The Oxnard Strike of 1903: Breaking Barriers of Racial Representation in the Labor Force

**Historical Background**

The agriculture industry of Ventura County (in California) was booming.

The 1897 Dingley Tariff Act raised foreign goods, raising demand for sugar.

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The San Francisco Call, 1902, "Japanese Laborers Fight With Mexicans."

Ventura County, 1941, "Charles Collins Teague."

**Thesis**

During the late nineteenth century, immigrant workers faced racial labor representation barriers. However, the Oxnard Strike of 1903 (the first successful interracial strike) broke these barriers, inspiring future multiethnic walkouts. This became significant in the nation’s history of instigating change for laborers.

**Breaking Barriers**

"The most effective method of protecting the working man and his standard of living is by the creation of a national organization of the laboring people..." - Los Angeles City Council of Labor

"The significance of the particular district as a great cheese center, to the extent that from this district California is able to supply the demands of the United States, is shown in the new cheese factory at Oxnard, California, which is the largest plant of its kind on the Pacific Coast..." - John Murray

**February 11, 1903**

700 laborers formed the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) to strike against WACC for paying less than promised.

The JMLA celebrated increasing membership by persuading WACC to increase wages, heightening tensions.

In the late nineteenth century, immigrant workers faced racial labor representation barriers. However, the Oxnard Strike of 1903 (the first successful interracial strike) broke these barriers, inspiring future multiethnic walkouts. This became significant in the nation’s history of instigating change for laborers.

"If all efforts that we make in opposing the WACC were truly effective..." - John Murray

"...we acted separately. Had we collaborated..." - Barajas, 2012, "Curious Unions."

**March 6, 1903**

The JMLA managed to increase wages, a victory for the JMLA.

"Japanese and Mexicans, side by side, shall in the labor market assert their rights and prevail as equals..." - Ventura Daily Democrat

March 23, 1903

WACC deputy Charles Baradis killed two JMLA members; however, he remained unapologetic. The insurance JMLA provided his men's funerals and subsidized its efforts.

The JMLA now controlled Oxnard's entire workforce; facing WACC to increase wages, a victory for the JMLA.

"There are many factors which prevented..." - San Francisco Examiner

**March 30, 1903**


"The JMLA dissolved without the AFL's support."

"All those involved..." - Charles Collin-Tague, Political Scientist

**Conclusion**

Local racial representation improved after subsequent interracial events (Oxnard), policies to support racial equality (founding strikes, discrimination in the economy).

The Oxnard Strike inspired Hawaii’s 1946 Sugar Strike, starting several cases in resisting for better pay.

Chains around United Farm Workers (UFW) in 1968 to instigate change from today; they employ the JMLA’s interracial ideals.

"In [1965], Ed Lee, a farm laborer, of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in Delano, led the strike against the Oxnard Sugar Company and was arrested, effectively ending the strike."

"For their efforts, the union remained intact, providing a much-needed racial representation for American laborers." - Barajas, 2012, "Curious Unions."

"...the JMLA decided to petition to join the AFL (American Federation of Labor)."

"The JMLA now controlled Oxnard’s entire workforce; facing WACC to increase wages, a victory for the JMLA."

"Japanese and Mexicans, side by side, shall in the labor market assert their rights and prevail as equals..." - Ventura Daily Democrat

"I'm not one of those so-called 'big shots', but..." - J. M. Laurin

"In [1965], Ed Lee, a farm laborer, of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in Delano, led the strike against the Oxnard Sugar Company and was arrested, effectively ending the strike."

"For their efforts, the union remained intact, providing a much-needed racial representation for American laborers." - Barajas, 2012, "Curious Unions."
A NOTE TO THE JUDGES:

This picture (displaying houses by a river), is meant to be an “artifact” for our board. It displays the setting of the Oxnard sugar beet fields during the strike. A caption for this artifact is also provided below the image (this caption is also in Student-Composed Words). This artifact is not meant to be a picture on the exhibit board itself - it’s meant to be displayed in front of the exhibit board as a 3-dimensional visual of this event in order for the project to be an interactive visual. Please take this into account while viewing our exhibit.

This artifact depicts Oxnard’s fields, with Japanese and Mexican boarding racially separated (by the Santa Clara River). However, the laborers broke this barrier, striking together during harvest season - when farm labor was crucially needed. Farmers couldn’t hire other harvesters (because the JMLA controlled Oxnard’s workforce), and had to increase wages; breaking labor representational barriers.
The Oxnard Strike of 1903: Breaking Barriers of Racial Representation in the Labor Force

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Junior Division
Group Exhibit
Student-Composed Words: 499
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Process Paper

We are a group of students who love learning about the development of groups who fought for rights in history. That is why our initial historic question before researching our topic was, “How did the labor force evolve as workers’ representation in society grew more and more important?” This was what we had started with, because although we had done a short Social Studies lesson on the development of labor unions in the late 1800s to the early 1900s, we were still intrigued about them. However, as we conducted more research, we found out that minority laborers barely had any labor representation during the early 1900s, but had significantly more representation towards the later half of the twentieth century. Because of this, our question became, “What barriers separated the minority groups in the United States, how did the state of minorities in the labor force change over time, and how did they gain ethnic representation as laborers?” However, as we researched further, we decided to focus on how those barriers of racial labor representation were broken, and how the impacts of this change affected the USA as a whole.

We used a variety of sources to conduct the research of our topic, including various books from our public library and e-books from online archives. In addition, we used newspaper collections (such as Chronicling America from the Library of Congress Archives) to acquire significant quotes, pictures, and political cartoons. We looked at letters that were exchanged between key characters of this strike to learn about the tension that divided racial groups of Oxnard, the economic position of this situation, and even the importance of the timing and key geographical setting of this strike. To conduct this research, we visited our local library (the Schaumburg Township District Library) in order to access many microfilm repositories, which
helped us track down newspaper articles that we used as evidence to prove our thesis. In
addition, we gained access to many primary sources from outside of Illinois via interlibrary
loans, from which many pieces of our evidence are from. This helped us gain a better
understanding of how this strike broke barriers.

We chose an exhibit to display our topic, because we wanted to emphasize the national
importance of this strike, and its further ramifications throughout the national stage. In addition,
we wanted to display the efforts of the strike visually, so that our information could potentially
be more aesthetically pleasing and interactive to a person learning from our project.

Our project integrates the NHD theme, “Breaking Barriers in History” because the strike
broke barriers of labor representation by giving laborers better pay and representation as workers
of race. In addition, it broke the racial barriers that held the Japanese and Mexican minorities of
the USA apart by instigating them to cooperate and strike. Because this strike was the first to
accomplish this feat, it led to many other strikes across the nation to start implementing these
multiracial ideals.
Annotated Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**


This newspaper shows how the Japanese united with the Mexicans to fight for better rights. They fought together in the Strike of Oxnard Chinatown, showing that the two different races of workers were willing to fight alongside each other against the WACC until they won. This demonstrated their cooperation in striking, and how it was effective in making it a success.


This book was influential in our knowledge of the resistance in Oxnard, California during the strike. Its maps were informative, and they helped us understand many of the aspects of the striking. In addition, it helped us form our historical background by giving us sufficient historical background on what happened before the striking began in 1903 in the city of Oxnard.


This book gave us lots of historical background and information that led up to the Oxnard Strike of 1908. This helped us strengthen our historical background and helped us understand why the people did what they did. It also provided lots of information on the long-term and short-term effects of the strike, which helped us understand the legacy of this event.

This book showed us how prejudice against the Japanese built up throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It gave information on the white perspective of the biases being built on the Japanese, and how although the nineteenth century brought hatred between Mexicans, the commencement of the twentieth brought promises of collaboration between the two ethnicities. This helped us develop historical background.


This book gave us lots of historical background on the discrimination against the Japanese-Americans of California. It showed why the Mexicans and Japanese of Oxnard, California were discriminated against and what this racism meant for the oppressors and the prejudiced. It also provided many pieces of evidence to prove our claims, giving useful, applicable


The San Francisco Call newspaper describes brutality against Mexicans. This provides numerous examples of massacres and acts of violence against Hispanics, as well as legal cases. Clearly this newspaper transmits violence and hatred to other races. This really allowed us to appreciate the period of time and the extent of racism.


This newspaper article helped us understand the implications of the breaking of the barriers, and how the Los Angeles Government Board favored them. The newspaper also expressed itself in an amazed tone, because it mentions that it was the first time that a labor union of non-Asiatic ethnicity had accepted Japanese-Americans. This newspaper was written after the strike but before the JMLA’s success, so it describes the strikers’ journey to success.


This newspaper from the San Francisco Call, shows violence against Mexicans. It shows many examples of shootings and violent acts against Mexicans, and legal cases. This newspaper clearly broadcasts the violence and hate towards other races. This helped us really understand the time period and the level of discrimination.

This article was very informative in helping us gain perspective about the Strike as portrayed by the media. Although Southern California newspapers such as the Oxnard Courier and the Los Angeles Times portrayed the Strike as an unnecessary riot created by non-white people, other newspapers had less bias against the strikers. This gave us information on how the strikers broke barriers, which helped in developing our thesis.


This newspaper was very informative in giving us the different perspectives of the Oxnard Strike of 1903. It showed how although the non-Japanese and non-Mexicans tried to put the strikers in the worst light possible, they had to admit that the white reaction to their striking was unwarranted and violent. This shows how the strikers maintained nonviolent policies, which helped gain sympathy from others and inevitably triumph.


This book showed the agricultural history of Southern California, including farm laborers from Native Americans to Mexican-Americans to Japanese immigrants. This book helped us understand how people became farm laborers, and why stereotypes against immigrants from Mexico and Japan formed. This helped us develop our historical background.


This newspaper article gave us insight on how the WACC functioned, and also provided a clipping of a WACC note saying that the sugar beet trimming season was near, and that the contracting company was ready to provide labor for that. In addition, it showed us how Oxnard was before the rioting, which gave us a really good perspective of the white Americans and helped us understand the many aspects of our historical background better.


This book helped us understand the short term causes of the Oxnard Strike of 1908, which helped us develop the main ideas of our historical background and the background portions of our thesis. In addition, this book helped us comprehend the long-term effects of the Oxnard Strike, and how it was portrayed by the media at that time, which helped us understand the white perspective of the strike.
Secondary Sources:


This helped us gain more historical background on the Oxnard Strike of 1903. In addition, it helped us develop our thesis by providing information on how the Oxnard Strike broke racial and discriminatory barriers by being the first strike to include cooperation between two races who were usually against each other.


This website helped us understand why white Americans were prejudiced against Mexican Americans, and how stereotypes against Mexicans began. This was influential in our understanding of the background of the strike because it shed light on to the situation of the discrimination against the Mexican-American workers, and why they and the farm owners were against each other in the Oxnard Strike of 1903.


This website helped us understand how the Oxnard Strike of 1903 broke barriers in being the first interracial strike in America. This showed what the workers were fighting for in the strike. In addition, it shed light onto how other unions (such as the UFW) would be inspired by this to implement these practices by disregarding racial barriers.


The website of the United Farm Workers of America made by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta as an activist organization. This organization has helped us realize how helpful and impactful Cesar Chavez and his associates are. He is still making an impact today in his work and activism. It really helps us understand the impact and the way he could transform the working conditions for farm workers all around.

This magazine from the 1900s helped us understand how daily life was in Oxnard before the Oxnard Strike of 1908. The people of Oxnard were living in prosperity because of the abundance of crop yield; in fact, Oxnard began producing so many sugar beets and lima beans that it became a rich town. This helped us understand what happened leading up to the strike, and helped us develop our historical background.


This website gave us more information as to the historical background of the sugar beet farms, and technical information including what the workers were called such as specifically providing what the Mexicans and Japanese workers did. It also provided some short term effects of the strikes. In addition, it provided evidence of how the people broke barriers by providing official photographs of the people of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association.


This document is very helpful to us by providing information about the events and the Oxnard strike’s effects in labor unions afterwards. It includes many primary and secondary sources that we can utilize for our tri-board and to continue our extensive research on our topic. Overall this bibliography of sources on the Oxnard Strike has many good sources.


This article helps us understand how the Mexican residents were greatly affected by their wages. It affects their lifestyle, their living conditions and how they survive. This article emphasizes the importance of the Oxnard Strike and how it improved the lives of Mexican residents.

This website helped us by giving us lots of information on how, after the Oxnard Strike of 1903, the JMLA (Japanese-Mexican Labor Association) wanted to join the AFL (American Federation of Labor) after helping gain a workers’ victory in Oxnard. However, they were rejected because the AFL didn’t want to accept people of Asiatic race, despite their claims of accepting people of all ethnicities. This helped us in our project by giving us information for the long term effects of the strike.

Kim, Eugene. The Oxnard Strike of 1903. Dartmouth, 1999, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~hist32/History/S03%20-%20The%201903%20Oxnard%20Strike.htm. This website gave some insight on how the Oxnard Strike happened, and provides a reflection on the event in which the effects and legacy of the striking are discussed. In addition, this document gives statistics on how many workers were in the WACC, the names of important people of the corporations, and many more important details that helped us gain more knowledge on the short-term and long-term effects of the strike.

McBane, Margo. “Whitening A California Citrus Company Town: Racial Segregation Practices at the Limoneira Company and Santa Paula, 1893-1919.” Indiana University Press, San Jose State University, 2011, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/racethmulglocon.4.2.211?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. This website helped us in finding information, because it gave us more examples of practices of racial segregation and how people overcame those barriers in striking to get what they wanted. This shows how other strikers were inspired by the Oxnard Strike of 1903, and having taken their example, they struck and were successful. This information helped us develop our long term effects section.

MFSM. “History.” Migrant Farmworkers Social Movement, http://migrantfarmworkers.web.unc.edu/history/. This article from the Migrant Farmworkers Social Movement gave us the effects of the strikes while also showing us important working conditions. We can clearly see the effects and the awareness brought to discrimination in today’s world. In addition, the timelines give information about farming and domestic agriculture from the 1650s to today, and go into detail about Cesar Chavez and his strategies for better rights.

This secondary source from archive gives us a chronological order of events to show how each event impacted each other. It shows the racial divide even in the AFL. It shows how Asain people were not accepted and they were widely discriminated against. This is shown even more when the AFL didn’t accept them because they are supposed to be accepting of everyone.


This article gives the historical background of the city of Oxnard, California, and recounts the fatal events that occurred in 1903. The racial divide, even in the AFL, was apparent, and how Asian and Mexican people were not accepted and were widely discriminated against. They were shot at and heavily despised. This is when the AFL didn’t accept them because they are supposed to be accepting of everyone. Later on, the article states the short-term impact, and some of the JMLA’s failures.


This article gave a concise summary of the history of The American Beet Sugar Company, and gave background information about the JMLA, WACC, and important figures such as Kusaburo Baba, the leader of the JMLA. In addition, the website gave pictures of the conditions of the Japanese, and data on production amounts, number of workers, and dates of events. This helped us form a long-term effect of other strikes, and how action was taken.


This website helped us understand the prospect of breaking barriers by introducing different perspectives of this event. In addition, it provides context to different strikes in which people broke racial and segregatory barriers. It also showed how the Mexican-Americans and Japanese-American laborers were often pitted against each other, and how when only one of them tried to fight for better working conditions and pay, it was easier to control.

This document gave historical background from 1850 pertaining to the sugar beet industry in California. This helped us understand the basis and the previous events to our topic. Its background knowledge was very helpful in our understanding of the “current” events for our topic. Making our research stage quicker and more efficient. Overall this source gave extra sources for our background and also enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the strike.


This article about the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2019 shows us the major impact of Cesar and the organization of UFW. They have continued to help and greatly impact farm workers since even before the Oxnard Strike. The UFW in general is a great way to show us how impactful Cesar and his work is. Overall this article enhances our knowledge and understanding of the major impact of Cesar.


This website helped us identify the events of the Oxnard Strike of 1903 by giving us many pieces of evidence to support our point. In addition, it helped us develop an understanding of the Oxnard Strike by displaying quotes of the leaders and important people of the event. In addition, it thoroughly explained the short term effects of the strikes, which helped us describe the effects of the strike in our project.


This website informed us on how cultural and racial diversity was important in labor movements, because it gives information on how important it was that the Japanese and Mexicans worked together in striking. In addition, the article gives information on how the town of Oxnard grew, which helped it attract workers of different races.
Student-Composed Words
The Oxnard Strike of 1903: Breaking Barriers of Racial Representation in the Labor Force

Historical Background

The agriculture industry of Ventura County (a Californian region by the Santa Clara River) was booming.

The 1897 Dingley Tariff Act taxed foreign goods, raising demand for sugar.

Sensing profitable opportunities, Henry Oxnard built a sugar-beet company in Ventura County; business prospered, and the town “Oxnard” was established.

Oxnard’s main labor-contracting company - WACC (Western Agricultural Contracting Company) - consisted largely of Japanese and Mexicans laborers.

Farmers heightened Japanese-Mexican opposition by racially separating boarding, which prevented potential collaborative strikes while keeping wages artificially low.
Thesis

During the late nineteenth century, immigrant workers faced racial labor representation barriers. However, the Oxnard Strike of 1903 (the first successful interracial strike) broke these barriers, inspiring future multiethnic walkouts. This became significant in the nation’s history of instigating change for laborers.

Breaking Barriers

The laborers broke significant ethnic barriers by interracially uniting.

The laborers’ triumph over labor representational barriers proved that interracial unity was effective.

Although prejudiced newspapers portrayed the union scathingly, the union overcame media-imposed discriminatory barriers.

February 11th

700 laborers formed the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) to strike against WACC for paying less than promised.
March 6th

The JMLA celebrated increasing membership by parading. WACC resented this, heightening tension.

March 23rd

WACC deputy Charles Arnold killed two JMLA members; however, he remained unpunished. The incensed JMLA performed the mens’ funerals and redoubled its efforts.

March 30th

The JMLA now controlled Oxnard’s entire workforce, forcing WACC to increase wages; a victory for the JMLA.

Short-Term Events

Lauded by the Los Angeles Labor Council for breaking barriers, the JMLA decided to petition to join the AFL (American Federation of Labor).

Prejudiced against Asian-Americans, the AFL told the JMLA to expel its Japanese-American members before joining.

Many criticized these conditions, because the JMLA’s ideals revolved around interracial unity. The JMLA dissolved without the AFL’s support.
Long-Term Impacts

Local racial representation improved after subsequent interracial events forced Oxnard’s politicians to support racial equality (fearing strikes’ detriment to the economy).

The Oxnard Strike inspired Hawaii’s 1946 Sugar Strike, uniting several races in striking for better pay.

Oxnard’s interracial ideals inspired activist César Chávez (who was raised there) to implement them in the 1965 Delano Grape Strike and 1970 Salad Bowl Strike.

Chávez created United Farm Workers (UFW) in 1962 to instigate change. Even today, they employ the JMLA’s interracial ideals.

Conclusion

Ethnic and labor representational barriers were overcome by laborers during the Oxnard Strike of 1903. Although fatalities occurred, this victory inspired activists to employ interracial ideals in inciting change. This proved that impediments that separate people can be broken to accomplish common goals and establish unity.
Artifact

This artifact depicts Oxnard’s fields, with Japanese and Mexican boarding racially separated (by the Santa Clara River). However, the laborers broke this barrier, striking together during harvest season - when farm labor was crucially needed. Farmers couldn’t hire other harvesters (because the JMLA controlled Oxnard’s workforce), and had to increase wages; breaking labor representational barriers.