

FARMWORKER HOUSING AND SPACES OF BELONGING IN WOODBURN, OREGON*

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ABSTRACT. This article traces the history of efforts to build subsidized farmworker housing in Woodburn, Oregon, during the early 1990s. Although the northern Willamette Valley has been dependent on Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers since the 1940s, until the 1980s most of those workers had been migratory and lived in labor camps. Political economic transformations shifted these dynamics, causing an increasing number of farmworkers to settle permanently in towns such as Woodburn. Rising housing costs, in combination with skyrocketing demand for low-income housing, led to a housing crisis in the late 1980s. The Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, established in 1991, successfully built two housing projects in Woodburn despite fierce resistance from city leaders and many long-time residents. These housing projects not only provided safe and affordable housing for farmworkers but also claimed a space of belonging for a group profoundly marginalized in terms of economics, race, and legal status in Oregon and throughout the United States. *Keywords:* *belonging, farmworkers, housing, Oregon.*

The town of Woodburn lies at the heart of Oregon's richest agricultural region, the northern Willamette Valley (Figure 1). Like many small and medium-sized cities across the United States, over the last two decades changing immigration rates and settlement patterns have transformed the community. The region has been economically reliant on Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers since the 1940s, but until the 1980s most of those workers had been transient in time and spatially contained. This began to change with the intensification and diversification of forestry and agriculture in the 1980s, when the demand for rural workers increased in terms of both raw numbers and length of the hiring season. These regional dynamics, in combination with broader political economic changes to which I will return to below, facilitated a process through which a growing number of farmworkers began to transition from living in camps seasonally to seeking long-term housing in nearby towns throughout Marion County, including and particularly Woodburn. According to the 1980 census, 17 percent of the town's population of 11,196 was Hispanic (USCB 1982). By the year 2000, after nearly doubling in total population (to 20,100), 50.6 percent of Woodburn's residents identified themselves as Latino, most of them Mexican-born (USCB 2000). Today Woodburn is Oregon's largest city with a majority Latino population.

In this article I explore the renegotiation of social belonging that occurred locally during and in the wake of this demographic transition. As I will explain in more detail, farmworkers arriving in the 1980s were positioned subordinately in

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