

**Del Valle a Willmar: Settling Out
of the Migrant Stream in a
Rural Minnesota Community**

*by Susan Green
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Del Valle a Willmar: Settling Out of the Migrant Stream in a Rural Minnesota Community

The phenomenon of Chicanos/Latinos settling out of the migrant stream in Minnesota is not a new one. St. Paul's West Side and Minneapolis' North Side were built by Chicanos/Mexicanos who settled out during the off-season or came to find jobs in the rail or meatpacking industries. Although the process is not new, the places migrants now settle are. The fastest growing Chicano/Latino population in Minnesota is no longer in the Twin Cities metropolitan area; it is in rural Minnesota.

Willmar Minnesota is now the home to the third largest Chicano/Latino community in Minnesota. The Chicano/Latino population has grown 750% over the past 10 years. The vast majority of these new residents are migrants who have put down roots in Willmar and in the larger community of Kandiyohi County, located in West Central Minnesota. Ninety percent of Willmar's Chicano/Latino population consists of *Tejanos*, or of people who migrated directly from Texas. The majority of residents came from the Rio Grand Valley.

I first began studying migrant settlement in Willmar Minnesota in 1989. I wrote my thesis about Chicanos/Latinos in Willmar for my baccalaureate in Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota. Now, five years later, I am again looking at the Chicano/Latino community in Willmar to see how things have changed. In 1989, I made predictions about the direction of the community, some of which were accurate and validated the theories I had used. Other predictions, especially those regarding attitudinal changes, were too optimistic.

To understand the contemporary settlement of Chicanos/Latinos, and as comparison, I would like to offer some historical background about Willmar and the nature of past immigration to the area. Willmar's past and present ethnic development are microcosms of both Minnesota, and to some extent, Midwest development.

Minnesota, as a territory, first became attractive to settlers in the 1840's and 1850's. In 1856, the Kandiyohi Townsite Company began selling land in the Willmar area (Blegen, 1963). The Homestead Act of 1862 offered Willmar settlers 160 acres in exchange for the improvement and cultivation of the land for five years (Clark, 1989). At one point Willmar was so popular it was even considered as the site for the state capitol, now located in St. Paul.

Agriculture was, and is, the foundation of Willmar's economy. Large food processing companies such as Cargill and Peavey moved to Western Minnesota in the 1860's and 1870's (Clark, 1989). The whole community directly or indirectly depended on agriculture.

The most important factors shaping in immigrant settlement in Willmar were James J. Hill and the expansion of the Great Northern Railway. Hill ran a bureau of emigration in Europe that issued pamphlets and maps to interested settlers. The railroad, however, "took a special interest in promoting immigration by colonies, so that neighbors in the Fatherland may be neighbors in the new west" (Blegen, 1963). Not only was growth visible in Willmar due to the Great Northern Railway, but it was ethnically planned growth such that communities in the New Frontier resembled those in the "Old World." The majority of Willmar's first settlers were northern European: Norwegian, Swedish, German, British, Dutch, and Irish (Rice, 1973). The immigrants were segregated by nationality within the area. The county was composed of various ethnic enclaves, each with their own geographic location resembling the "Old World," just as Hill had intended.

Because the movement of people and information at this time was limited, a strong regional consciousness centered on the local parish developed in each village (Rice, 1973). Outsiders were conspicuous. Studies have shown that Willmar and Kandiyohi County's ethnic make-up were not atypical and the settlement pattern was quite similar to Minnesota at large.

It is possible to map these enclaves: the Norwegians settled in northwest, Kandiyohi, British and Irish in the northeastern part, and German and Dutch in the southwestern corner of the county (Rice, 1973). Contemporary Chicano/Latino settlers have continued this pattern of spacial segregation, not always by choice.

The 1890's saw the first migration of Mexicans to the Willmar area. Due to the Dingley Tariff on imported sugar, domestic sugar beet production in Minnesota increased dramatically. In 1900, the Minnesota census counted 24 Mexicans in Minnesota (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1982).

In 1929, due to the Great Depression, the Minnesota Sugar Company, one of the state's largest, stopped recruiting Mexican workers in Texas and did not employ those Mexicans already in the state, stranding unemployed Mexicans in Minnesota (Gilligan, 1948). Anglo-American workers displaced Mexicans in the sugar beet industry, and many Mexicans migrated to St. Paul in search of work. There they became targets for the Midwest repatriation effort (Fridley, 1981).

During World War II economic conditions in Willmar, and nationwide, improved. Kandiyohi County was one of only four counties in the state to show not only economic, but also demographic, growth at this time. In 1943, it was estimated that 350 Mexican nationals were employed in the beet fields and over 1,000 were employed by Minnesota Valley Canning (which became Green Giant) and Fairmont Canning (Fridley, 1981). Railways and packing houses also recruited Mexicans because they were "satisfactory" workers who did work other "Americans" would not (Gilligan, 1948).

In 1948, the Minnesota governor's office did a report on the "Mexican in Minnesota" and referred to Mexican migrants and braceros as "Latin American ambassadors" in the field (Gilligan, 1948). Willmar paralleled the national trend toward urbanization and mechanization in the 1940's. This destroyed many family farms which were then bought up and incorporated into one of several large-scale agribusinesses.

The most important agricultural product in Willmar, after sugar beets, was turkey. In 1949, Earl B. Olson opened Jennie-O Turkey, one of the largest employers in Willmar today. In the 1960's Jennie-O Turkey had an unwritten policy in which they "wanted to hire Mexicans," and many migrant workers took jobs and stayed in the area (Fridley, 1981).

By 1992, Jennie-O had expanded to three plants in Willmar and one in nearby Melrose. The company currently employs approximately 4,000 people, a large majority of whom are Chicano/Latino (Aamot, 1994).

In 1986, the George A. Hormel Company purchased Jennie-O for \$85 million (Ciccantelli A1). Not coincidentally, from 1985 to 1986, Hormel in Austin, Minn., faced one of the most bitter strikes in meatpacking history, the P-9 strike. The strike "ended" for some in 1986 after much violence and confrontation between union workers and Hormel.

Since Hormel bought Jennie-O Foods eight years ago, production totals have doubled, and 25 product lines have been created or expanded (Aamot, 1994). Products such as turkey ham, turkey bologna, and turkey hotdogs are now commonplace. In 1987, turkey became the meat of choice over all others in the United States (Hage 1989)¹.

Hormel effectively shifted pork production and processing at its Austin plant to turkey products and processing at its new Willmar plants. Significantly, Jennie-O is a non-union plant and vows to stay that way. In the past during union votes, workers claimed that they were threatened and harassed; the National Labor Relations Board concluded it was unlikely a fair union vote would ever be held at Jennie-O.

In community discourse, Jennie-O has become known as the "Mexican" plant. A contemporary grievance among Chicanos/Latinos settling in Willmar is that the Department of Training and Education routinely refers Mexicans to Jennie-O and other meatpacking plants instead of to mechanical or office jobs for which they are qualified (Shores, 1993).

It was not until the mid-1980's or so, whenever increasing numbers of Chicanos/Latinos began settling out of the migrant stream, that immigration became a phenomenon worth documenting locally. Chicano/Latino migrants settled out in Willmar not only for employment opportunities, but also because it was the county seat, home to government services, the then Minnesota Migrant Council, and vo-tech and community colleges.

In actuality, one of the reasons hostility toward Chicanos/Latinos in Willmar was so great was because they began settlement during a downturn in the local economy. The job market was saturated, yet contrary to traditional economic or push-pull theories of migration, people continued to settle out of the stream in Willmar. In their book *Immigrant America*, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut discuss a theory they term the "promigration cycle," and it illuminates the contemporary formation of Willmar's Chicano/Latino community.²

The promigration cycle consists of two levels: the macro and the micro. The macro-structure rests on the symbiotic relationship between two areas or countries. Prior expansion and recruitment efforts of countries or regions laid the foundations for contemporary migratory patterns. In the case of Willmar, sugar beet, railroad and agricultural recruitment at the turn of the century, and post-World War II recruitment by poultry processors and meatpackers established migratory patterns in the area.

The second level of Portes' and Rumbaut's promigration cycle, the micro-structure, is composed of informal social networks of family and friends. These networks provide important information about employment, social conditions, and the Chicano/Latino community in a given geographic location. In Willmar, Chicanos/Latinos had been coming to do beet work and agricultural work for generations. The pattern was established by recruiters, but individuals and families decided to come to Willmar because it offered important services and facilities other areas did not.

Thus, a constriction in Willmar's economy and lack of employment opportunities were not sufficient to keep migrants from settling in an area with which they were familiar. Chicanos/Latinos, like their European predecessors, formed ethnically segregated communities in Willmar in the trailer parks and low income housing on the south and southeast side.³

Initially, the economic realities of Willmar in the mid-1980's meant some Chicanos/Latinos were unable to find work. As unemployment and under-employment increased in Willmar in the late 1980's and early 1990's, businesses saw this surplus of available workers as a resource waiting to be tapped. What Willmarites saw initially as "the Mexican problem" became a source of tremendous growth for the community. Short term unemployment has been offset by long term growth. Target, Wal-Mart, Rainbow/Festival Foods, Jennie-O, and others have located or expanded their operations in the area.

Some Anglo-Americans⁴ in Willmar have viewed Chicano/Latino settlement as a breath of fresh air, while others have seen it as a curse. The responses range from the enthusiastic to the hostile and violent.

When I first wrote about Willmar in 1989, I noted evidence of the cultural impact of Chicano/Latinos on the largely Anglo American community. For example, an urban legend developed among Anglo-American Willmarites that Chicanos/Latinos were coming to Willmar because a flier was circulating in Texas telling *Tejanos* to "come to Kandiyohi County because it has the best welfare benefits in the nation."⁵ Many felt Chicanos/Latinos were targeting Willmar specifically to live off public assistance, despite the fact that benefits were the same in every other county in the state. Many claimed a friend or relative had such a flier or had seen one, but in 15 years, none have ever really been found by scholars or government agencies. A simultaneous, yet contradictory concern, was that Chicanos/Latinos were in Willmar to take jobs from native residents. Everyone, it seemed, knew someone who had lost a job to a Mexican.

I thought the myth of the flier had faded until a student in my class Winter quarter (1994) "informed" classmates that I was "misleading" them with a discussion of the promigration cycle. The "real" reason, according to her, that Chicanos/Latinos were settling in Willmar was because of a flier advertising they had the best welfare benefits in the nation!⁶

Initial responses in the mid-1980's were not all this negative, however. Local churches celebrated Spanish language masses and established the "Amigos de Cristo" day camp, where Chicano and Anglo children spent summers together. Several churches also offered bus service to masses from local trailer parks where many Chicanos/Latinos lived, or offered on-site services in the trailer parks themselves.

Thus, churches in Willmar were among the first to adapt and to embrace the Chicano/Latino community. The first community relations program, "Building Bridges," was developed out of the efforts of local clergy.⁷

The other organization to respond quickly in the mid-1980's to migrants' needs was what was then called the Minnesota Migrant Council, now called the Midwest Farmworker Employment and Training. The Migrant Council assisted those trying to settle out of the stream. They helped migrants find training, education, daycare, employment, housing, and social and legal services. Without the Migrant Council's help, it is doubtful that so many Chicanos/Latinos would have settled in Willmar or with so much ease.

Since the mid-1980's when settlement began, Willmar has changed dramatically. It still bases its economy on agriculture and the surrounding agricultural industries, but it is also a booming urban area. There have been changes that might be metaphorically characterized by the movie title, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."

The good changes in Willmar have been both attitudinal and physical. Many services in Willmar are now routinely provided in English and Spanish, such as hospital care, police service, government services, etc.. Some local businesses have bilingual facilities and proudly advertise them in hopes of expanding their clientele.

Courts and classrooms are now not only bilingual out of necessity, but also out of habit.⁸ Interpreters in court used to be haphazard, utilizing anyone on hand who knew even a smattering of Spanish. The court system now routinely offers Spanish training and exams for court interpreters. Standards, qualifications, and ethics are

continually being reviewed (“Court” B1). Now several bilingual teaching aides are available for every school in Willmar. The extent of bilingual service is much like that offered in the much larger urban area of Minneapolis/St. Paul; it is not better in some cases. Many in the Chicano/Latino community with good language skills have found work helping others who settle in Willmar.

Changes for the better have not only been adaptations by “the system” to its new users, but also have come at the hands of Chicanos/Latinos themselves. Important new additions in Willmar are the Mexican owned and run gas station, restaurant, and grocery store which the Chicano/Latino community patronize frequently. A large “Centro,” outside Elm Lane Trailer Park, houses events every day for the community, such as tax preparation classes, adult ESL classes, Fare Share food distributions, lectures, and bailes.⁹

The churches, which had been leaders in the mid-1980’s, continue to be at the forefront of Tejano organizing in the community. A new organization with strong church ties is the *Alianza Hispano*. The *Alianza* serves as an advocacy and lobby group and was in bringing the Minnesota Department of Human Rights to Willmar to conduct hearings on racism and discrimination.¹⁰ The *Alianza* also pushed for the development of the local commission on human rights. The organization stresses dealing with racism as a moral issue that is not easily fixed with stopgap treatments (Kendall, 1993).

Perhaps the most encouraging sign to come from the Willmar area is one that demonstrates not only attitudinal change, but also structural change. This change is illustrated by a walk-out at Heartland Foods in nearby Marshall, Minnesota. During three weeks in May of 1993, the INS raided turkey processing plants in the towns, Madelia, Washington, and Marshall, also in West Central Minnesota. Sixty people were arrested in the raid in Marshall, and 50 other workers did not show up for work after the raid. Heartland spokesmen touted their full cooperation with the INS and their compliance with immigration legislation (“INS Raids,” 1993).

Union workers at Heartland Foods suspected more than cooperation on the management’s part with the INS. Workers suspected management had called the INS themselves to avoid paying the undocumented workers and giving them the semi-annual bonuses due the following week. As a response, 100 workers walked off their jobs and would not return until the company made concessions to the union.

Workers also forced the company to release the deported workers’ paychecks and to give them 50% of the \$500 bonuses they had earned (“Turkey Plant,” 1993). Union workers acted in solidarity with non-union, undocumented workers. This walk-out showed not only solidarity against management, but also an understanding of the precarious situation of undocumented workers.

The Marshall raid was a media ploy more than anything. Over half of the workers without documents were released the following day on their own recognizance. These rural Minnesota raids and subsequent deportations were then featured in an in-depth special series on NBC news affiliate KARE in Minneapolis.¹¹

However, not everything has changed for the better in Willmar over the past five years. Despite the gains Chicanos/Latinos have made in Willmar, 70% of them still live below the federal poverty line (as compared to 12.8% for non-Latino residents) (Polta, 1993). Structural and institutional barriers are clearly a significant factor affecting Willmar’s Chicano/Latino population.

Blatant racism and discrimination also still exist in abundance, as the State Human Rights hearings held in Willmar uncovered last fall. For example, national white supremacist organizations, Aryan Nation and United Patriot Front, inundated the city with racist fliers on four separate occasions last year. Fliers referred to “non-white welfare parasites,” “Hispanic drug lords,” and “non-white thugs” that “are coming in the thousands and they are all pregnant” (Aamot, 1993).

Another example is the experience of Willmar police officer Arturo Dearo. Dearo moved to Willmar from El Paso to fill an opening for a bilingual officer.¹² Dearo claimed he faced repeated harassment, failed to receive back-up from fellow officers, and was accused of being in collusion with Chicano felons, especially the drug dealers. Dearo filed complaints and received death threats in response. Two years ago he found a grenade in his squad car, and an internal investigation dismissed it as a harmless prank. Dearo quit, filed suit, and eventually settled with the City of Willmar for \$75,000.

Not all racism in Willmar is this explicit. Often community discussions about housing shortages and educational facility shortages are couched in terms of “overcrowding” and “recent immigrants.” Rarely do Willmarites still refer to it as “the Mexican problem.” These public discussions blame the victim and refer to “cultural differences” as the source of tension in the com-

munity. One example is a Willmar police officer, Rick James, who said the following in an interview about violence at the Elm Lane Trailer Park:

“...culture and poverty play a bigger role in the violence than overcrowding...the problem starts when they are out barbe-cuing and drinking. It’s not the overcrowding. There are a lot of guns out here. They like to flex their muscle and they shoot, and they shoot into the air” (Prusak, 1993).

The myths about machismo and the pathology of the Chicano family permeate his discussion of Chicano culture and the housing shortage in Willmar.

Sometimes efforts to “help” or to “understand” Chicanos/Latinos in Willmar have the opposite effect. Two well-intentioned juniors at Willmar Senior High School wrote a book entitled *The Story Behind M&Ms*, which was praised by the school and read to all elementary children in the district. The book is about racism, but it carries strong overtones of paternalism and uses Anglo culture as the norm for judging all others.

The Story Behind M&Ms tells the story of Jerome, a Black child adopted by “White” parents. Jerome faces racism and is taunted by other kids at school. Jerome goes home and tells his mother he is tired of being “White” everywhere except for the color of his skin. He asks why he has to be “different.”

His mother explains that people are like M&Ms: each candy has a different color on the outside, but they are all the same on the inside. With this simplistic explanation Jerome is satisfied. He returns to school, wins many new friends by handing out M&Ms and relating his mother’s analogy, and is eventually elected class president (Little, 1992).

The book, read to all children in the district, demonstrates the sometimes unanticipated products of multicultural education. It also shows how trying to add diversity to the curriculum without changing the fundamental structures of the educational system.

Some contemporary issues facing Willmar’s Chicano/Latino population are not so clearly “good” or “bad.” They fit into what Roy Garza, head of the Spanish Speaking Affairs Council in St. Paul, calls “not Minnesota nice, but Minnesota ugly” (Kendall, 1993). Two

examples, again surrounding the oft-cited Elm Lane Trailer Park, illuminate the complexity of the contemporary climate in Willmar.

Due to increasing violence and neighbor complaints among Elm Lane’s residents, the City of Willmar installed a police substation at the entrance to the park. Visitors and residents were required to check in and out at the substation in an effort to curb “undesirable elements” from getting in. Some residents complained the substation was overkill and an attempt by police to oppress the community, while others liked the new security and peace they found within Elm Lane’s confines. Some residents expressed that the loss of a little personal freedom was a small price to pay for the safety of one’s family.

A second issue regarding the trailer housing in Willmar is a city ordinance enacted in 1989 that required minimum levels of quality for trailer homes and larger lot sizes for better visibility and access. Chicanos/Latinos, who were forced to live in dilapidated trailers because affordable housing was so scarce, were optimistic the new ordinance would improve conditions. The deadline for improvements is June of this year (1994). Larger lot sizes, however, mean some residents will be evicted to make room for the remaining trailers. The park owners of Elm Lane refuse to comply and vow to close the park before doing so.

The *Alianza Hispano* has been frantically developing a transition plan for those families evicted one way or another. What started out as an ordinance to improve conditions for settling migrants will eventually displace them. Because the City of Willmar has been extremely reluctant to finance low-cost housing projects, combined with the new trailer ordinance, the result (intentional or not) may be the out-migration of Chicanos/Latinos from the area. It is hard to define these issues at Elm Lane as anything other than “ugly.”

Overall, Willmar’s Chicano/Latino population has been a fascinating one to study. The growth and evolution of the Chicano/Latino community were something I envisioned five years ago. The subtle and complex forms racism and discrimination have taken in Willmar were things I thought would improve.

Some things I could not predict at all, such as the construction of a 500-bed Puerto Rican prison outside Willmar. The new Prairie Correctional Facility is one of the factors I think will significantly affect the Chicano/Latino community in the area and add cultural

complexity to the largely Tejano settlement.¹³ Beyond that, I am not sure how Willmar will change in another five years. One thing I am certain of is that because the tremendous urban growth of Chicanos and Latinos in rural Minnesota is unprecedented in the state's history, Willmar, Minnesota, will continue to be an interesting area to watch and study. Willmar has broader implications for Minnesota and the Midwest as a model of community development and interaction to be adopted or rejected. Other rural locations in the early stages of similar demographic shifts can look to Willmar as an example of one community's struggle for change.

Endnotes:

1. Turkey became the most popular meat after extensive campaigns about the "healthiness" of white meat over red meat, carried on by poultry farmers. See Dave Hage, "Poultry Workers Pay Physical Price for Healthy Food," *Star Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1989, 1A.
2. I have greatly simplified the work of Portes and Rumbaut; their book and their theories are much more complex than I have dealt with them here. See Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Immigrant American: A Portrait*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1990).
3. Again, it is important to keep in mind that Chicanos/Latinos do not always chose to locate in certain areas of the city, but are afforded little else. Housing discrimination and a lack of low-cost housing has limited the options available to new settling migrants.
4. Some "Anglo-Americans" in Willmar have expressed displeasure with the use of this term. One woman wrote into the *West Central Tribune* that her ancestors fought the British in the American Revolution and did not want to be an "Anglo" anything, only an "American." See Ruth Petersen, "Letter to the Editor," *West Central Tribune*, May 11, 1993, A1.
5. Similar types of urban legends have appeared in other rural areas of Minnesota, such as the Fargo/Moorhead region.
6. When I asked this student if she herself had seen this flier, of course, she had not, but claimed a relative of hers had. The legend has remained surprisingly strong after many years.

7. A series of other programs developed between the old "Building Bridges" program and the new *Alianza Hispano*. There were the Mayor's Minority Advisory Committee and the Minority Advisory Council. These programs have tended to be short-lived and without a lot of power, until recently. See John Prusak, "Hispanic Alliance Eyes Changes and Traditions," *West Central Tribune*, May 12, 1993, A1.
8. A number of other bilingual services have also appeared such as a bilingual cable television program and regular features and letters printed in Spanish in the *West Central Tribune* (although the newspaper continues with the discriminatory practice of reporting disproportionately on the crimes committed by Chicanos/Latinos).
9. The group formed in November of 1992 in response to the needs of the Chicano/Latino community in Willmar. Some Anglo-American Willmarites have decried the *Alianza's* tactics as confrontational and abrasive. One Willmar city official said the *Alianza* should try to be more like the Sons of Norway and act as a cultural preservation society instead of a social action agency. See John Prusak, "Hispanic Alliance Eyes Changes," *West Central Tribune*, May 12, 1993, A1.
10. The Minnesota Department of Human Rights also visited other areas in out-state Minnesota where migrants have experienced racism and discrimination, such as Albert Lea, Worthington, Marshall, Tracy, Crookston, and Fargo/Moorhead.
11. Undocumented workers receiving assistance from the government has come under heavy attack in the past several years in the Minnesota state legislature. Assistance to anyone has come under attack as demonstrated by a Minnesota legislator who proposed the establishment of a "dating service" so men and women on relief money could get married and cut down on the amount of aid they received!
12. In the late 1980's, Willmar was featured in a *New York Times* article as "progressive" because they required all police officers to have Spanish language classes. However, after the exit of Dearo, the police department decided the best route was to hire two bilingual, non-Hispanic officers.

13. Prisoners released from the new Prairie Correctional Facility are to be returned to Puerto Rico for release. This was one of the conditions on which the community agreed to the prison. However, it has now been noted that several of the prisoners were not from the island and would instead be released somewhere in the United States, most likely in the midwest.

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