A Different Look at California’s Commission of Immigration and Housing in the Early Twentieth Century

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A Different Look at California’s Commission of Immigration and Housing in the Early Twentieth Century

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History at Pomona College

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Abstract
The Commission of Immigration and Housing (CCIH) was created in the summer of 1913. This essay argues that the need California’s progressive felt to protect and improve Mexican immigrants during the early twentieth century shadowed the expression of agency by Mexican immigrants alongside working-class and non-white immigrants. The commission’s engagement with Mexican immigrants in efforts to “Americanize” them furthered ideas that rejected immigrants from full political participation. Through arguments about improving ‘the standard of living’ and the conditions in labor camp throughout the state, the commission balanced serving immigrant needs while staying away from interfering with California’s agricultural wage-labor system. As will be seen, the commission’s initial support of all immigrants quickly shifted to implicitly supporting only Mexican immigrants, revealing further their rejection of non-white heteronormative bodies.
Introduction

California first established a temporary commission overseeing immigration in 1912. This lasted until the summer of 1913, when the Commission of Immigration and Housing (CCIH) was created. Housed at the University of California, Berkeley Bancroft Library, collections on the Commission of Industrial Relations: Commission of Immigration and Housing holds thousands of documents collected from the year of its temporary creation in 1912 until 1939, a few years before the commission ended its services for immigrants in 1945.1 This essay argues that the need California’s progressive felt to protect and improve Mexican immigrants during the early twentieth century shadowed the expression of agency by Mexican immigrants alongside working-class and non-white immigrants. The commission’s engagement with Mexican immigrants in efforts to “Americanize” them furthered ideas that rejected immigrants from full political participation. Through arguments about improving ‘the standard of living’ and the conditions in labor camp throughout the state, the commission balanced serving immigrant needs while staying away from interfering with California’s agricultural wage-labor system. As will be seen, the commission’s initial support of all immigrants quickly shifted to implicitly supporting only Mexican immigrants, revealing further their rejection of non-white heteronormative bodies.

The archive at Bancroft is extremely diverse and contradictory. This “clutter”, as I call it, reveals multiple different location in which information was gathered and a cacophony of opinions held by the state bureaucrats and citizens towards immigrants. This essay will engage with research and archival material of the commission from its first ten years to explore how the Commission of Immigration and Housing served California progressive desires. Despite pro- and anti-immigration sentiments within the commission—reflected throughout its archive—the

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commission served the interests of Progressivism by promoting narrow ideas of assimilation, opposing labor mobilization and rejecting non-Mexican immigrants. Through the commission’s history, the state established powers to monitor and investigate immigrants. Criminalizing immigrants, especially immigrant labor mobilization, protected the state’s desire to sustain a low-wage labor system where immigrants, one where they were accepted as laborers but not as political agents. Yet, this process was by no means straightforward or predictable nor can it be simply rendered as a story of state-driven racism.

The archival clutter revealed positive and negative features of the commission that make it difficult to easily understand the nature of the commission as either for or against immigrants. My choice to focus on smaller moments within in the commission’s archive—such as the Wheatland Riot of 1913 or investigations of South Asian immigrants—highlight less focused aspects of the commission’s actions. The state’s use of the Wheatland Riot to criminalize labor mobilization and investigate the Industrial Workers of the World or the rejection of South Asian immigrants in the commission’s efforts to house, educate, and assimilate are both understudied by scholars who have written on the commission. Rather than a reflection of the commission and the body that comprised it, I believe these actions reflect state driven goals of progressivism.

Throughout the U.S, public and private agencies who did the work of “Americanization” sought to advance specific population of people, most often immigrants. In writing, the state tasked the commission to work with “all levels of government to ensure citizenship.” This state responsibility was said to include all immigrants but emerged in reflection of the state’s 20th century character; despite the large diversity in races and nationalities that made up the immigrant agricultural labor force in California, the commission’s focus reflected its anti-

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Japanese and anti-Chinese sentiment and the increased dependence on cheap, unorganized Mexican labor. The commission granted its resources mostly to Mexican immigrants in an effort to ‘Americanize’ these immigrants while it racialized them through defined standards of housing, clothing, hygiene and gender.

According to its first annual report, the Commission’s sought to “primarily distribute and assimilate immigrants.” This included preventing exploitation and teaching the “duties of citizenship.”3 By the middle of the 20th century the Commission was best known for providing social counseling, housing and labor inspections and adult education. Their work mirrored the Americanization work being done on the East coast, efforts focused on immigrant education, English language proficiency and general “American standards of living.”4 In the commission’s early years it was assigned many responsibilities but by the end of the century it was becoming well-known for its home teaching to Mexican immigrant women.5 The commission gathered research and taught Mexican immigrants about American standard of living, ranging from clothing to housing construction. Responsibilities specific to California and its large agricultural character gave way to the assigning the commission authority to inspect camp and labor conditions. In Section 5 of its annual report, the state granted the Commission of Immigration and Housing’s full power “to make full inquiry, examination and investigation into the conditions, welfare and industrial opportunities of all immigrants.”6

Taking a look at the political aftermath of an important farm labor riot in 1915 explores the theme of labor strife in 20th century California. The result of immigrant and working-class laborers uniting against unfair labor conditions was a political focus of the commission’s

5 Roesch, 61.
authority to investigate. The use of state effort to investigate the Industrial Workers of the World uncovers one of the driving forces behind their creation and an important character of early 20th century progressive California, specifically state fear of labor strikes and immigrant mobilization. State agents sought to restrict and criminalize labor organization viewing it as a threat to the state and the safety of society. They often viewed arguing for fair wages and working conditions was seen outside of legitimate political disagreement, for it attempted to knock on the door of an exploitative wage labor system on which California’s economy depended on. Where the Wheatland Riot could now be seen as an expression of immigrant and working-class labor agency and political mobilization, in 1913 the state furthered a narrative of an immigrant in need of protection and monitoring.

The appearance of South Asian immigrants in the CCIH’s archive at UC Berkeley reveal in one small way the commission’s exclusion of many non-Mexican immigrants including their complicity in the exclusion and discrimination against Japanese immigrants that translated into different grievances against Asian immigrants more largely. The investigation of South Asian immigrants reflected the state’s desire to keep immigrants at the bottom of the wage-labor system as well as maintain an image of California and the heteronormative household. Where Mexican immigrants were depicted as able to assimilate into a heteronormative household, South Asian immigrants were rejected from Americanization efforts and often sexualized as deviant or predatory. The commission was not established to enact real structural change or political participation for immigrants, and early on and throughout its career, the commission’s use of standards of living in its effort to Americanize defined citizenship for Mexican immigrants without political agency or fair wages. I believe that through targeting known wealthy South Asian immigrants, the commission participated further in the rejection of immigrants outside of
low-wage labor. The policies and improvements in camp conditions for agricultural laborers produced from the commission’s work is evident in current research, but the fear of immigrant agency especially outside of Mexican immigrants reveal more ways than one that the commission functioned as a progressive state apparatus.

**Methodological Framework**

My work builds on the theoretical framework of Michal Kohout essay “Immigration Politics in California’s Inland Empire.” Kohout explained the theoretical approach of geographers studying contemporary immigration who use a political and economic approach. Here, we see how immigration is a necessary part of the global capitalist economy. Kohout wrote,

“This political-economy approach is deployed to explain the contradiction between the globalizing economy of goods and services and the more restrictive national effort to regulate the movement of persons. In general, these studies agree that restrictive politics of immigration are necessary to create a large and flexible (disposable) reserve army of labor with no recourse to rights granted through citizenship.”

The need for immigrants throughout California’s history has created the conditions for the movement of immigrant workers into the state. Immigration policy and its enactment along with the demand of labor create a “contradiction between legal trade and illegal workers [that] was essentially ignored.” The activity of the commission throughout its time display both anti-immigrant sentiment and pro-immigration efforts. In 1914, the commission found success in improving sanitation and hygiene conditions on labor camps throughout the state and became well-known by the 1920s for its home teaching services provided to Mexican immigrants. During this time, immigrant laborers and Mexican immigrants were not fully heard or recognized. The commission lacked efforts to improve low wages or see the importance of

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7 Michal Kohout, *Immigration Politics in California’s Inland Empire* (Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers 71, 2009), 122.
political mobilization, both as an expression of agency and as a political right white and non-white worker desired alike. By implicitly maintaining California’s wage labor system the commission did not combat what Kohout described as the use of immigrants’ bodies as cheap and flexible labor. Through the commission, Mexican immigrants remained politically unprotected, low-wage laborers, falling into Kohout’s argument. “Since the U.S capitalist system relies on undocumented immigrants, our labor market is constructed to exploit these workers.”

The early twentieth reveals a time when immigration policy was less restrictive and Mexican immigration saw a continued increase. Nevertheless, the work and authority of the commission did not include granting citizenship to Mexican immigrants, what could have been protection for the worker to the agricultural industry. Rather, it focused on standard of living and ignored the lack of protections the immigrant agriculture laborer possessed.

In her book titled *Fit To Be Citizens?*, Natalia Molina explored the racialization of Mexican immigrants through social health policies in Los Angeles. Public health officials in Los Angeles contributed to the Mexican immigrants’ sense of social membership. As Molina noted, this did not include full citizenship or expression of agency. The Los Angeles public health system instead utilized racist-based theories and stereotypes that were importantly rooted in the racialization of Japanese and Chinese Immigrants. Similarly, the CCIH sought to encourage social membership for Mexican immigrants but did not provide service that reflected a desire to truly assimilate or ensure citizenship for immigrants McPherson explored how the commission sought to encourage immigrants to help themselves, rather than provide structural or monetary support. It also lacked active recruitment or service toward Asian immigrants, especially during heavy immigration restriction of Japanese immigrants. Its focus on Mexican immigrants do not constitute an absence of Asian immigrants, but a rejection towards specific groups of
immigrants. The archives at Bancroft library have a handful of reported cases that involve South Asian immigrants, as we will see.

The work to ‘Americanize’ immigrants by the commission and state masked an exploitative and unfair labor system behind a liberal and immigrant-sympathetic image. An important part of this image, I believe, is of the stable American family in the West. As Nayan Shah has argued in his work, the state elevated the heteronormative image of family and used it as a form of political legitimacy\(^8\) \textit{Stranger Intimacy} highlighted the “The states presumption that social stability could be achieved through an invented normative family in the face of mass migration and its non-normative sexual relations and domestic life.”\(^9\) Shah’s work proves the evidence of large numbers of south Asian immigrant men working and moving around the America west and California. Though sentiments varied within the CCIH archive, Mexicans immigrant men were depicted as potential benefits to society through assimilation whereas Shah and Molina have found that anti-Asian rhetoric often concluded Asian immigrants as ‘un-American’ and unable to assimilate. In the commission’s archive, small moments in which South Asian immigrants emerge were often documentation of investigations and reports for their immoral activity or the threat of their increasing wealth. As Shah’s work noted, South Asian immigrants became perceived as part of the attack on the West’s heteronormative family. Part of this narrative created depicted Asian immigrants as a different economic threat as well, where Mexican immigrants were perceived as an essential labor force in need of regulation and assimilation.

\textit{Background}

\(^9\) Shah, 4-5.
On June 12th, 1913, the California State Legislature created the Commission of Immigration and Housing. Under the California Department of Industrial Relations, the CCIH was established along with other progressive state apparatuses supported by Governor Hiram W. Johnson. Meanwhile, in the countryside of Sacramento agricultural laborers composed of families and children were rumbling with frustration and fury against their unfair living conditions on a popular ranch. Though the commission official creation was a month before what became known as the Wheatland Riot, the incident allowed the state to increase the commission’s investigative authority over labor camp conditions across the state, including investigating labor strife. The state argued that unsanitary and “dangerous social environments” exposed by the Wheatland Riot would lead to social unrest and threatened the health of society, becoming a catalyst for the push of increased state intervention in labor, immigration and housing.

To argue that the commission feared labor mobilization requires an understanding of how the commission saw immigrant and non-white laborers. The population involved with the Wheatland Riot were not part of the organized labor and working-class bodies in which Johnson traveled across California speaking to during his campaign for Governor or the body of people he sought to appease throughout his administration. These figures seem to come into importance when the state must “mute social discontent.” Expressing the desire to avoid what was called the “dreadful condition of poverty” caused by immigrants in New York and fear of possible mass immigration by the opening of the Panama Canal, Johnson’s administration solidified their fear of immigrant and non-white bodies through the creation of the Commission of Immigration and

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10 Before Chapter 318 the Commission had been established as a temporary immigration agency. The California State Legislature created the Commission of Immigration and Housing by the enactment of Chapter 318 on June 12, 1913. See at https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kf15f59n6fj/
11 Ziegler-McPherson, 39.
12 Lower, 34.
Housing. As we will see, especially through the prosecution of the Industrial Workers of the World by the state and the commission, this fear was rooted in a fear of disruption and rebellion.

Hiram W. Johnson was born in Sacramento, California in 1866. Throughout his political career Johnson became a notable progressive figure, from his role in the San Francisco graft trials to his career’s platform of opposing and checking the power of the South Pacific Company. Elected as governor in 1910, Johnson’s emerged from the first decade of the twentieth century as one of California’s best known advocates for reform and a part of a group of Republican progressives challenging the “Old Guard,” the Republican political power holders who notably comprised of his father—Grove Johnson—and supported corporate interest such as that of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Johnson’s new order in California fought against private interest and placed greater responsibility of society in the hands of voters and the government. In the end, Johnson’s goal was “sane legislation” to that would mute social discontent and avoid class division.

Johnson’s legacy is marked by quick structural change brought by his progressive administration. Along with the Commission on Immigration and Housing, Johnson initially created the Conservation Commission and the Railroad Commission. The Railroad Commission was meant to fix absolute rates and was used as a move against the Southern Pacific Transportation Company (also known as the Southern Pacific Railroad). Soon after the commission shifted its responsibilities to oversee all utilities as well as. Emerged deeply in the legislative process, Johnson quick reforms would also be marked by international tension

13 Lower, 34.
15 Lower, 17.
16 Lower, 29.
17 Lower, 30.
through his reluctant support to restrict the property rights of Japanese residents.\textsuperscript{18} Though
Johnson did not have large support from working-class neighborhood, his administration
attempted to support organized labor by passing 39 of the 49 measures supported by union labor
and supporting workmen’s compensation legislation while also appeasing the political desires of
his Republican coalition.\textsuperscript{19} Increased legislation established Johnson a legacy for progressives
especially through their support of middle-class and organized labor. The CCIH was meant to
serve as the states hand in protecting the immigrant laborer, especially when immigrant laborers
were not included in the state’s interaction with union labor. Though, as will emerge, the
commission lacked real protection for immigrants against unfair wage-labor or the
criminalization of labor organization.

Outlined in the beginning of the first official Annual Report in 1914 are the principal
powers and duties of the commission given to it by the state. In Section five of their annual
report the commission discussed the power granted “to make full inquiry, examination and
investigation of condition, welfare and industrial opportunities of all immigrants arriving and
being within the state.”\textsuperscript{20} The commission did not have the power to determine or resolve cases
but where “to cooperate” with all levels of government to resolve immigrant problems, placing
the commission the responsibility on them to communicate with federal, state and local
employment and immigration bureaus. Section six listed the importance of the superintendent of
public instruction, state and local boards of education and all “authorities and organization,
federal, state, county, municipal and private” that could assist with immigrants acquiring
education and citizenship including teaching English language, the duties and rights of

\textsuperscript{18} Lower, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{19} Lower, 34.
\textsuperscript{20} CCIH, Annual Report (1914), p. 7.
citizenship and the “fundamental principles of the American system of government.” This meant extending educational opportunities to families and children on labor camps as well as the creation of playgrounds and recreational areas for children, though the commission was meant to do so by cooperation with the “proper authorities” rather than alone. Section seven described the labor camp investigative power given to the commission by the state that included the examination and report of the sanitary and safety conditions of immigrants housing and labor environments. In Section eight the state granted the commission the responsibility of discovering any violations of workers protections laws such as child labor laws, women’s right in the workforce and payment of wages. The section continued to describe that “the members of the commission… shall have the right to enter into tenement houses, building and dwelling places or the purpose of inspecting such houses, buildings and dwelling places” to report on violations of state tenements and building laws. In the final section, the commission wrote,

“For the purpose of carrying out full the intent and spirit of this act, the said commission shall have full power and authority to gather any and all such evidence as it may deem proper and necessary in order to present the same to the proper authorities for the purpose of instituting prosecutions against any and all persons, firms or corporations found violating any of the laws of any municipality, county or of the state or of the federal government, concerning any of the matters in this act referred to.”

Delivering Sacramento’s Memorial Day address in 1983, Johnson gave a warning of what could become of overwhelming poverty. “As the classes among us become more distinct, as the poor become poorer, and as hunger drives men to desperation, that we will be confronted with a problem again as serious as… rebellion.” As governor, Johnson sought to continue a fight against the emergence of rebellion caused by the inequality of the classes. Through the

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24 Lower, 11.
commission, the state sought to protect immigrants and help aid them in assimilating into society. Through progressive methods of helping and protecting immigrants outlined in the paragraph above, immigrants were not seen as capable political agents but rather were sought out to be convinced to rely on the government to solve immigrant problems, and many problems of housing and sanitation did improve during the first years of the commission actions. What will be seen with the Wheatland Riot of 1913 is the disregard for working class and non-white immigrant mobilization in place for arguments of improved standard of living.

In the commission’s Annual Report of 1914, the commission described the creation of a complaint bureau to gather the “actual needs” of immigration. Through its investigative duties, the commission revealed just how the state’s economy participated in sustaining low-wage labor and rejecting citizenship rights to immigrants. The commission wrote under Section III. “Bureau of Complaints,”

“Consequently, it was decided not to theorize concerning the problems and difficulties met with by newly arrived immigrants, but to find out from the immigrants themselves what these facts and problems were. It would be obviously unwise to attempt to render direct aid to immigrants or to propose remedial legislation until the actual needs were thus ascertained.”25

Through the over two thousand complaints gathered by the commission from immigrants who sought aid from April 1914-January 1915, the commission found one of the largest complaints were that of land and business fraud cases. The commission argued that the best case for assimilation of immigrants included encouragement of immigrants outside of the city, which the commission noted immigrants reported being discouraged from investing in agriculture. One hundred and ninety-three complaints were filed by immigrants who invested into agricultural land and were robbed by “fraudulent land dealers.”26 Similarly, the commission reported one

hundred and sixty-three cases of business fraud. The commission described the “ignorance” and “helplessness” of immigrants for their causes of injustice involving the inability gain legal support, their susceptibility to crime and cases of fraud. One hundred and eighty-three complaints concerned unemployment and two hundred and eighty-seven wage claim cases, in which the commission reported it sent the cases to the Commissioner of Bureau Labor Statistics. In the reporting of these cases, the state was seen as a solution rather than the bearer of the problem. Though the commission continually placed blame upon unknown “fraud dealers”, protections for immigrants from the type of cases reported were not signed into law. Immigrants were given an avenue to voice concerns through the complaint bureau and their reports revealed unfair conditions for immigrant laborers as well as immigrants attempting to build business. The commission sought to aid the struggles of immigrants while not interfering with a naturally exploitative wage-labor system.

**Wheatland Riot**

The Wheatland Riot occurred in the Sacramento Valley where a group of agricultural workers reportedly broke into a riot at the ranch of J.D and Ralph Durst. In August of 1913, almost 3,000 workers—men, women and children of varying nationalities—arrived in Yuba county to work on the large-scale Durst ranch thanks to coastwide advertisement of a need for workers. The Durst Brothers Hops Ranch promised in these notices across the state proper living conditions for workers and families on the Durst farm. The commission reported that half of the laborer’s who arrived were immigrant—"Syrian, Mexican, Italian, Porto Ricans, Poles, Hindus and Japanese”—and half of the population arriving to live on the farm were women and

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28 Mitchel, 18.
children. The annual report displayed pictures of the Durst Ranch in 1913, rows of tent-like living facilities made of wood and cloth. Workers were faced with working at the end of a hot summer for lower wages than promised by the Durst Brothers advertisements and without proper access to water wells or bathing and toilet facilities. The commission reported that wells ran dry and were quickly polluted contributing to cases of typhoid and malaria caused by general unsafe hygiene conditions.

In the commission’s official report of the Wheatland Riot given to the state, the agency and political action by the workers at the Durst hop ranch were not acknowledged or reported. Don Mitchell has written in detail of the incident that occurred that August when a group of workers unsettled with their working and living conditions came together and mobilized. The workers created list of demands that included proper wages and improved living conditions. The Durst Brothers would not accept changing the workers wage pay and rejected their list of demands. The ranch claimed that conditions were no different than other working farms, revealing the commonplace of such injustices against poor and immigrant agricultural laborers.

When the workers threatened the farm with strike if their demands where not acknowledged, Ralph Durst called local authority asking for the arrest of a man named Richard Ford, naming him as the leader. When workers refused to allow the arrest of Ford without an actual warrant, Durst called the police authorities from Marysville on the claim that angry crowd of workers were assembling on his farm. When heavily armed authorities arrived at the scene, having prepared for a large crowd of strikers, they were faced with a crowd of singing workers.

34 Mitchell, 39.
In an effort to grab the attention of the workers, one of the officers set off a gun shot that ignited an altercation between the workers and officers. Twenty shots were fired and after all was settled, four had been shot and killed.\(^{35}\)

What began as a peaceful gathering of over two thousand workers singing in unity against their conditions on the Durst ranch became a violent incident for the Sacramento Valley. Having called the authorities on the peaceful workers singing and on strike, placing blame for the worker’s demands on the Industrial Workers of the World, Ralph Durst ignited a shoot-out that would end with the murder of a two Yuba county officials and two agricultural workers.\(^{36}\) The commission failed to report the exact causes of the Wheatland Riot and chose to use the incident of an example of the unfair conditions of agricultural laborers—which was true. The statewide inspections that would ensue was ignited by this incident and demanded to “set forth a minimum standard of housing and sanitation.” The cause of the Wheatland Riot is importantly marked by Ralph Durst perception of labors gathering in unison as illegal mobilization.

Two individuals were taken to trial under the accusation of having provoked the riot.\(^{37}\) Richard Ford and his group of workers were at blame for causing workers on the Durst ranch to misbehave. Ralph Durst claimed that Ford and the group were influenced by teaching from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and by the end Richard Ford would be taken to trail under having initiated the riot and causing the death of four men.\(^{38}\) Durst would be quoted blaming the IWW specifically for the death of two deputies.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{35}\) Daniel, 90.

\(^{36}\) Mitchell, 40.

\(^{37}\) Mitchell, 15. See Richard Ford and Herman Suhr who were accused of having caused the murder of a state official by inciting the crowd to riot.


\(^{39}\) Daniel, 90.
The state created the conditions for an event such as the Wheatland Riot to occur. Wheatland impacted the amount of energy the newly established commission would put into efforts such as labor camps inspections and the improvement of hygiene and sanitation conditions. The commission not only dismissed the full causes of the worker’s strike that included fair wages but chose to focus the blame the influence of the IWW, producing investigations aimed at targeting the Industrial Workers of the World as we will see. In their annual report, the commission described their response to the Wheatland Riot. Determined that the incident was caused by “American exploiters” who took advantage of naïve immigrants, the commission blamed these exploiters pretending to be “immigrant protective societies” for causing fear among immigrants to ask for aid. The commission explained the use of posters that displayed in various languages that the commission was to protect all immigrants and “aid all in obtaining justice.” The full importance of cross-racial and cross-ethnic mobilization and unity at the Durst Brothers ranch are overshadowed not only by the commission’s focus on sanitation and standard of living but the focus put on the IWW as a militant agitator of immigrant farm workers.

\textit{The Industrial Workers of the World}

Christina A Ziegler-McPherson wrote in her book \textit{Americanization in the States},

“The driving force behind California progressives’ concerns about migratory labor, seasonal unemployment, and agricultural working conditions was a desire to undermine the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Seeing itself in competition with the IWW for the loyalty of California’s poorest workers, the [Commission] worked to improve both foreign- and native-born California’s standard of living through progressive reform.”

McPherson does not expand on the role of the IWW in the commission work or efforts by the commission to undermine labor organization. In 1913, Carleton Parker was appointed official investigator of the labor conditions for the state and national government and produced

\footnote{CCIH, \textit{Annual Report} (1914), p. 34.}
\footnote{Ziegler-McPherson, 39.}
documentation and verbal testimony of the Wheatland Riot and the militant threat of the IWW. Following Wheatland, investigators such as Frederick C. Mills were sent in disguise throughout California’s agricultural farms to investigate problems concerning labor conditions, labor organization and the presence of the IWW.

The commission sanctioned investigations of camp conditions across California included investigating possible threats to society. Inquiry into labor mobilization especially through efforts to discover the presence of the IWW among immigrant laborers was included among state investigation of threats. Exploring the investigations led by the CCIH of the IWW underlines the motive of the state to paint labor organization and labor mobilization among immigrants as acts of spontaneous, unorganized riots caused by the IWW’s desires to incite rebellion and destruction of the state.

Gregory Woirol studied Frederick C. Mill’s unpublished reports titled the “Mill’s papers” that are kept by Mill’s family in a private archive. The five reports are titled as followed, “Scenes and Incidents ‘On the Road,’” “The Orange Industry of Central California,” A Supplementary Report Concerning Orange Picking Conditions,” “An Economic Survey of a Sierra Lumber Camp,” “The Sand Creek Road Situation,” and “The Hobo and the Migratory Casual on the Road.” Through these reports Woirol published Mills accounts as he was set out to travel across central California on behalf of the commission serving as a special investigator. Mills was a recent graduate of the University of California, Berkeley before he worked for the commission under Carleton Parker. In May of 1914, under the guise of an itinerant laborer, Mills was one of the early methods the commission used for date-collecting and investigation. During this time,
agriculture in California was broken down into firmly established systems of large farms and ranches owned by corporate interests and employing most commonly seasonal and migrant workers. Mills was able to interact with various workers and farm owners concerning the presence of the IWW.

Mills found that while employers and farmers he encountered knew of the IWW and concluded that the IWW was wieldy recognizable to most laborers, there was no universal support for the IWW and both groups commonly possessed negative perceptions of the IWW. Woirol described that the conversations Mills reported on the road consistently included Mills intention to ask about the IWW. In the reports, Mills described skilled labor and unskilled labor, reporting that unskilled labor—itinerants, hobos and migrants—showed more sympathy to the IWW than skilled labor and farm owners. Opposed to direct involvement with the IWW, Mills found “social unrest” and described migratory workers as dissatisfied and susceptible to the IWW activities. Toward the end of his investigation, Mills spent time at different IWW halls disguised as an IWW member. Mills reported the IWW as militant noting,

“It is revolution, bloody revolution, and some of their arguments are bitterly unanswerable. As yet it is but talk, largely, but Ludlow, Patterson, West Virginia, Wheatland are not meaningless phenomena that can be safely ignored.”

His involvement with IWW figures and in IWW meetings led his reports to repeat what the IWW was already known to represent. The IWW was known for their support of strikes and militant action, though his reports depict a lack of organization of the IWW in California during

45 Ziegler-McPherson, 47.
46 Woirol, 437.
47 Woirol, 438-440.
48 Woirol, 442.
this time, especially among immigrant laborers. Though the IWW were active in the central region Mills found no evidence that the IWW played a role in causing the Wheatland Riot. Individual members of the IWW did respond to the prosecution of four laborers including Richard Ford and Herman Suhr after the investigation blamed the IWW for the incident.

Rather than finding agricultural workers and immigrants involved directly with the Industrial Workers of the World, Mills expressed anxiety towards the unrest of a “great floating army” of men. Mills warned of the “dangerous discontent” of men seeking season work throughout central California and the agitation swelling among them.

“It is easy to say that the conception of any such dangerous discontent is imagination, it is so vague and strange to us. I felt it vaguely at first, then strongly…the message they bring [is] one of violence, bloodshed, "Direct Action" they call it… This sort of talk is old; we have heard it all before. But what astounds and grips one is the enormous number of men by whom this method is accepted as the one way of escape from a life as deadly and painfully miserable as that of a bond slave.”

Mills reiterated an unspoken goal of the progressive state and the commission, to improve the conditions of inequality and poverty to prevent labor unrest. Based on his personal journey and interactions, Mills determined that the “enormous amount” of American and white immigrants’ unemployed and working seasonally were a threat because of the strong presence of agitation among the men. “I am living eating and breathing agitation, agitation that is really anarchy. More than ever I feel the force of the great social unrest that is boiling and seething.” The “violence” and “bloodshed” of the IWW as Mills described was a threat to those laborers at the bottom of the hierarchy—seasonal workers and immigrants. These arguments helped support the belief that the state should interject into the lives of laborers, to improve working and living conditions and prevent the rebellion of agitated workers and the IWW.

50 Daniel, 494
51 Woirol, 444.
52 Woirol, 445.
53 Woirol, 444.
Parker and the ‘Casual Laborer’

Carleton Parker served as the executive secretary of the CCIH in 1913 and the official investigator of the Wheatland Riot. In 1920 Parker published *The Casual Laborer: And Other Essays* which included official reports of the commission focused on Wheatland, labor and the Industrial Workers of the World. In 1916 Carleton spoke in front of the Commissions of Industrial Relations in their *Final Report and Testimony* submitted to the 64th Congress. The Commission of Industrial Relations was created by the U.S Congress and led by Francis Patrick Walsh. In his testimony concerning camp and labor conditions in California, Parker argued the Wheatland Riot was as an example that the “treatment, housing and feeding” of laborers on farms were “disastrously bad” due to “accepted traditions in ranch life” and because of California agriculture’s seasonal character. Carleton urged for the state’s control of labor employment as solution to seasonal migration, which he put forth as a main cause of the laborers poor conditions. Despite the date collected from the commission like that of the complaint bureau that point toward immigrant’s susceptibility to fraud and continued low wages, Carleton urged that the great unrest was caused by the “unemployment armies” that form when the work season ends for agricultural and other industries. The population Parker spoke of in his testimony to the commission was not specifically targeted toward Mexican immigrants but based on data collected by the commission Parker described the population has almost half American born with most immigrants being European.

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54 Commission of Industrial Relations, *Final Report and Testimony Submitted to Congress by the Commission of Industrial Relations created by the Act of August 23, 1912 (1916), 4934-4935*. See: [https://books.google.com/books?id=DIFRAAAYAAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbis_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=DIFRAAAYAAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbis_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)


56 Commission of Industrial Relations, *Final Report and Testimony*, 4933.
Parker explained to the commission that San Francisco employment agencies had predicted that the following winter there would be a large “army” of unemployed agricultural laborers, “more agitated [and] temperamentally more threatening.”\textsuperscript{57} Parker’s understanding that unemployment and poverty among migrants and working-class laborers caused unrest was also met with the fear that such conditions would lead to threatening action and rebellion. Despite this, Parker and the commission refrain from fully acknowledging wage issues or an understanding of California’s exploitative agricultural economy. California’s agricultural industry depended on its “seasonal irregularity” and low-wage labor.\textsuperscript{58} Though no official legislature or organization was made to solve the issue of seasonal unemployment, Carleton reiterated the hazardous conditions on labor camps as did the commission in its annual reports. Sanitation and health conditions were often used to trace the blame back on immigrants, as we see in part of Carleton’s testimony.

“The second phase of the problem is the general indifference and carelessness in the treatment of these workers. This is due in part to the fact that they are utterly disorganized or their organization are militant organization gathered together for some definite strike object, and not for long campaign for better conditions, and secondly, because we have a careless California condition of laissez faire—let things rest.”\textsuperscript{59}

Parker’s use of “militant organization” to describe the assembly of agricultural workers is directed to IWW and it characterized a section of agricultural laborers as militant, dismissing their efforts to express agency against unfair wage labor and camp conditions. In “The Casual Laborer,” Parker reported his findings as the primary investigator of Wheatland. Parker blamed the IWW for the worker’s strike at Wheatland, despite there no evidence of official involvement. Parker instead used the IWW’s efforts in the trial of Richard Ford and Herman Suhr. Scholars have described the IWW activity during this time to be more concerned with free speech efforts,

\textsuperscript{57} Commission of Industrial Relations, \textit{Final Report and Testimony}, 4934.
\textsuperscript{58} Commission of Industrial Relations, \textit{Final Report and Testimony}, 4935.
\textsuperscript{59} Commission of Industrial Relations, \textit{Final Report and Testimony}, 4935.
but the accusation of the IWW by the state and the commission influenced particular members of 
the IWW to act on behalf of those at the Wheatland Riot.  
60 Parker argued tirelessly that the IWW were a threat to migrant laborers while arguing the restlessness, agitation and immorality that 
formed among migrant labors. Parker wrote, “There will be neither permanent peace nor 
prosperity in our country till the revolt-bases of the I.W.W are removed and till that is done the 
I.W.W remains an unfortunately valuable symptom of a diseased industrialism.”  

61 In his testimony to the Commission of Industrial Relations, Parker used the argument that 
farm owners were unaware of their treatment to workers, which was often repeated throughout 
the commissions archive. Parker claimed that the California rancher was “as kind and benevolent 
and generous a person as you will have as an employer,” reiterating a positive characterization of 
the agrarian elite. 62 Worker’s experiencing racial discrimination, lack of proper wages and the 
inability to unionize or organize are not properly addressed. Blame for conditions created by the 
state are once again put into the hands of workers and immigrants themselves, where their acts of 
resistance and mobilization of such conditions are often characterized as criminal and 
illegitimate. 

60 Daniel, 492.  
61 Carleton H Parker, Cornelia Stratton Parker, and Anarchism Collection (Library of Congress), The Casual Laborer: And Other 
62 Commission of Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony, 4935.
Future of Mexican Immigration” found under a folder labeled as ‘Mexican housing 1924,’” similar sentiment expressed by Carleton in 1916 appeared. The concern of seasonal unemployment is reiterated this time much more directly focused on Mexican immigrants, where immigrants are depicted emphatically as groups of families or workers in need of protections.63

The first document has no author but appears as a small report using information collected by the commission. The report used personal story and data analysis to frame its arguments. Under the title the document reads, “A Story on the Outside Looking In (Based in large part on an actual life story).” Beginning with an immigrant worker named Jose and what presented as his own words, Jose described his movement from Mexico to the United States that did not first begin California but led him across the country. He spoke of his own experience with mistreatment at the border and detailed the crude process of physical examination and receiving vaccines as well as his reasons for arriving in the U.S. “Oh many reasons; some good, some foolish, perhaps.”64 Jose listed greater pay, better education and the desire for a home as his reasons but the difficulty in finding work or safe work conditions. On the second page of the document, Jose ends as though in a rush. “But I cannot talk much more now,” he stated, “I see you later.” He ended stating,

“The next spring, I went to Colorado to pick meets, then to California to the Imperial Valley. I picked cotton there and in Arizona too. In your country, señor, I have travelled much and worked much, too. It is a good place to make money, sometimes; but not so good to make friends. And always during the winter, it is hard to make money, for there is little work. After many years, I feel still that my real house is in Mexico, not here. Perhaps later I feel different, but quien sabe.”

Jose was used as an example of Mexican immigrants as hard workers and seeking better opportunity. Even in his personal story, he ends in a rush as though to return to the hard work he


64 CCIH, The Future of Mexican Immigration.
belongs to. On the document’s third page “Jose and his Job,” the author briefly reported the dependence of the southwest on Mexican immigration by the 1920s. Listing the Mexican population in Texas, Colorado and New Mexico and arguing that each have large industry in agriculture and construction dependent almost solely on Mexican labor. In California, the author reported that fruits, walnuts, cotton, grape, and beet production were all dependent on Mexican labor. The entire page revealed the commission’s work in discovering the huge dependence agricultural industries have on seasonal Mexican immigrant. This segued into the authors report on unemployment and seasonal agriculture. Under the title “Employment which means Unemployment,” the report described season labor in agriculture and railroad work and the unemployment it caused in the winter as the “most striking feature of the economic position of the Mexicans.”65 Almost ten years after Carleton Parker’s testimony to Congress, similar evidence emerged in the commission investigation that revealed a huge dependence of the agriculture economy on seasonal immigrant workers and the importance of Mexican immigrant labor as their immigration increased through the 20th century.

The Final Report and Testimony mentioned above included testimony from individuals in different sectors important to agriculture. Parker was the representative of the commission and state efforts into agriculture and labor issues. E. Clemens Horst and R.I Bentley represented company owners in the California’s agricultural industry and George H. Speed spoke on behalf of laborers and loosely the IWW. George Speed claimed he had served on the executive board of the IWW in the past and mostly had volunteer organizing experience, but no present involvement with the IWW at the time his testimony. Speed was questioned on his experience as a laborer in

railroad and agriculture as well as his beliefs on how to solve labor unrest and seasonal employment.

Despite Speed’s personal testimony of the unfair treatment of workers in multiple industries as it concerned wages and housing, the commission speaker used questions that pointed blame toward a competitive labor economy caused by new immigrants. Speed was quick to use a historical lens when he identified farmers as exploiting immigrant workers unaware of their low wages. Speed blamed farmers for having paid higher wages in the past when labor was more largely “native,” white and non-foreign born. Speed argued that when foreign-born workers speak up against their treatment, “they turn them down and ask the natives to come back and take their place, [they] use one against the other.” When asked how to make it so there would not be competition among workers, Speed suggested that workers must be able to organize, “organize and solidify their forces and compel those who need their help to go right to their organization and get them.” In progressive fashion, the commission proceeded by suggesting how the state could manage and control employment of agricultural and lumber workers to provide aid. They asked Speed how the state should solve the issue of seasonal migration, but Speed did not provide an answer. The questions given to Speed reference the responses from the testimony of E. Clemens Horst of the E. Clemens Horst Co. hop ranch and R.I Bentley of the California’s Canning Association. Both employers were questioned about how they were prepared to extend harvest seasons and solve the issue of seasonal work. Speed’s answers pointed toward wage exploitation and importance of allowing workers to organize, and

these sentiments disappear in the commission’s focus on how to solve seasonal work and how to implement progressive ideas of state control.

In a document titled “Do You Want To Go Hungry?” by Secretary of Agriculture E. T. Meredith found under the folder ‘Migratory agricultural labor 1931-37,’ the Secretary urged young men from the city and college students to participate in farm work during their vacation. Meredith claimed that farmers are unable to pay their workers proper wages because of the industry competition and rather than acknowledge the large immigrant population that supplies cheap labor contributed to the importance placed on white male agricultural workers. Similarly, Speed pointed out agriculture’s tendency to promote and idealize “native” labor despite the overwhelming presence of immigrant laborers. Despite this narrative of the American farm worker, Speed laid bare that employers purposely preferred and exploited immigrant laborers.  

The Nature of the Commission

The archives of the CCIH are located at the University of California, Berkeley Bancroft Library. On my first day in the collections room, I found myself reading many pages of information that seemed unimportant and massive. As I have learned from scholarship on the CCIH, one of the results of the commission legacy was the collection and reproduction of local, state and federal sourced information on housing, sanitation, labor, education and laws related to the matter of immigration. The archive and the scholarship produced on the commission reveal a large spectrum in which beliefs towards immigrants and how to “deal” with immigrant laborers vary. Similarly, the actions taken by the commission and individuals within the commission reveal important tactics by the commission. As we have seen, the commission gathered and reported to the state important evidence concerning the real problems of immigrant laborers.

69 Commission of Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony, 4938.
Despite these findings, the commission focused on camp conditions and employed a passive approach to ‘enforcing’ sanitation and housing standards. Its use of pamphlets and voice of ‘advice’ served as a new tool to avoid enforcing proper wages or acknowledging the political voice of immigrants. Rather, the narrative told to farmers relayed the idea that sanitation and housing assured a more reliable, hard-working, assimilated immigrant.

Evident in the progressive state’s action through the commission was that farmers and employers would be prioritized in efforts to bring resolution to issues brought to the light by the Wheatland Riot. This sort of passivity and neutrality was seen throughout the actions of the commissions, including prohibition of employment of immigrants within the CCIH and the requirement of employees to refrain from lobbying for immigration. From its onset, written in Section 12 of its annual report, the commission restricted actions to “induce or encourage immigration in the state or the United States.” The commission was not meant to critique the economy or the policies that created low wages for poor laborers, rather the commission was to look inward, focusing on the assimilation of immigrants already in California. Through its neutral sentiment, it alleviated blame from the agrarian elite and the state that was evident throughout its investigations. In the end, the commission became focused on how to teach immigrant to solve their own problems.

Sources found in the collection, both utilized and produced by the commission, include analysis’ of housing and sanitation laws (“An Analysis of the 1916 Housing Laws,” “The Housing Problem in Van Nuys”), questionaries’ on housing shortages, newspaper clippings (“The Shortage of Homes”), speeches and reports from national and state leaders (“Do You Want to Go

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70 Ziegler-McPherson, 40.
72 Gribble, 291.
Hungry?” By E.T Meredith, Protection to American Labor” by Erving W. Scott) and reports on labor strife (“Stirring Developments among 150,00 Californian Agricultural Workers,” “Labor Conditions During the 1926 Apple Harvest in the Wenatchee Valley,” “Poison Gas in America’s Salad Bowl Salinas Lettuce Strike,” “Riot Spiraled Salads Salinas Lettuce Strike,” “The Battle of Sacramento,” “The Case of Thomas Sharpe”).

Under the folder ‘Migratory agricultural labor 1931-37,’ an article dated from June 1936 was found with other collected sources on the topic of ‘Schools and School Children.’ Collected from the Family Magazine, the article titled “The Anonymous Mass of the Disposed” highlighted the varying type of sources the commission added to what McPherson called their ‘social knowledge.’73 The anonymous author of “The Anonymous Mass” pointed toward similar ideas expressed by Michal Kohout. The article began by stating,

“It seems strange that fear, suspicion, lack of responsibility toward the non-community individual should be so tenacious in this twentieth century. The term transient… conjures up a picture of a type, undesirable because of his transiency regardless of his other individual qualities. It is almost as if all those who move from place to place for whatever purpose were thrown together in the mind of the general public into the ‘anonymous mass of the dispossessed.’”74 The author wrote that the “transient worker” functions as a “good, not an ill” when it caters to the industry’s “need for a mobile labor population.”75 Urging the reader to understand the ‘transient problem’ with multiple lens, the author blamed multiple factors including the ‘industrial disorganization,’ ‘propaganda about favorable health conditions,’ and the ‘general restlessness of the American people.’ The author recognized that migrant workers were not heard or fully seen by the government or by the general people. Written in the 1930s, the document does not specify who belonged to the group of ‘transient workers’ it defended but ended its final

73 Ziegler-McPherson, 52.
74 CCIH, The Anonymous Mass of the Dispossessed (June 1936), Located Dept. of Industrial Relations. Division of Immigration and Housing records, 1912-1939, Carton 43, Folder 12, BANC.
pages recommending the urgent need for increased government ‘studies’ and the creation of ‘permanent departments of states’ on relief and employment of transients. 76

The sentiment expressed in the above article resemble other sources collected by the commission such as pieces titled “The Hardships of Migratory Families” and “The Happy House” as well as the personal politics of important figures within the commission. Scholarship on the commission highlight the influence figures such as Simon J. Lubin and Edward J. Hanna had over the commission in its first years. Lubin initiated the creation of the commission and served as the first president and Hanna served as Vice-President until becoming president of the commission in 1923. 77 Lubin was a descendent of Jewish immigrants who believed that minorities should integrate themselves into American society opposed to cultural retention. 78 Both leaders were described in respective scholarship as advocates of immigrants and focused on social welfare and the assimilation of immigrants already in the state. According to scholar Richard Gribble, Hanna was noted for establishing the commission’s philosophy in government work. Gribble depicted Hanna as an avid advocate of Johnson’s progressive government and the need for government agencies to operate “for the interest of the whole people, not the interests of a political party.” 79 Hanna was the child of immigrants just as was Lubin and Hanna’s Irish background was credited in his efforts through the clergy and the commission in supporting immigrants and their assimilation in San Francisco.

Lubin and many progressives believed in what scholars have named the settlement house theory that argued Americanization should not be a process that stripped immigrants of important cultural “gifts.” 80 Retention of traditions and languages were important to this idea.

77 Mitchell, 44.
78 Ziegler-McPherson, 42.
79 Gribble, 290.
80 Ziegler-McPherson, 45.
Nevertheless, the commission believed that immigrant could and should assimilate.\(^81\) As these scholars have pointed out, the commission often subscribed to the progressive theory of positive liberty. McPherson wrote that this argued that immigrants could only become “equal” to U.S citizens through special state assistance. Once immigrants assimilated and adopted American values such as hard work, dependability and self-control they could experience upward mobility.\(^82\) The commission’s inability to enforce labor camp improvement and their tactics that avoided placing direct blame on farmers allowed the commission to position immigrants as complicit in their conditions, as was seen with Carlton Parker reports following Wheatland. As noted by Roesch, progressive activist tended to believe that immigrants should be taught to help themselves.\(^83\)

A piece titled “The Happy House” began straightforwardly with the words, “You are quite right, little one.” It began first referring to a child. “At this moment when we are wondering without home or place to stay, it is pleasant to picture to ourselves the home long held so dear.” This home is the “Happy House” and the context laid out, though remaining broad, pointed directly to the experience of migrant laborers and Mexican immigrants. “The charm of the home, the happiness of the mother, the solutions of the domestic problems will do more to restore peace… encourage motherhood, and promote temperance and morality…” By the end, the author referred to women and specifically mothers. “It is for you, mesdames, to leave your drudgery…” Just this front page there is as an example of how the commission sought to focus on topics such as the home and sanitation so as to solve problems inward, avoiding a critique or challenge to the wage labor system in place or racist treatment towards immigrant laborers. Rather, the home

\(^81\) Ziegler-McPherson, 45.
\(^82\) Ziegler-McPherson, 44.
\(^83\) Claudia H. Roesch, 46.
becomes a center to look at family structure and gender roles, health and sanitation, morality and even decor and aesthetic. Scholars agree that the commission focused on the issue of normative standards for housing and hygiene, ideas that were put forth as scientific but were really Anglo-American middle-class cultural conventions.84

Based on data gathered by the complaint bureau as well as the many investigations that took place following Wheatland, the commission reported dangerous housing conditions on labor camps, continued reports of low-wages and cases of employment fraud. The commission had to address these issues, focusing almost exclusively on labor camp conditions, without the state authority to legally enforce such standards on farmers and employers.85 It reported to the state, “The Commission decided that these conditions constituted an aggravation of industrial warfare, and that they could and should be changed. It was ascertained that the Durst camp was no exception.” Following Wheatland, a state-wide “clean-up” was initiated by the commission. Spencer C. Olin described the commission as fully aware of the unfair conditions agricultural laborers dealt with but required factual data for legitimacy.86 By the end of the investigation, 641 labor camps had been investigated in which 180 labor camps were described as having “dangerous sanitary conditions.87”

The annual report reported that the creation of housing and sanitary standards must be sufficient enough to ensure results “but not so expensive and impractical as to deter employers of labor from adopting.”88 In the end, the commission wrote, “While the wage scale and other factors contributed to the feeling of discontent, the real house of the protest of the pickers

84 Roesch, 44-45.
87 Olin, 79.
seemed to come from the inadequate housing and the insanitary conditions under which the hop pickers were compelled to live.”

Housing and sanitation became the focal point to tackle the issue of immigration but it represented much more. It was a choice not to highlight low wage labor or workers efforts to organize against unfair conditions. The commission spoke on behalf of all the August 1913 workers at the Durst Ranch when proclaiming that the “real” cause of the riot was insanitary conditions, not the claims of low-wages or Ralph Durst’s rejection of the workers list of demands.

Originally under the jurisdiction of the State Board of Health, investigation of labor conditions became a responsibility of the commission in 1913. The commission’s investigation revealed that no law was in place that secured housing and sanitation standards or were any processes in place for inspection and complaints. In an effort to solve this problem, the commission conducted a small sanitation test on the farm of Shingle Springs in El Dorado County to be reported in a pamphlet and sent to farmers across California. According to the commission, “employers and operators were willing to cooperate in the effort to improve the conditions of men” but were unaware of how to do so. The commission argued that because of the evidence that the agrarian elite were naive but cooperative, a more comprehensive pamphlet would be produced with the spirit of “‘cooperation and advice,’ rather than ‘compulsion.’”

Using a similar argument used by Parker defending California’s mistreatment of agricultural laborer’s as part of its “laissez faire” nature, the commission reported in its annual report, “Our contact with the employers of labor made it clear to us that the undesirable sanitation was not the

result of intentional carelessness, but rather a relic of early California days when our people were
good-naturally willing to put up with alimony any housing conditions.”91

One of the pieces found in the Guide to the California. Dept. of Industrial Relations. Division of Immigration and Housing records collection was a pamphlet titled “Housing for Field Employees” written by a Dr. Charles L. Bennett and published in the San Dimas Press. Using arguments of racial and cultural inferiority, the chairmen of the Joint Building Committee argued that proper housing for Mexican workers would lead to Americanization. Described as a “progressive demand,” Bennett argued on the basis that proper houses lead to greater sanitation and greater economic benefit. “What we get in return for the housing outlay primarily is a readily available and constant supply of efficient help. This is the all-important economic feature,” Bennett wrote in the pamphlet.92 After Bennett claimed the economic opportunity of improved housing for farmers, he claimed the “proper man” required a home. Pamphlets such as these urging farmers to improve labor conditions reiterated not only the economic profit of healthy immigrant workers but the gendered importance of a home and family for Mexican immigrant men. Though a tactic by the commission, this sentiment reflected the belief that economic profit and protection are more important than the social and moral issues exposed by events such as Wheatland. By the end of the pamphlet, Bennet argued in defense of housing immigrants based on the uncivilized and degenerate, but docile and willing character of Mexican workers. Without the ability to enforce, the commission resulted to persuasion to change the labor conditions, where their arguments and ideas further cemented blame of such issues on Mexican immigrant bodies.

92 Pamphlet, Commission of Immigration and Housing. by Dr. Charles L. Bennett, Housing for Field Employees, Located in the Guide to the California. Dept. of Industrial Relations. Division of Immigration and Housing records, 1912-1939, Carton 43, Folder 2, BANC.
Americanization was often used interchangeably with assimilation to describe efforts such as teaching English literacy, work skills, and health and hygiene standards. The focus on Mexican bodies grew from the characterization of Mexican immigrants as a threat to health and as overwhelming to the state’s facilities. In the report “The Future of Mexican Immigration” that began with a story from a Mexican immigrant named Jose, under the title ‘The Mexican and the Social Agencies,’ the commission detailed the percentage of Mexican immigrants reported by different agencies across California. The agencies listed included some from Long Beach, San Diego, Fresno and San Bernardino and each reported that Mexican immigrants took up a large portion of their clients and their budget. Quoted from the Los Angeles Department of Charities, “our problem is becoming so great with the Mexican family who will never become good efficient citizens, that it is impossible to work on a constructive program for the Mexican family who might become an asset to the community.”

In 1923 when Hanna became president of the commission, by the end of his term had on his belt the Labor Camp Sanitation Act, the Tenement and Home Teacher Acts and the Hotel and Lodging Acts, as well as the creation of the State Land Bureau and its work in education. His proud work in education included programs specifically provided to Mexican immigrant women that utilized harmful ideas and theories about Mexican immigrants and women. In these years under Hanna, the commission began an association with the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, a conservative and anti-immigration coalition.

South Asian Immigrants and the Commission

94 Bennett, Housing for Field Employees.
95 Gribble, 296.
96 Roesch, 63.
97 Roesch, 55.
Influenced heavily by the work of Natalia Molina and Nayan Shah on the complexities and relationships among racial groups while under state surveillance and control, I hope to add a similar lens to understand the racialization and treatment of Mexican bodies by the state and the commission through highlighting the small moments in which South Asian immigrants emerge in the CCIH’s archive. Stranger Intimacy by Shah detailed the extent to which local and state authorities monitored and policed South Asian immigrants in the southwest. Shah pointed toward the change in California law in 1903 that changed from explicit criminalization of prostitution to more broadly any ‘idle, lewd or dissolute person.’ Shah wrote, “The demands of capitalist development created mobile populations, but politicians and moral reformers condemned the social dynamics of untidy work and temporary housing that were generated in the wake of human mobility.” California law created what Shah saw a more broadly defined scale of immoral and moral activity and Shah’s research focused on how migrant men were easily identified and monitored for immoral characterizations. 98 Multiple cases emerged in locations such as Sacramento in which land and business owning immigrants from India were investigated on the basis of deviant sexual behavior. Shah picked cases in Sacramento during the 1910s in which police authorities investigated on different occasions business owning South Asian men on the basis of suspected sodomy and predatory behavior over young white immigrant men.99

Molina put forth the history of racialization of immigrants by LA health officials and state institutions. There Molina revealed the importance of understanding the treatment of Japanese and Chinese immigrants by health officials in the early 20th century in understanding treatment of Mexican immigrants after, “as I argue, the historical experiences of one nonwhite

98 Shah, 64.
99 Shah, 76. See Shah work on the state cases involving South Asian immigrants Jamil Singh and Tara Singh.
group could significantly affect rankings of other nonwhite groups.”

Molina first established the role the racialization of Chinese immigrants as health threats and polluters before the twentieth century played in the radicalization of all Asian immigrants as dangerous threats, especially Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century. Molina described the increase of Mexican immigration in the twentieth century, rising in Los Angeles from five thousand in 1910 to thirty thousand in 1920. Meanwhile Chinese and Japanese immigrants faced an increase in discriminatory laws. Through LA public health discourse, Mexican immigrants were both characterized and defended for their importance as a source of labor, but by 1920 discourse had changed to characterize Mexican immigrants in a light similar to that of Japanese immigrants. The significance in this time period according to Molina was that although public health and the state began to view Mexican immigrants as a greater social and health problem, the state continued offering Mexican immigrant services in an effort to “transform [immigrants] into an acceptable workforce.”

The treatment of Asian immigrants influenced how Mexican immigrants were treated in the following years. In this way, I hope to highlight the small moments within CCIH’s archival clutter in which South Asian immigrants emerge. When mentioned, often under racist title’s and headings, South Asian immigrants were filed under as complaints and as problems. Despite there being a similar sense of urgency to solve what was often labeled as the “Hindu situation,” the commission lacked any structural support for South Asian immigrants. South Asians were seen by the state as unassimilated immigrants and as land and business owners throughout California; they were denied the possibility to assimilate through the Commission of Immigration and

101 Molina, 61.
102 Molina, 74.
Housing in the same manner they focused on Mexican immigrants. The ethnic composition that made up the labor force of agriculture and other industries such as railroads or mining was vast. Immigrants from all over the world were in California working at different levels of the economy. Considering the anti-Japanese sentiment of the state may reveal how and why South Asian immigrants were perceived as not only a health threat but an economic threat in a different manner than Mexican immigrant. This furthers our understanding of why the commission sought to focus its efforts on Mexican immigrants in a pool of Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and European immigrants.

In the report “The Casual Laborer” submitted to the commission by Carleton Parker, immigrant laborers are characterized as participants in sex perversion, writing that the commission “has the date to prove a widespread practice of homosexuality among migratory laborers.” Parker continued, “Investigations are beginning to show that there are social dangers which a group of demoralized, womanless men may engender such conditions of greater menace than stereotyped ill effects of incantation and malnutrition.”103 Parker consistently argued that the unsanitary conditions on labor camps had caused the unrest seen at Wheatland, but here he characterizes the immoral character of laborer’s as the real threat compared to the “stereotyped ill effects” of labor camp conditions. The blame find itself pushed upon the bodies of racialized immigrant bodies once again. The sort of investigations Parker referenced can be seen in the few moments South Asian men emerge in the commission clutter.

Upon my very first encounter with the CCIH archive, I came across different documents that were documented South Asians in California. Largely labeled as “Hindu,” the commission and state were most likely referring to Punjabi and Indian immigrants from South Asia, as Shah

103 Parker, 75-74.
pointed out in his research. Based off the scholarship done on the commission and Americanization in California, there is little to no reference of South Asian immigrants or their racialization by the commission. The first document I found was written to a Vincent S. Brown, Chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing in San Francisco from 1933, occurring under the leadership of religious leader Rev. E. J. Hanna. The author left a signature that reads “Adele S. C” and it began by stating “In accordance with our agreement” and proceeded to describe the rest of the letter has containing “facts” on the “Hindu situation in this section, with several definite cases showing the conditions as they exist.” The documents were gathered under the leadership of Hanna, president at the time. The letter seemed to be information gathered from individuals working internally within the commission. The short introduction of the letter is finished by asking for the information in the following pages to remain confidential and be delivered to the “proper authorities” in Washington. I am assuming that the author was gathering information requested by the commission’s leadership. At the top of the document reads the name of the commissions board at the time, Reverend J. Hanna, D.D, Chas. C. Chapman, Mrs. Mattie W. Richard and J. Earl Cook, respectively.

Written at the top of the next page is “CONFIDENTIAL.” Based off scholarship of Asian immigrants in California, the figures referred to by the commission as “Hindu” were most likely Punjabi or Indian immigrants from South Asian. These first few paragraphs present what was written as a unique and dire situation in the commissions “experience with alien groups.” South Asian men are described as presenting a threat to the country because of their habit of

104 Shah, 4.
105 Adele S. C, Letter to Mr. Vincent S. Brown (Assistant Executive Officer), January 13, 1933. Located Dept. of Industrial Relations, Division of Immigration and Housing records, 1912-1939, Carton 42, Folder 42, BANC.
106 Adele S. C, Letter to Mr. Vincent S. Brown.
107 Report, CCIH, January 13, 1933, Located in the Guide to the California. Dept. of Industrial Relations. Division of Immigration and Housing records, 1912-1939, Carton 42, folder 42, BANC.
leeching money from “American women of means.” A sort of history is given that positions a man by the name of Swami Vivekananda as the catalyst for religious teachers from India to travel to America with plans to be financed by wealthy white women. This prevalent attitude, as it is described, among immigrant men from India was depicted as an extension of Indian men’s “general attitude... toward their own women” and strictly “un-American.”

The third page of the letter is titled “List of some Hindus in California whose activities or status seem open to question.” The list of men who were investigated were depicted as exploiting white women from the U.S for money for their own personal careers, i.e. the men were teachers, religious teachers and students. The first was a man named Swami Paramananda, a religious teacher who owned two religious centers, one in La Crescenta, Los Angeles and another in Boston. The letter sent to the commission claimed Paramananda was financed by the daughter of Nevada republican senator John P. Jones. Along with the commission, Paramananda’s financial actions had been investigated by the Police department of Boston. The information present a story that depicted Paramananda as leading an exploitative religious cult to finance his endeavors writing under his description, “We are told by a personal living at the Center that the women kneel before the Swami every morning, kiss his feet, and swear allegiance; and that he has been known to boast that they will do anything he tells them.”

Another man identified as Swami Yogananda had his daily activities investigated by “the Examiner of the city” beginning on January 10, 1928 and for three weeks after. Reported as a medical practitioner without a license, Yogananda seemed to also be under investigation because of his “magnificent place on a hill, surrounded by disciples, nearly all women.” as was seen with Paramananda, Yogananda seemed to not only be under suspicion for economic reasons but for

108 Report, CCIH. p. 2.
109 Report, CCIH. p. 2.
behavior seen as illicit or immoral. The author of this report used evidence of wealth in the hands of ‘un-American’ South Asian immigrants and their patriarchal power of over women as valid concerns to the state. His description stated that Yogananda had been investigated by “U.S Immigration authorities, the U.S Postal authorities and the District Attorney… and recently the State Board of Medical Examiners.” The commission reported that local authorities found a woman who admitted to giving money to Yogananda and was asked to come forward and file a complaint against Yogananda by Immigration Services. His described ended, “Both of these men seem to have unusual power, hypnotic or otherwise, to influence women,” when women suspected for involvement with these men refused to report them to authorities.110 The effort made by the report to characterize the endeavors or wealth of these immigrant men as an ‘unnatural power’ and as immoral reveal the length to which South Asian immigrants were racialized so as to make their presence illegitimate.

Many South Asian male students were listed at the end of the report under the accusation of lying about university attendance for stay in the country. Named as the “Kaura Brothers,” Rama Kaura and his brother, who is not named, were described as receiving money from many community members including a woman named Mrs. Vina Hagerty. Though no evidence was reported of money being stolen or coerced in this case or any of the others, the commission saw the occurrence to be a cause of suspicion and wrongdoing. Khagen Roy was said to be a student at the University of Southern California who was financed by “two rich American women.” Roy was accused of not attending classes and exceeding his stay in the country. the commission reported,

“It has become a business for these various Hindu students… to endeavor to attract the attention of rich women, catering to them, and finally pleasing for money to support and carry them thru

110 Report, CCIH, p. 2.
their various cactuses. It is an unfortunate situation because it demoralizes their character, tend they’re not in as good a moral and mental condition as when they came from India.” 111 Similar language is used by the commission that was used by authorities who monitored and investigated the South Asian men in Nayan Shah’s book. South Asian men were racialized as immoral and ‘un-American,’ a sentiment that would have fed into the commission’s lack of support for non-Mexican immigrants. Further, we see how the racialization of these immigrants may have translated into arguments that urged the possibility of Mexican assimilation and their importance to the labor force. As noted by Molina, many Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles after 1910 were farmers, owning or leasing land, leading to the perception of Japanese immigrants as landowners and invested in California agriculture. Many politicians opposed land in the possession of Japanese immigrants and supports legislation like the Alien Land Law Acts.112 In these few pieces reported by the commission, we see the characterization of South Asian immigrant men with any wealth or signs of economic success under investigation for immoral character that was continually racialized as belonging to their racial and cultural background.

Conclusion

When Nayan Shah wrote Stranger Intimacy, one of the driving arguments was the importance of cross-racial relationships and networks in the face of state investigation and surveillance. Shah found that many migrant working men established cross-racial relationships that were integral to their economic survival and well-being. Migrant men under unfair working conditions produced important bonds amongst each other. In a similar fashion, the events at Wheatland was an act of cross-racial and cross-national mobilization against unfair conditions that affected all those working at the Durst Ranch at the time. The commission used the

111 Report, CCIH, p. 3.
112 Molina, 79.
Wheatland Riot of 1913 as a catalyst to improve labor camp conditions and address the ‘immigrant problem.’ The commission did not address the worker’s at Durst attempt to improve their own conditions and argue for fair wages. Rather, in its first years of service, the commission committed partial of its activity to monitoring labor strife and the threat of the Industrial Workers of the World. Through these actions, the commission served progressive interests as well as interests of the state’s economy. The defining characteristic of the commission in this essay is the lack of authority the state provided to the commission to address immigrant issues. The commission was created and operated in its first ten years almost exclusively as an investigative entity, reporting information and data to the state. Its collection of immigrant complaints through the complaint bureau provided the commission a sufficient amount of evidence detailing immigrants’ issues of housing, wages and employment. Without the proper authority, the best the commission could do was report its findings to the state. In the 1920s and years following, the commission would turn toward exclusively teaching Mexican immigrant women standards of living and education, utilizing a new method of protecting and assimilating immigrants with still no authority to enforce improvements. In its early years it is evident how sanitation and hygiene became issues that translated back to immigrant bodies. As the Mexican immigrant population grew, the commission moved from investigations of labor camp conditions to outlining how immigrants should improve their own conditions. The use of rhetoric surrounding the Mexican immigrants’ bodies and natural characteristics as causes of their dangerous living conditions and as health threats to society became more common, replicating language used to discriminate against Chinese and Japanese Immigrants. The commission established itself in an era of rapid progressive change and held true to progressive
ideals that supported state interference. It sought to solve issues that arose from a state market economy that depended on the exploitation of working-class and immigrant laborers.
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