

Andres, B. J. Jr. 2003. Power and control in Imperial Valley, California: Nature, agribusiness, labor and race relations, 1900-1940. Ph.D. dissertation. The University of New Mexico. 277 pp.

This dissertation explores interrelationships of power in Imperial County, California, a desert agricultural community on the U.S.-Mexico border, from 1900 to 1940. It examines how power was used to engineer and exploit the environment, establish agribusiness, and shape and control a multiracial labor force and society. Promoters of the Colorado Desert selected the term "Imperial" to reflect a desire to tame, manipulate, and monitor desert "wilderness," river "wildwater," and racial "wildness." Homesteading of 450,000 acres began in 1900 when the Colorado River was diverted from Baja California, Mexico. Colonizers sought to dominate the environment to minimize floods, droughts, crop infestations and market fluctuations. White landowners believed that the government owed them assistance and subsidies for "conquering" the river and desert. The government built levees in Mexico, Imperial Dam, the All-American Canal, and provided research, marketing, and subsidies. Control over water and land formed the basis of commercial agriculture and allowed growers to use the state to procure inexpensive, plentiful, immigrant labor of color and to smash field strikes. Building on ideologies of racial and cultural supremacy, white middle-class leaders smothered social dissent and attempted to shape social and gender relations by establishing a society predicated on white supremacy, segregation, and middle-class morality. The Mexican Revolution, which sparked banditry and smuggling, radicalized Mexican immigrants, and reinforced employers' desires for social control. Whites began patrolling the border, resisting field labor unionizing, and deporting radicals. People of color and white allies defied proscribed and prescribed codes of behavior by forming interracial workplace and social friendships, and engaging in sexual relations. Intermarriages in Imperial County rose from seventy-three (3 percent) from 1903 to 1919 to 608 (10 percent) from 1920 to 1939. Mexican-white couples were the overwhelming majority of intermarriages because Mexicans were racially "Caucasian," yet were deemed socially people of color. This dissertation, which is the only study that examines a California-Mexico border agricultural community over an extended period of time, demonstrates how power shaped the environment, built an agribusiness economy, and established a racialized, hierarchical labor and social structure.