

How did undocumented immigrants come to dominate the workforce on U.S. dairy farms?

Emily Tran: From the University of Wisconsin–Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: How did undocumented immigrants come to dominate the workforce on U.S. dairy farms? Professor David McDonald talks to PhD candidate Dustin Cohan about how changes in the U.S. dairy industry that began in the 1970s led to an unprecedented reliance on undocumented immigrant laborers.

[MUSIC FADES]

In the past several years, national and local journalists have given increased attention to the role of undocumented laborers on dairy farms. In 2017, *HuffPost* centered Wisconsin farms in a feature with the headline, "Undocumented Workers are the Backbone of Dairies. Will Trump Change That?" Earlier this year, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* declared, "Wisconsin's dairy industry would collapse without the work of Latino immigrants—many of them undocumented." You can find links to both those articles in the show notes.

Our question today is about the history behind these headlines. How did undocumented workers come to dominate the workforce on U.S. dairy farms, particularly in Wisconsin? This is one of the questions at the center of PhD candidate Dustin Cohan's dissertation research. Today we're listening to Dustin's conversation with Professor David McDonald.

David McDonald: I'm David McDonald. I'm a specialist in the history of imperial Russia and more recently in sport and popular culture, and I'm just finishing my 32nd year on faculty at University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Dustin Cohan: So, I'm Dustin Cohan, and I am a History PhD student researching immigration and labor history in the 20th century, and I am a fifth-year graduate student at University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Emily Tran: Stay with us, as Dustin explains how agricultural transformation in America's Dairyland came to be and how it shaped the lives and work of Wisconsin dairy farmers, their undocumented workers, and the workers' communities of origin in Veracruz, Mexico.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

David McDonald: All right, Dustin, we've had this question regarding the, the presence or the appearance of undocumented immigrant labor in the upper Midwest and specifically in Wisconsin, and specifically in the dairy industry in which the number has grown quite significantly over the last several decades. What can you tell us about the about the how this problem relates to your dissertation, your research?

Dustin Cohan: The dissertation really looks at the ways in which the dairy industry has changed. I sort of recognized that there was a way to map out the, the migration or the, the cycles of migration from Mexico to Wisconsin with the changes that were happening in the dairy industry. And really those changes were about the growing need for hired labor on dairy farms as they became larger businesses. And the Mexican migration that had been happening sort of filled that void in the mid 1990s, and through to today.

David McDonald: Sure, sure. No, that that's really interesting because from this outsider's perspective, the research problem seems to address something that would impress most lay people like me as almost a hiatus gap between two different types of historical processes.

One would be the long history of cross border migration from Mexico into the United States, but I always associate that with, say, California in the, in the southern border states and not really the upper Midwest; on the other hand, there's a long history—at least, I grew up in a green growing part of Canada, and I know from, on both sides of the border, there is a long tradition of migrant labor that helps with harvesting or helps with planting. They sort of migrate across both sides of the border for most of the 20th century in seasonal cycles depending which crops are growing where.

But in Wisconsin, this is specifically dairy industry that you're interested in. What changed in the dairy industry that creates this new destination for Mexican migrants?

Dustin Cohan: Well, I would start off by saying, you know, it's, it's a similar case to the one you described in Canada where there is a migrant stream or cycle.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, Wisconsin being a place where, you know, there's a lot of farming, a variety, a diversity of farming, migrants have been coming to the States since at least the 1930s to do seasonal labor.

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: So, in a similar way, moving from, you know, place to place, state to state depending on the season, the harvest season, and when work was needed. And so, there's sort of this tradition of a migrant stream, largely in the Midwest coming from parts of South Texas—

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: —and Mexico.

Now, the dairy industry had always been a more small family-based labor operation, I guess I could call it. People didn't have many cows on their farms. It might have been, you know, a range from 40 to 50 cows and that did not require farmers to hire additional laborers.

But there came a point in the 1970s where several things started to happen. There's technology that really influences the efficiency of the industry. So, dairy science helping produce larger cows that are then producing greater volumes of milk.

Then in the 1980s, there are, sort of, technological computerized systems, advances in how farmers feed their animals, how they arrange them, organize them.

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: And then by the 1990s, we see this push for growth—which is also sort of encouraged by the state government of Wisconsin—for dairy farms to grow, partially because the price of milk had been going down—

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: —pretty much since the 1970s, and the government, while it used to have a price support system for dairy farmers, that system sort of evaporated in the 1980s and early '90s. And so, farmers had the choice: we could either grow the size of our farm—

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: —to take advantage of the larger numbers, create some economies of scale on our farm. Or we try to go into a niche market; keep a smaller farm but increase the quality and hopefully be able to sell at a larger price. But there wasn't much in-between space, there's not a lot of leeway. You either had to try to specialize or you had to try to grow, otherwise people were going bankrupt people being forced to sell.

So, as people are growing, as firms are growing in size, they have a real need for hired labor.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: And they don't have a ready labor pool yet because they had never had a need for workers in that industry to this extent. And so, what happens is, you know, we have migrants from Mexico that are in the Midwest already working in other industries, maybe even adjacent industries like more of your standard crop agriculture.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And they are, in some ways, in the right place at the right time, but also, they very quickly take to that business. And what we find out is laborers are recruiting themselves; that dairy farm owners are not really recruiters. They don't really know a lot about recruiting because of the, sort of, background of the family-based business.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: So, it leaves open this avenue for people who have a knowledge of people in need of jobs, and a knowledge of jobs that are needing to be filled. And so, it's sort of a, an informal familial or kinship network that really blossoms in Wisconsin.

David McDonald: Right, yeah. That's one of the images I got, that sprang in my own mind from the background materials you, you were kind enough to share, is that this one period sees the formation of actually complementary networks, I would imagine, between the growth of knowledge

and connections on the part of the farmers but also among the migrant labor force itself, because they seem to be pretty regionally concentrated in terms of their homes in Mexico. Is that, would that be right, or?

Dustin Cohan: Yeah. That is right. So, initially, when farms start really having a strong need for hired labor, because of some contingent, sort of, historical process with the area of Veracruz, Mexico, there were a large number of Veracruzanos that were in the Midwest already working.

And so, you know, that's partially a history of that region of Mexico—

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: —and ways in which economic, and political changes in Mexico but also in North America sort of create an economic need, decreasing the economic opportunities for Mexicans in Mexico.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: There's a lot of issues with the Mexican peso being devalued and simply, economic opportunities not being available.

David McDonald: Yes.

Dustin Cohan: And what happens, really, is that, because there's not an institutionalized or standardized recruiting model, the Veracruzanos that are there are able to start recruiting their own family and friends to fill those jobs.

David McDonald: Sure, sure, sure. Well, no, that makes sense and of course I was thinking that—and the other big change outside of the structural transformation of the dairy industry is the structure of the, of the legal regime for immigration or for crossing that border, especially in search of work. And how does that change?

I would think, up until the 1950s, it was pretty unproblematic. It certainly was for crossing from across the northern border. When do these things begin to change, because that seems to be a very important condition that your farmers and your workers are dealing with?

Dustin Cohan: Right. Yes, certainly. The border is increasingly, since the early part of the 20th century, has been becoming increasingly militarized.

The border patrol that's on there is getting larger but I would say the point of history that I am sort of focused on is the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

David McDonald: I remember it well.

Dustin Cohan: Yeah, so that's, that's a pretty big deal. It has two parts that function. There's the amnesty program for undocumented immigrants that had already been in the country. And then it also increased the budget for the border patrol and ways of policing undocumented immigration.

So, from that 1986 point forward, scholars are pretty consistent in saying the border becomes more and more dangerous, more and more difficult to cross. The areas that are available for crossing are smaller, and the terrain in those areas is a lot more difficult to get across: mountains, deserts, those types of things.

And so, the process has certainly become more difficult and more dangerous, but at the same time, when you have these networks of family and friends, you know, kinship relations that are building this network—

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: —that have contacts on the border, transportation networks from the border to different parts of the country, we're starting to see that there's knowledge that's being produced from this group of migrants, and they're sharing that knowledge with the people who are those next generations of migrants that are coming.

And so, partially, the border does deter a lot of people, but at the same time, there are systems that are being created by those communities of migrants to make that process safer, make it maybe simpler.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And there's a lot of buy-in from the community of people that live in this part of Veracruz, Mexico, to help each other to create a better community for themselves in Veracruz. There's certainly reason to be fearful of the situation but at the same time they're creating ways of getting across.

David McDonald: Yeah, and that, that also speaks to the push force for out-migration to begin with, is, the conditions are sufficiently marginal in Veracruz area. That sort of lowers the threshold represented by the increasing difficulty of crossing.

Dustin Cohan: Yeah, absolutely. And what I would usually say is that they're socially and economically vulnerable enough that these types of dangers are not stopping them.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah.

Now, again, on the other side of this, this relationship, you have this community of increasingly stretched dairy farmers. This is not a community usually associated with, with clandestine activity but there's a mutual complicity. And usually, the conversation focuses on the laborers for reasons we'll come back to in a bit, but how do these dairy farmers explain the fact that they're abetting the breaking of a law that they probably philosophically supported when it was first introduced?

Dustin Cohan: Yeah, it's a, it's a good question, and I would say that most farmers do not have a good answer for it.

Usually, when you talk to dairy farmers in the state of Wisconsin, you're right, they do have political views that might be more in favor of immigration restriction. And yet, they have a body of laborers

that they're increasingly reliant upon that don't have that legal status that, you know, is sort of the paramount need for people to, to feel safe and to feel protected by the law.

So, you're seeing more and more dairy farmers come out and support their immigrant workers and, and say that there is a need to find ways to legalize these workers. There's got to be a way to create a program where we can have visas for people doing year-round labor—

David McDonald: Uh huh.

Dustin Cohan: —that doesn't, you know, sort of force us to, to break the law in this way.

The most common visa for workers is the temporary H-2A visa.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And that program does not work for dairy, because the work is year-round, it's not seasonal. So, there is really a strong need for a new type of program, a new type of visa, that can support these year-round enterprises and, you know, it's a very sensitive and difficult topic to broach with people.

David McDonald: I can imagine.

Dustin Cohan: They don't want to talk about it all the time, and certainly I've had a lot of difficulty just getting through to speak to people, because as soon as they find out what your work is, they're fearful that, you know, you might be trying to either undermine them or expose something.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, it's very difficult to gain the trust of the people to have that first response. But for those who I have spoken to and who have shared with me,

David McDonald: Yeah?

Dustin Cohan: They are more so than ever before proponents of immigration reform that would create a way for them to have visas to provide to year-round workers.

David McDonald: Hmm, interesting.

Now, I do know that that when I first came into the country, even when I first got on faculty at University of Wisconsin–Madison, under the Free Trade Agreement before—the original one between Canada and the states not the NAFTA expansion to Mexico— but there was a special visa just called a free trade visa that, if you were invited to come in and you proved you were qualified to do this work year-round, well, I could hold my position right until I got my green card.

Was there any effort to create something similar vis-à-vis Mexico when FTA becomes NAFTA?

Dustin Cohan: There's a couple of different types of visas, or different programs that got initiated with NAFTA, that enabled, sort of, I guess what you call like a temporary—

David McDonald: Sure, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —year-round visa, maybe. It's not seasonal, but there's, there's, so there's two different types of visas that come to mind. There's a TN—

David McDonald: Yeah, that's the one.

Dustin Cohan: There's the J-1. So, what I see on dairy farms is that those visas are most often used to recruit educated college graduates—

David McDonald: [Laughter]

Dustin Cohan: —who, you know, either worked as veterinarians or some type of animal science, and those people are the ones who use those visas.

And so, some of the stipulation is you have to be college educated, or there has to be a guarantee of employment, and the employer has to do an, a good amount of paperwork, which is not always something that can be done or that people are willing to do for farming.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: And so, you know, there are these programs and I have met a handful of people who, you know, either have a bachelor's from a public university in Mexico and they want to become veterinarians in Mexico and so they're almost on what seems to be an exchange program where they come to the U.S.; they're here for between 12 and 15 months. And, you know, they're working on the dairy farms with the expectation that they're going to be doing work regarding, you know, insemination, or dairy science or something of a little bit higher caliber.

And what we find is that they're not always doing that.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: That sometimes, they're the ones who are doing the most basic, sort of, low-wage labor. It kind of, it varies depending on the dairy farm and the dairy farmer, and how they choose to use their workers.

So yeah, I see that there are things that NAFTA created but largely those tools are ineffective for the population coming from places like Veracruz, or regions that are more impoverished. People don't have the same level of education. It just doesn't work.

David McDonald: Yeah, no, I get your point entirely. And yet, something you raised earlier, that the declining presence or density of the American-based labor market for this. Why aren't Americans doing this work?

Dustin Cohan: That is a great question, and it's certainly one that dairy farmers asked for a long time.

If you look at Wisconsin-based or even, you know, Minnesota-based regional newspapers from the late '80s, or the early 1990s—

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: —you'll see any number of ads, you know, 'Help Wanted' ads for dairy farms. They're all over the place, they're littered across these newspapers from that, that period.

And when you talk to dairy farmers, they will tell you, 'Yeah you know, in 1994, '95, even earlier, I was trying, you know, my hardest to recruit local American-born citizens, usually sort of white rural—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —people, and largely they were unreliable or completely uninterested in doing that type of labor for that amount of money.'

And so, part of it is there is a rural out-migration that's happening.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: There's a decreasing population in the rural counties of Wisconsin. That's something that's been going on for a while now but the population of workers to begin with is decreasing. In the past, dairy farmers, maybe they needed a hired hand to work a few months, and they would have hired a local high school kid or somebody who might have just been down on their luck or just didn't have a job. And those were the types of people that filled those temporary needs.

But that is not a reliable workforce for year-round labor and repeatedly, I would hear that dairy farmers would hire somebody maybe who was born locally. They might have lasted a week—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —and decided that they didn't want to do it, or they just were completely disinterested in the type of work, and just thought they needed a job but once they found out how difficult it is to do dairy farming they had noth— they didn't want to have anything to do with it.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: Really, the money is too little for American-born citizens who have, you know, at least a high school diploma, to think that working on a dairy farm at a minimum wage is enough just to create a life. That's sort of the common refrain that I hear is, you know, 'Americans aren't willing to do this work.'

It's very difficult work. It's dirty. It's smelly. You bring that home with you every day.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And it's a big commitment. These are not easy tasks that you're being asked to do.

David McDonald: Why don't you talk about the work they do? What's involved in supporting, a, a dairy herd year-round?

Dustin Cohan: Sure, yeah. You know, you have, let's say 1000 cows. They're ranging between 1,300 and 2,000 pounds, and your job is to basically maneuver around them, clean up after them, feed them. And it's no easy task just because it's Wisconsin and the majority of the year it's cold outside. You're outside with the animals. That in and of itself is difficult. It's just really long hours, heavy lifting, you know.

You're not just milking cows; you're also helping move feed around. It's a farm. Usually there's other things that are going on in that farm; it's not just milking cows. And so, there's all sorts of tasks with large pieces of equipment and machinery that create danger, whether it's just minor danger or whether it's more severe. Every day, you know, you're, you know, you're going in there at risk of something.

And so, there are people that are in there doing more scientific tasks, I guess you could say, people that are more involved in the insemination process or have more to do with the, sort of, feeding of calves or things like that. But the vast majority are milking cows, rotating through, working 10-to-12-hour shifts, and, on average working about 60 hours a week. Most people work six days a week.

David McDonald: Yeah. In exchange for what? What would the average pay be and what sort of benefits? Like, you're working in the proximity of big animals and there's a lot of moving parts in a modern dairy farm. What if you get hurt? What if you get ill? What sorts of protections do you have there?

Dustin Cohan: Well, I think it largely depends on the people that you work for.

David McDonald: Okay.

Dustin Cohan: As undocumented immigrants, they certainly have less access to the types of healthcare services that a citizen would have. Part of that is because some farms don't offer health insurance.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: Some do. I think increasingly, especially, you know, today, more and more are.

David McDonald: Okay.

Dustin Cohan: But as this transition happened in the 1990s and dairy farmers were having to become managers of people rather than managers of cows, they had to learn this.

David McDonald: Yeah, I'll bet.

Dustin Cohan: And there's very tight margins in this industry, so people have to really be motivated to want to give out more money, produce, you know, more benefits for their employees because they have to be able to afford to do that.

So, there's a lot of complications just initially. And so, there's clinics or a couple of clinics in this state and in Minnesota that really are geared towards that population, but that type of care is certainly not the best that's available.

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: There's also a great fear on the part of dairy workers that they should do their best to not get sick.

David McDonald: Yes.

Dustin Cohan: And so, even if they are slightly injured or slightly ill, more than not, they're going to still go to work. That's, that's another aspect of this, that there's a language barrier that exists on a lot of farms, and that language barrier creates fear.

David McDonald: Yes.

Dustin Cohan: Fear of speaking up, fear of voicing concerns. I was visiting a couple of dairy farms in the northwestern part of the state, and I met a worker who had pneumonia, and he is working. Certainly, that's not something that I think most industries would promote and it's not that I think the dairy farmers are necessarily promoting it.

It's that there are these vulnerabilities that exist. When not addressed, or sort of not proactively addressed, it creates these inequalities. And certainly, I've seen evidence of people who have worked in the industry for over 20 years. And you can see the wear and tear on their hands, on their posture.

David McDonald: Oh, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, there's sort of those, maybe long-term effects. And, and they will tell you, you know, they have back problems, or they have, you know, a leg problem that they never addressed, either because they were not able to afford a proper medical service, the clinic was only able to provide a certain amount of help, and/or they were fearful of trying to find better or more effective help.

So, that's, that's something that I think has been consistent since this transition happened.

David McDonald: I can imagine. And I also imagine that—you alluded to it earlier—that different operations treat their employees differently, which—I was wondering about the life of the, the Mexican community in these areas. They must have a grapevine about who's good to work for and who's not. Do they have any informal or formal social organizations to keep each other versed in how, how they're all doing?

Dustin Cohan: You know, not, not that I know of.

David McDonald: Okay.

Dustin Cohan: You know, part of it's because of the isolation.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: Obviously, this state's got a lot of farms that are in very rural areas, and with the difficulty of driving or the complications of driving, there's not as many opportunities to meet. Also, people are working most of the time, and so that that's also a problem.

I would say that the network, rather than it extending as the grapevine in Wisconsin, it's more that it goes directly back to Veracruz.

David McDonald: That makes sense. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: So, there's, there's sort of a back and forth that happens.

David McDonald: Yep. Yeah, no that makes very good sense.

How have the relations evolved between these two very disparate communities? I'm thinking about—I don't think I'm stating any great revelation to suggest that rural Wisconsin is pretty ethnically homogeneous, including, I would suppose the First Nations population which isn't very large—but you've got these relationships between, between Mexicans from very specific areas, and then Americans from an equally specific culture and area.

How have the relations evolved generally, or can you see any patterns between the between these farmers and, and their Mexican employees?

Dustin Cohan: Yeah, I think, you know, again like I said earlier, it's always a large variance here depending on the person, their politics, how they treat their workers, or how they envision sort of their, their relationships with their workers.

So, on the one hand, we have people that are running a dairy farm who very quickly realize, 'I have Mexican workers that have come—like you're saying, David—from a very specific culture. And I don't know anything about that. And so, as a dairy farmer, I want to learn a little bit so I can have better communication with my worker, hopefully to run a better business, but also if I have better relations with my workers it's just making for a more enjoyable, working environment.'

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, you have people that will go this, sort of, extra mile to learn about the culture, to take classes, to learn basic Spanish. There is examples of people who have created cross-cultural classes.

So, there's a very good, a very, sort of, productive organization in western Wisconsin called Puentes, which is Spanish for 'bridges.' They've, they've worked in a number of projects where they're trying to get dairy farmers from Wisconsin to Veracruz, Mexico—

David McDonald: Oh, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —to meet and learn about the cultures that their workers are coming from.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: There's not a lot of these organizations out there or anything like that, but it has inspired people to become more aware of the communication barriers that exist.

And so, what we have in Wisconsin is there are people who are hired as translators or consultants—

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: —that go out to the farms, who work there on a daily basis or do training with the workers in Spanish so that they can have, sort of, the specific technical knowledge and there isn't anything lost in the translation.

Now, on the other end of the spectrum, there's also people that aren't doing these things. There's certainly instances where workers and their, their dairy farm owners or bosses are really not talking at all.

And so how does that function? Well, usually there's sort of a head worker who has a relationship with the boss or the owner, and they might not even really be able to communicate that well. But the boss sort of uses a point person to then be, like, the manager of the rest of the group so that they are removed—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —by a degree, from interacting with people.

You know, that has multiple effects. I think what it does is it increases the fear that exists between the employees and the employer. We don't know what our employers are thinking, we don't understand necessarily how they feel about us. We get the sense that they don't really want to engage. And so, a lot of those things that I was talking about where farm workers are less willing to come forward or are less willing to voice their opinions or are less willing to try to improve, maybe, the conditions—that is even less likely in these farms where the communication is sort of broken.

It's very hard to know, even with those farms that, making that transition initially, how do we incorporate people into our business? It's almost as if dairy farmers had to learn human resources.

David McDonald: [Laughter]

Dustin Cohan: They had to learn how to manage people and do things that a larger corporate business might do naturally.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: And so those adjustments those learning curves, created a lot of inequalities for farm workers.

David McDonald: In that vein, the farmers are shifting. Their intergenerational operating model was based on patriarchal authority and interfamilial division of labor and here you're getting them having to, like you say, develop some sort of rudimentary HR culture.

How do Veracruzanos talk about the States especially when they go back home? Because I imagine a lot of these people, I know they're sending remittance payments, but I read about people using their time to build their own homes back in Veracruz and that. How did they regard the States, or can you get any sense of that from your materials?

Dustin Cohan: I get the sense that there's sort of a paradox in emotion. On the one hand, they see it as a very valuable opportunity for themselves and their families and their communities.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: There's a lot of people who will tell me, you know, 'I know that I can go up north and I can really make a difference at home, to make a difference not just for myself, but for my family, not just my immediate family but, you know, my cousins, aunts, uncles.'

They understand that there's a need to go to the United States to get those opportunities that are simply unavailable to them in Mexico. And so, you know, you see people adapting to the, the lifestyle, the culture of being in the U.S. Some people take to it very strongly—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —and some people are sort of uninterested.

There's this sense that it's sort of almost a necessary thing for me to come to the United States as part of my culture, that I am going to migrate north to bring money home. But I don't really necessarily want to stay in the U.S. There's not a lot of *my* culture, there's not a lot of sense of belonging for me as a dairy worker in Wisconsin.

Part of that is because these communities are very isolated.

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: People on farms, living in housing that's actually on a farm. So, you know, where do they go? They go to their house, they go to the farm, you know, and besides that they may go to the grocery store and that's it.

And so, what do they really know or how do they really interact with the, the broader culture in the upper Midwest? I would say probably they don't.

It's always going to be different for those who have families in the U.S.—

David McDonald: Yes, I can see that.

Dustin Cohan: —than for those who are single migrants. Not surprisingly, the majority of migrants that came first in the 1990s were men.

David McDonald: Yes, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: Later on, we start to see more mixed-status families, people getting married in the U.S., having children that are American-born citizens. I would say that in those mixed-status families, that's where you see the most interaction largely because kids go to school. And when they go to school, the parents then become more integrated into the community because they have to go for parent-teacher conferences or, you know, they have teachers that are interacting with them, other, you know, their children's friends' parents, things like that.

But in each of these situations, there's always a lot of mediation. Dairy workers that I interview largely do not speak English, and so their children become interlocutors, translators.

David McDonald: Yeah. Quite typical of most immigrants, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: Absolutely. And so, this is, you know, a situation that I see where the kids are very integrated into the culture and they largely want to stay—

David McDonald: Sure, sure.

Dustin Cohan: —just because that's where they were born, that's where they grew up, that's what they know.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, those families are maybe the ones that are the most connected. And it will vary depending on the community, how the community sort of responds, either in a welcoming way or sort of in a silent distant way.

David McDonald: Sure, sure. Okay.

Dustin Cohan: But a lot of people talk about, you know, 'I go to town to get gas to get groceries. Sometimes I see people that I know because I've seen them in my child's school, and they'll say hello. But beyond sort of just the common greeting there's very little interaction.'

David McDonald: A part of that, too, is they're visible, right, in a way that it seems to be—

Thinking about the racial dynamics in this situation, there's for, I think, a lot of these Veracruzanos, there's got to be a couple elements because A) they're Mexican and there are very strong American models of thought about Mexicans lumped together. But secondly, a lot of these folks are from indigenous backgrounds, aren't they? How does that inflect their position?

How do both considerations inflect their relationships with their employers or with their communities, but also how does that make them distinctive in Mexico and how much is that framing their understanding of the interactions they have?

Dustin Cohan: Yeah. Initially, you know, when you talk to people, they don't say they're Mexican. They say they're from Astacinga or San Juan Texhuacán, which are the names of pueblos in the mountain region of Veracruz.

David McDonald: Yep.

Dustin Cohan: And so, they much more identify with their local town or village than they would with the country of Mexico, and that's speaking to what you were saying in terms of the Indigenous history there.

And what I, what I've found is that these communities are certainly isolated because they're high up in the mountains and prior to the 21st century they did not have paved roads. They did not have internet connections or anything like that. They did not have cars. Usually a town, small village, would share a telephone, if they had one.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: And so, this is a way in which people from Veracruz are coming to Wisconsin or Minnesota or wherever and they are sending money back that, that literally is sort of transforming their communities. But it's also modernizing them in a lot of ways.

David McDonald: Yes.

Dustin Cohan: So, you know, now we have kids who have cell phones and iPads and, you know, all sorts of different things where 25, 40 years ago, none of that would have been even remotely possible.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: So, there's the sense that we see the benefits of people that are migrating. It's making material changes in our lives, in our communities. And I would say that of that first generation maybe from the '80s or the '90s that first migrates to the upper Midwest from Veracruz, a lot of those people grew up speaking Nahuatl—

David McDonald: Okay.

Dustin Cohan: —or Nahuatl. But they learn Spanish as a way to make money.

David McDonald: Sure. Okay, so it's nested, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: So, you know, people tell me stories about, 'Oh, well, first I went to Mexico City to work as a construction worker or as a factory worker. And so, I had to learn basic Spanish to work in that environment, and then Spanish sort of became my primary language because I was working in that environment.'

And then when they come to the United States, you know, if they are somebody who does that sort of first jaunt to a Mexican city and then to the U.S., largely they stick with that Spanish because that's the language that people in the U.S. know better still.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: You know, there's, there's sort of that, that language aspect where things are changing and the communities there are changing because kids that are being raised there now are not learning that Indigenous language, they're learning Spanish.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: So, things have definitely changed there. And, you know, I would say, for those mixed-status families that I talked about before, with children that are living and growing up as U.S. citizens in Wisconsin, almost everybody I talked to, you know, they say, 'Yeah, my child speaks Spanish not that well. And they speak English very well.'

And so, that's, that's really sort of a common thing. There is, there is a sense that the Indigenous history is slipping a little bit—

David McDonald: Sure, sure,

Dustin Cohan: —and that there's a need to, sort of, hang on to some of the traditional aspects of the community, in order to maintain that history that culture.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah, which, which, again, it's, it's bizarre how their experience, these, these communities' experiences in this part of the United States, echoes that of successive waves of immigrants from, from Europe, especially, that predominate here.

But again, this documentation regime throws this whole, this whole warp into the, into their status and relationship and identities. Do you see any way out of that?

Dustin Cohan: You know, I think that there's, there's a lot of people who have been developing, you know, potential programs for immigration reform. At this point, with the status of most being undocumented, you have to have faith or trust in your employer to have your back, to want to protect you, to value you as a human being.

David McDonald: Sure.

Dustin Cohan: And if there is a way for our government to create avenues for year-round workers, that would vastly change the experience of dairy farms, partially because the other part of this story is dairy farm workers, unlike, maybe more seasonal laborers, are able to stay there year-round, but they also, in the case of Veracruzanos, they're not thinking long-term. And what I mean by that is: they are coming to the U.S. with the intention of leaving in three to four years.

David McDonald: Yeah, yeah. Make your [indistinct] here.

Dustin Cohan: They're really on that plan. And it's less of the population that ends up staying, that ends up making a life in the U.S. I would say maybe it's close to 50/50, you know, depending on who you ask or who you talk to. But I would say that there are still a very, very significant portion of the population is trying to do a circular migration.

David McDonald: Which makes it very distinctive from, say, that Mexican and Central American laborers in meat plants in Iowa or around Green Bay. It appears more that they want sedentary life in, in the new place and think of it as a place to live. Is that correct or?

Dustin Cohan: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, I think, you know, the, the historian who, who's sort of done a lot of research on this that I usually look to is Ana Minian, who wrote a book called *Undocumented Lives*. And in that story, you know, she presents this evidence of, after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, because of the increased militarization of the border, because of the increased danger of crossing the border, people are more likely to stay—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —in the U.S. once they get here.

And, you know, the original intention that lawmakers had for IRCA was that it would decrease the amount of border crossings, that it would hinder or, you know, somehow stop people. And what it actually did was it, it didn't stop anybody. It just compelled them to stay—

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: —once they got across. And so, you know, certainly, if you look at Mexican migration very broadly, that is the majority. When you when you zoom in on the dairy industry you have this sort of different dynamic.

If our government is able to, to create an immigration reform system that would enable two-to-three-year circular migrations, that would transform the dairy industry.

David McDonald: Even contracts, yeah.

Dustin Cohan: So, I think, you know, there's a lot of reasons and evidence for why this would work for the dairy industry.

I think the fear is the dairy industry is not the majority.

David McDonald: Yeah.

Dustin Cohan: Other industries like corn, like you were saying meatpacking, pork, beef, all of these industries that rely on immigrant labor, they tend to have that storyline of 'come to the U.S., settle.' And so, I think that's the major complication that remains.

David McDonald: Well, thank you. This has been really interesting. I'm glad you were able to take the time to talk and good luck with completing the dissertation, bringing it to fruition, and in all your endeavors ahead. Look forward to running into you in the department when we're running into people again.

Dustin Cohan: Yeah, well, I hope sooner rather than later. Thank you. Thank you very much, David, I appreciate it and I appreciate your time as well.

David McDonald: My pleasure.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

Emily Tran: Listeners, do you have an idea for an episode? Send your questions for historian to outreach@history.wisc.edu.

Today's episode of *Ask a Historian* was produced and edited by me, Emily Tran, with editorial consulting from Leonora Neville. Special thanks to Liz Hauck.

Major funding for *Ask a Historian* comes from the Department of History Board of Visitors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Thanks especially to Jon Leibowitz, Peter Hamburger, and Rick Kalson.

Thanks for listening and take care.