camp when she was a child, but her best friend lived there. Reyes visited often. "I remember the cinder block cabins. A family of seven living in a two-room brick cabin. You walked into what was the kitchen area. There would be a two-burner gas stove on top of the counter and a sink. You'd walk through a hallway into a makeshift bedroom/livingroom/gathering place," said Reyes.

Like Hernandez, she recalled barracks made from train cars. "You just took it for granted that that was the way those families lived. It never dawned on me that my friend's house was different from my house, but I can tell you the housing was very poor. Very hot in the summer with no ventilation and very cold in the fall before the people left."

In 1971 San Antonio's Bishop Patricio Flores visited Idaho. In Spanish, he told a crowd of 175 at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Nampa that migrants should stay put and pressure their newly adopted communities to provide them with education, housing, and health care. "The monkeys in the San Antonio zoo have better places to live than the migrants in Texas or in Idaho." Flores informed his audience that "even the Church will not begin to listen" until migrants and ex-migrants demand inclusion on an equal basis.

From Minority to Majority

In 1972, the City of Wilder passed a resolution to establish a housing authority. The city annexed the Wilder Labor Camp. In 1975, the housing authority secured a grant and a bond from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to tear down the labor camp and rebuild the complex as affordable family

housing for agricultural workers. The USDA package also included funds for rental assistance for tenants.

The city named the complex *Chula Vista* (Spanish for “beautiful view”). Crews razed the cinder block cabins and hauled away the train car barracks. The complex was rebuilt in two phases, in 1976 and 1979, said David Lincoln, housing authority administrator. Improvements included paved roads, grassy common areas, a community center, and a new water and sewer system.

Although the history of Chula Vista was typical of other camps in many ways, the improvements to its physical plant



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set it somewhat apart. A 1980 report by an Idaho advisory committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights looked at migrant housing across southern Idaho. The report found migrant housing, in general, “deplorable.” But Chula Vista—with its 80 individual two- and three-bedroom houses furnished with beds, dressers, tables, chairs, full stoves, and refrigerators—fared relatively well in the report.

“The Chula Vista complex is not recognizable as farm labor housing, although it sits directly on the road entering town,” read the report. “Their choice of names was a careful and deliberate one, reflecting an attempt to create a planned community atmosphere rather than perpetuate the traditional ‘labor camp’ image.”

The complex, according to the report, had year-round occupancy and maintained a waiting list. A community

Concrete blocks housed migrant labor before the rebuilding of Chula Vista.

center provided space for tenant gatherings on the main floor and a child care program in the basement. “Many persons recommended Wilder’s operation as an example of what farmworker housing could (and should) be,” the report continued.

Chula Vista is unique in another way. In 2012, the complex, now 120 units, paid off its debt to the USDA. “We’re independent. We’re running on our own,” said Lincoln.



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Ismael Fernandez, a college freshman, serves on Wilder’s all-Latino city council.

The transition came with challenges. Paying off the debt meant an end to USDA rent subsidies. Chula Vista lost a third of its residents who could no longer afford to live there. The complex struggled for a couple years to fill its vacancies, said Lincoln, but today, the complex is full. As of 2016, rent for a two-bedroom duplex, including utilities, was \$470.

The association with the USDA required residents to work in agriculture. That requirement is gone, said Lincoln, but in this overwhelmingly rural community, nearly all of Chula Vista’s current residents still work in agricultural professions. Less than 10% of residents migrate during the winter. Farm work, particularly in hops production (an industry that is

expanding because of all the new local breweries), is available all year. During the off-season, some residents work in onion and apple packing operations. Others find work in local meat processing and fertilizer plants.

Wilder's Mexican American community, too, continues to establish itself in the Canyon County mainstream, a far cry from the early days of the Bracero program and the signs in shop windows banning Mexicans. A majority of Wilder residents are Latino. In 2015, the city elected its first all-Latino city council as well as its first Latina (and first female) mayor, Alicia Almazan. The election was notable enough to warrant an article in the *Huffpost*.

Seventy-five percent of the 450 students enrolled in Wilder's public school system live in Chula Vista Acres. The school district is one of the poorest in the state with nearly all of its students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. "Chula Vista is still a place that needs help," said Lincoln. For a time the Idaho Foodbank made deliveries directly to the complex's community center. "But it's no longer a hard luck place." There's reason for optimism, Lincoln added. The Wilder School District was a recent recipient of an Apple ConnectED grant that will provide an iPad for each student in the district.

Although the people who originally came to Chula Vista were passing through in tough circumstances, Chula Vista is changing from a transient place to a stable neighborhood. Wilder, in turn, has transformed in many ways, and Latinos are becoming the mainstream of the town rather than a marginalized class.



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Wilder mayor, Alicia Mora Almazan, receives a congratulatory hug after her swearing-in ceremony.



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