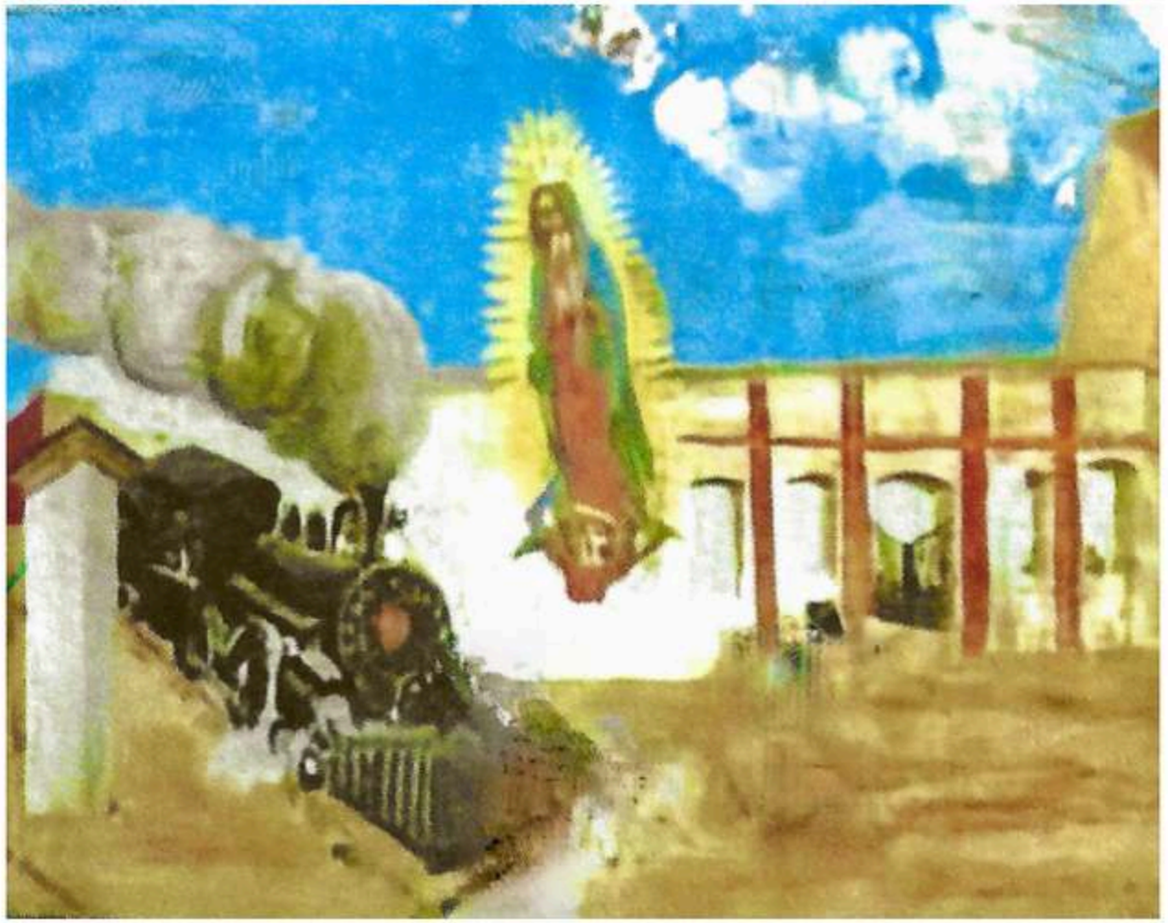
Saga of the Santa Fe Railroad Mexican Village in Fort Madison, Iowa

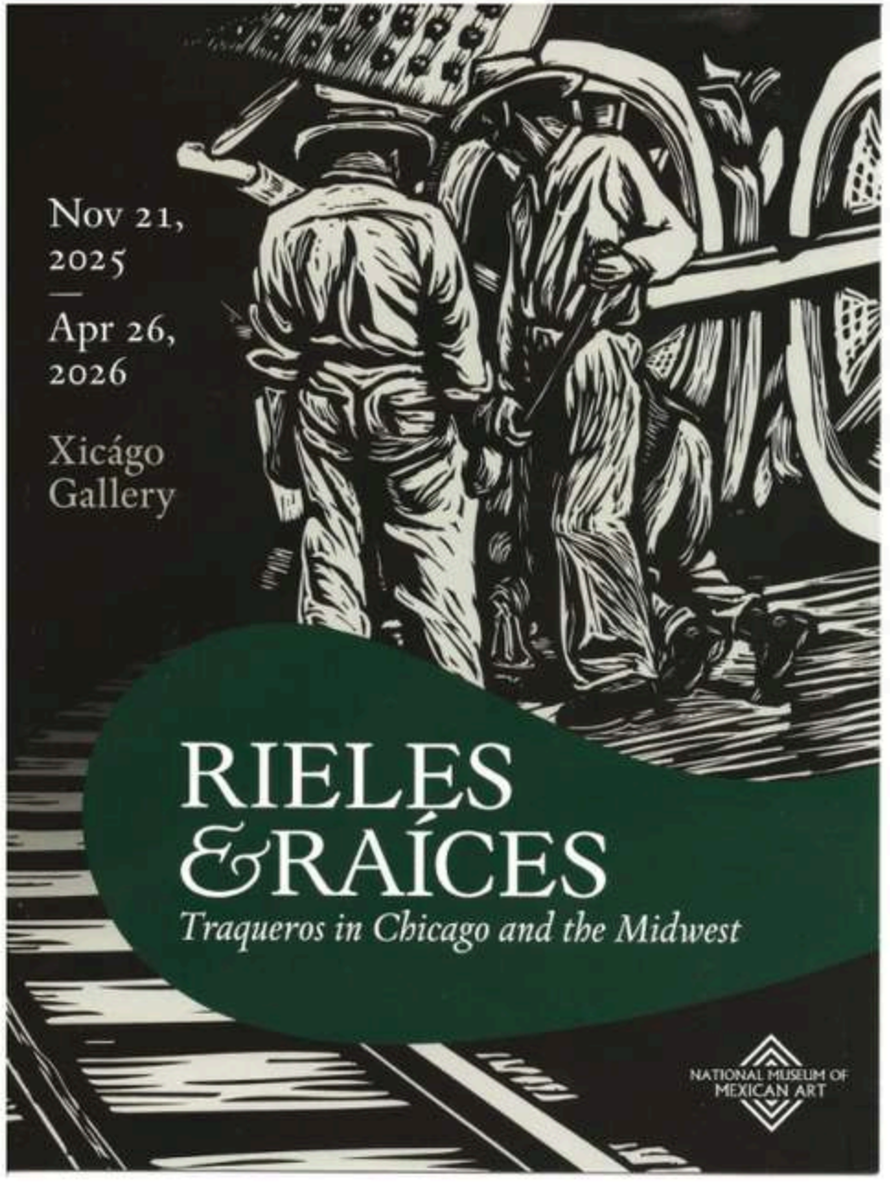
Part I: Early Mexican Settlements

Alejandro Benavides Ph.D.



March 2026: Fort Madison visit to the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago.





Rieles & Raices exhibition.





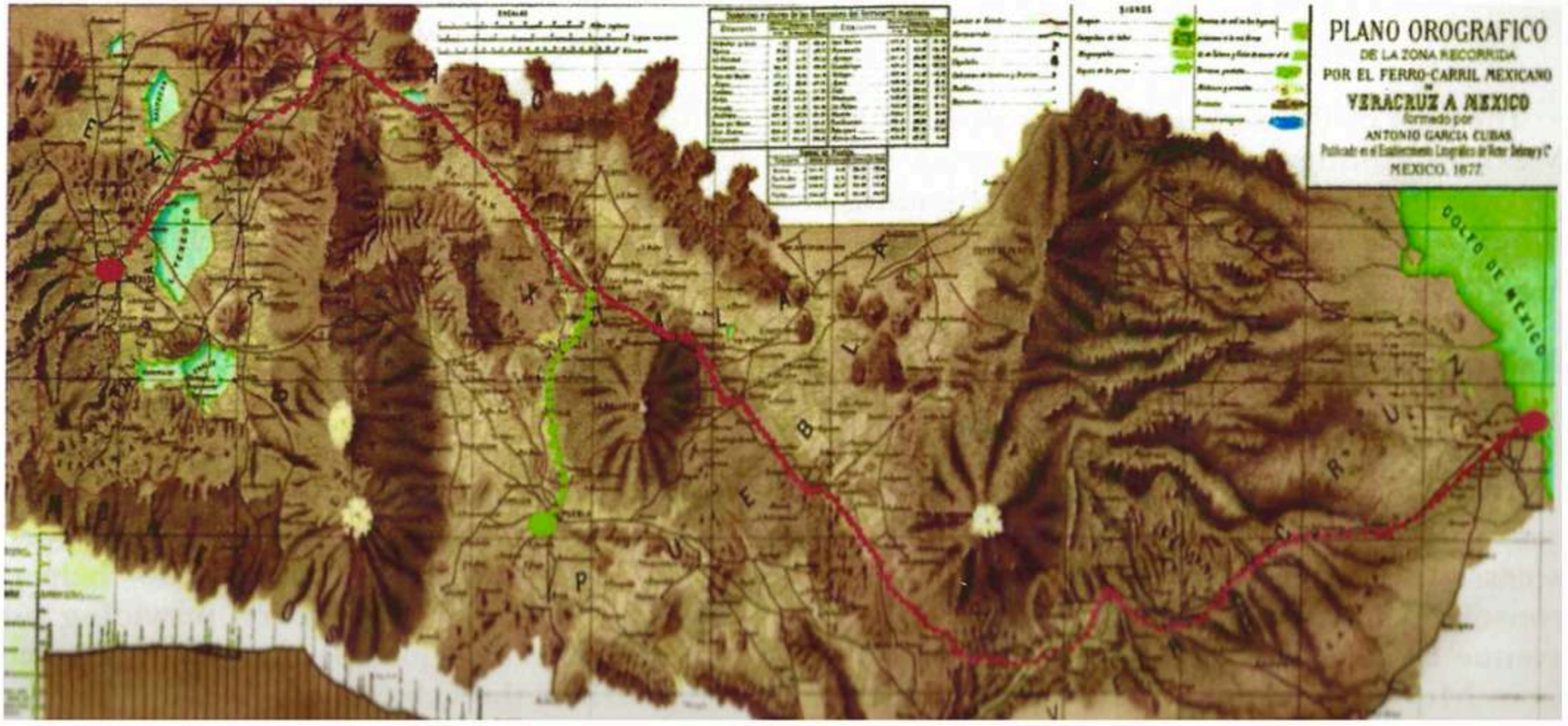
Exhibition title: “Faith, Culture and the Establishment of the Mexican Community in Aurora, Illinois.” The Saga of the Fort Madison Mexican Village is **Faith, Culture, and Establishment of the Mexican Village.**



1850: The first Mexican railway was built from the Port of Veracruz seven miles north to El Molino.



Port of Veracruz to El Molino-7 miles ( ). The first major railway, *Ferrocarril Mexicano*, was completed in 1873 ( ). It connected Veracruz and Mexico City, with a branch line connecting Apizaco to Puebla ( ).



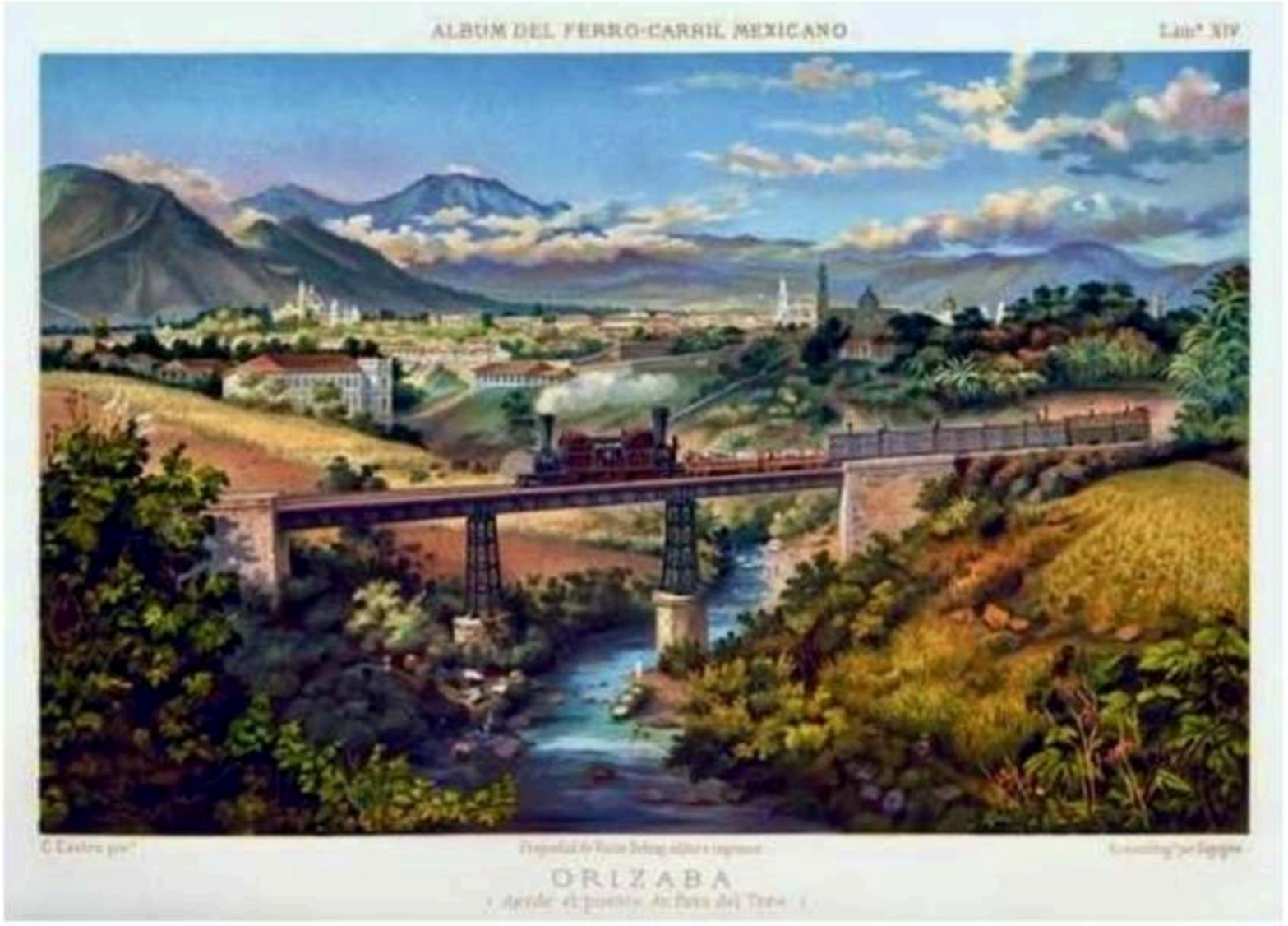
Three phases of Mexican railroad workers migration northward

- **1870-1880s**: The first phase was a movement of railroad construction crews from Mexico's central plateau to the northern region.

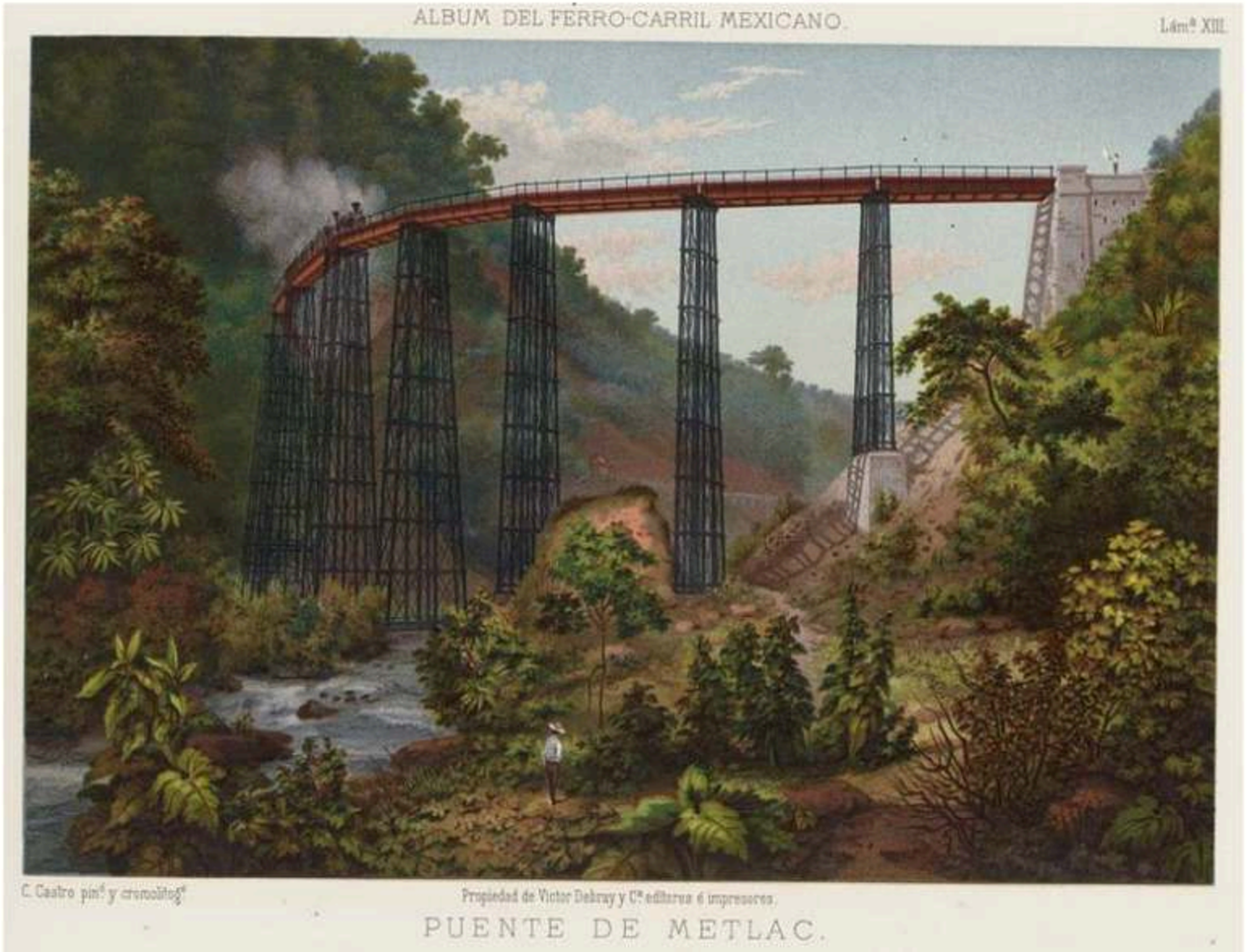
- **1880s-1890s**: Characterized by the extensive US recruitment of contract Mexican workers who migrated to the Mexico-US border by American railroads, such as the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad.

- **Early 1900s**: Characterized by Mexican workers reaching the Midwest, and the Eastern states to a lesser extent.

As construction of railways in Mexico increased, steam locomotives changed the scenery of towns such as Orizaba, Veracruz.



Locomotives crossed canyons over massive trestle bridges such as *Puente de Metlac* located in the *Barranca de Metlac* canyon in the state of Veracruz.



Mexico’s countryside began changing as steam locomotives crossed through remote regions.



Railroads help establish towns.



Trains in Mexico were initially mainly used by middle- and upper-class passengers.





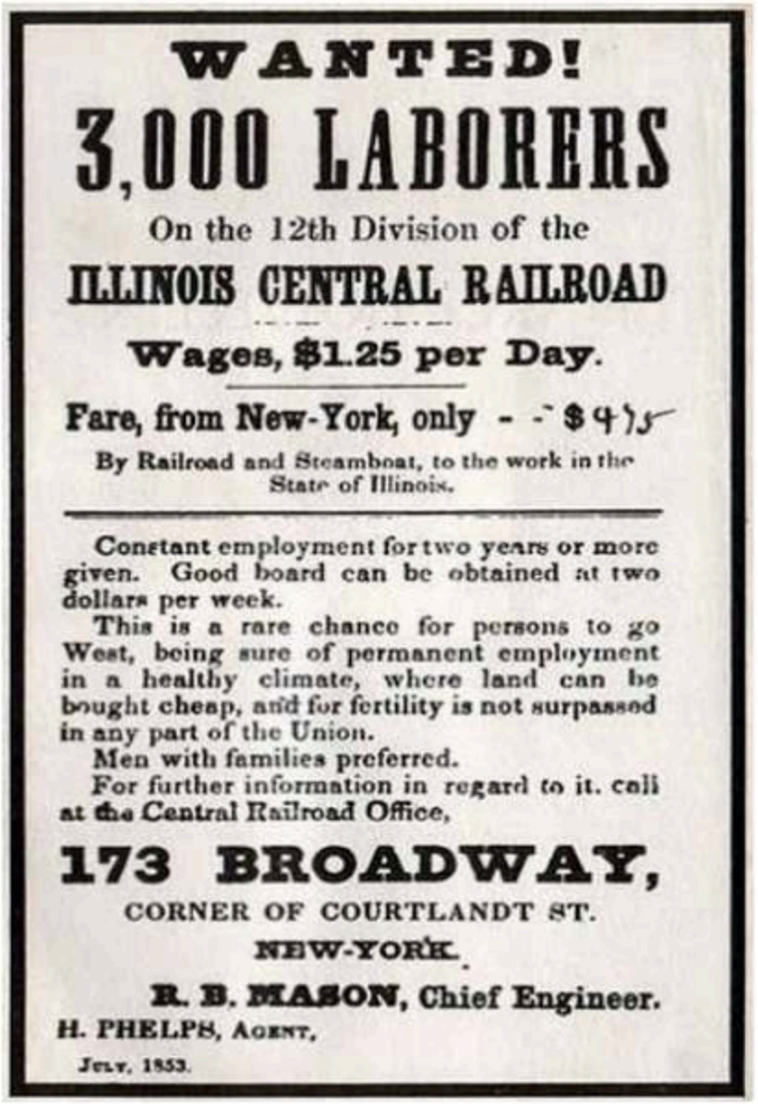
In the United States, society was driven by **Manifest Destiny:** Popular 19th century belief that **American settlers were divinely ordained to expand across North America**. As illustrated below, Manifest Destiny included the removal of Native Americans and westward expansion of the railways.



The mass immigration of Chinese people to the US began in 1849 due **to famine, economic devastation, and political instability**. Their migration from China was also triggered by the **California Gold Rush and western expansion of the American railroads**.



1853: Illinois Central Railroad poster for 3,000 laborers. “Men with families preferred.”



WANTED!

3,000 LABORERS

On the 12th Division of the

ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD

Wages, $1.25 per Day.

Fare, from New-York, only - - $9 75

By Railroad and Steamboat, to the work in the State of Illinois.

Constant employment for two years or more given. Good board can be obtained at two dollars per week.

This is a rare chance for persons to go West, being sure of permanent employment in a healthy climate, where land can be bought cheap, and for fertility is not surpassed in any part of the Union.

Men with families preferred.

For further information in regard to it, call at the Central Railroad Office,

173 BROADWAY,

CORNER OF COURTLANDT ST.

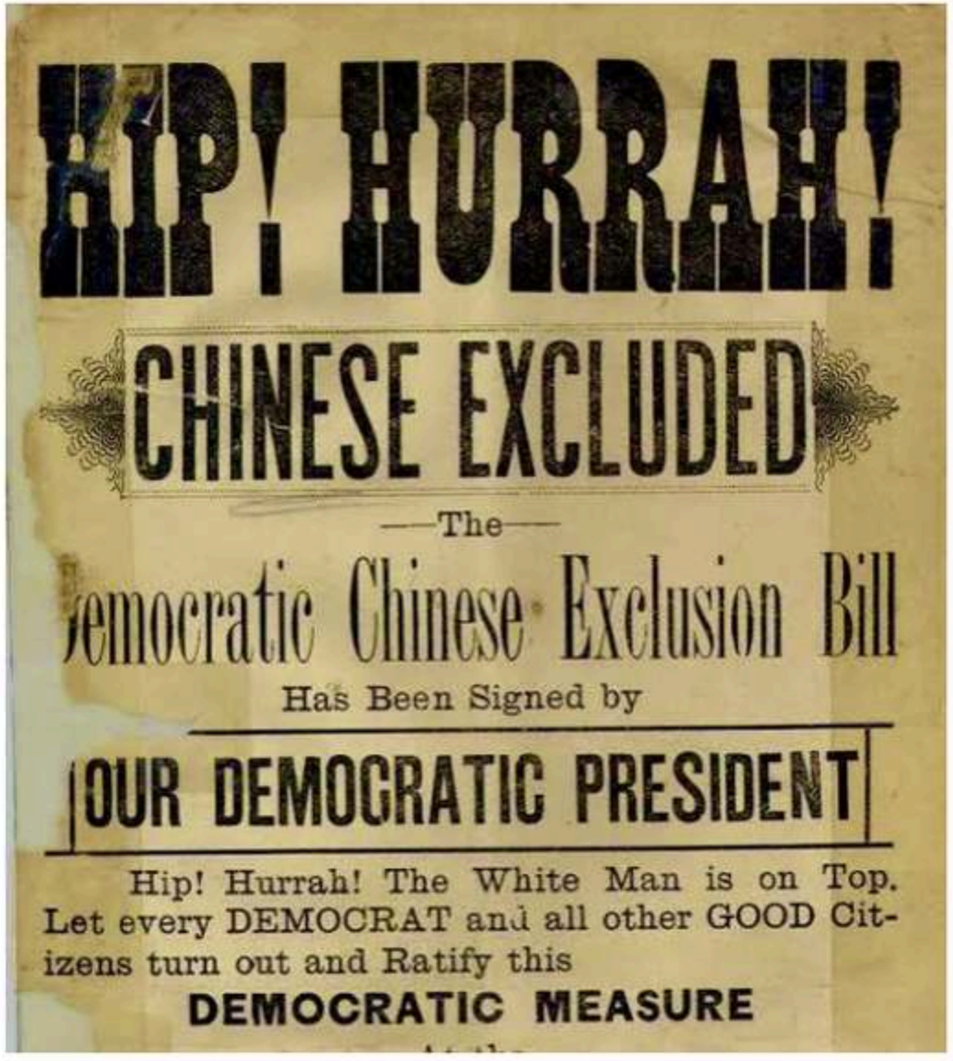
NEW-YORK.

R. B. MASON, Chief Engineer.

H. PHELPS, Agent,

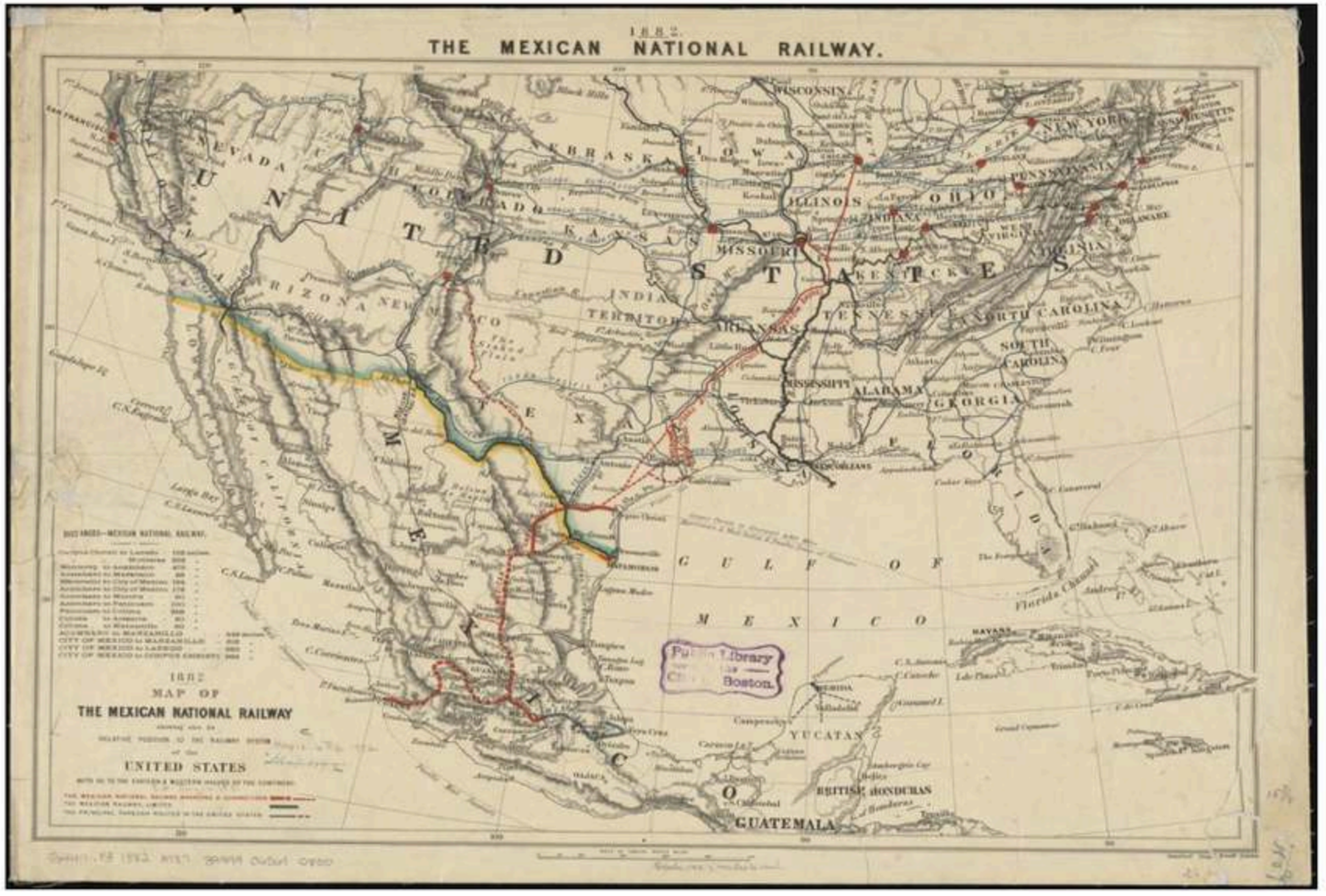
July, 1853.

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: Banned Chinese laborers in US due to intense **labor competition and deeply-rooted racism** against Chinese immigrants.

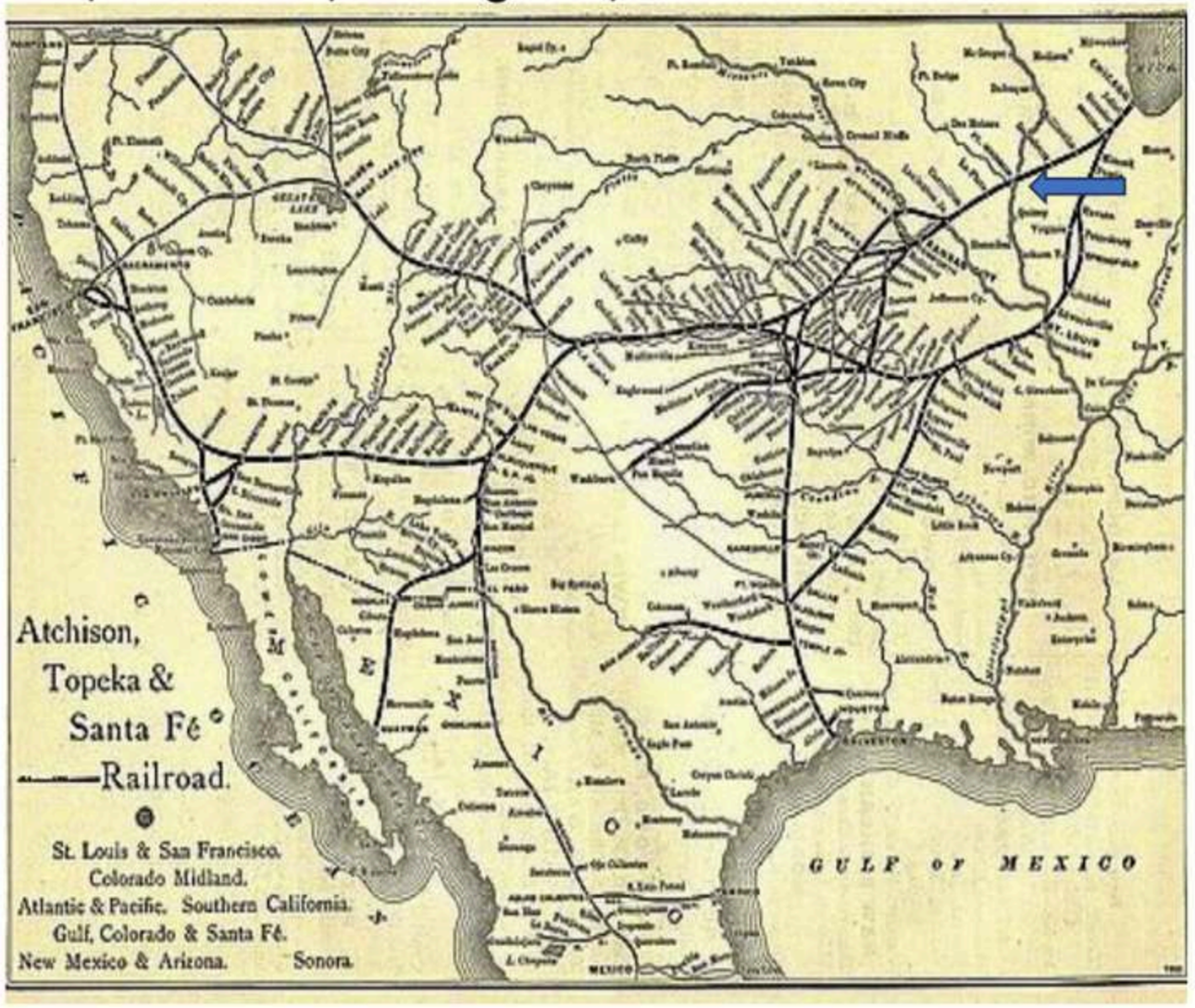




By1882, there was a major Mexican National Railway system with connections to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and to Chicago.



1891 map of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (Santa Fe) routes connecting the Mexican Central Railroad in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua Mexico , to El Paso, Texas; and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico , to Nogales, Arizona. Fort Madison.



By the late 1890s and early 1900s, *traqueros*, Mexican railroad workers, began building and maintaining America's railways, mainly in the Southwest and Midwest.





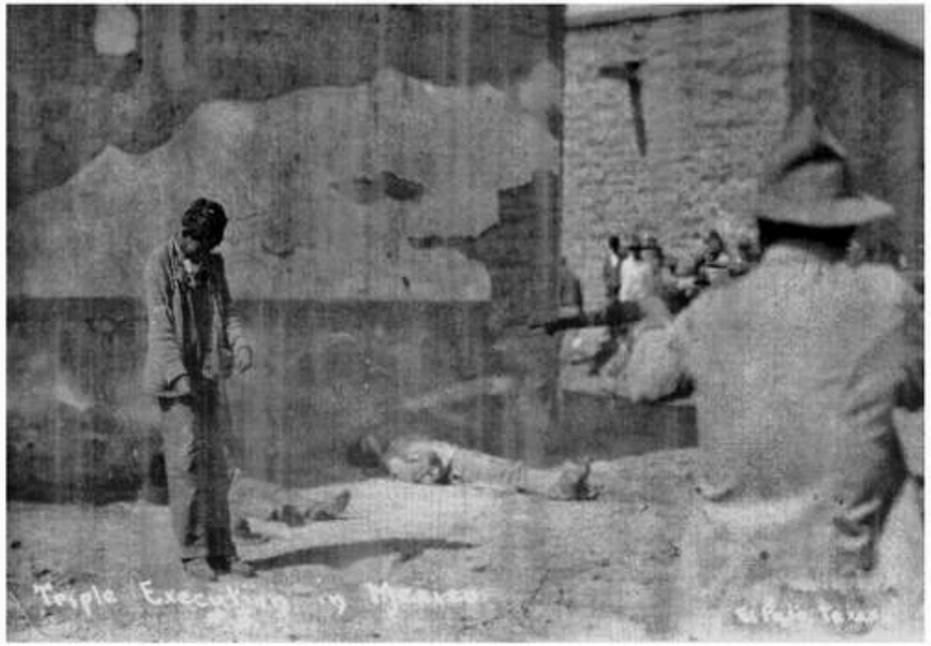
1892 Burlington route from Nogales, Arizona , and El Paso, Texas, to Fort Madison .
Migration from Mexico to the US was significantly facilitated.



By early 1900's, Mexico's trains were no longer just for the upper and middle class.



1910-1920: In the face of death during the Mexican Revolution, people began migrating from Mexico to the United States.





Between one and two million people died during the Mexican Revolution due to combat, wide-spread famine, and disease.





Trains played a major role during the Mexican Revolution transporting troops and artillery to the front lines.





People fleeing the Mexican Revolution. Men rode atop boxcars while women and children rode on the train's brake frame.



An estimated one million to 1.5 million people fled Mexico during the Mexican Revolution (about 10% to 15% of the population). They fled as best they could.

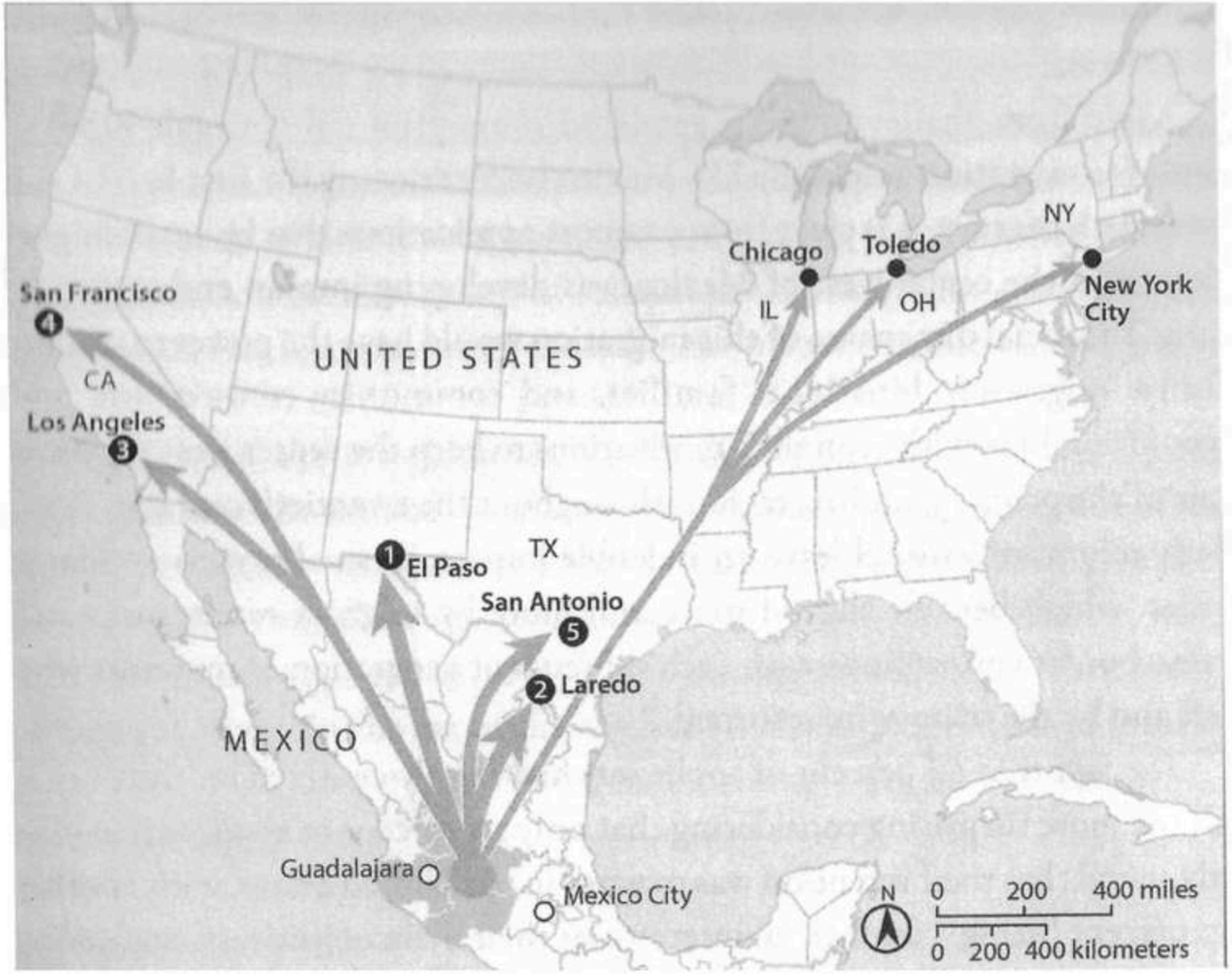




Our Lady of Guadalupe: A powerful symbol of **identity**, **protection, and resilience** for Mexicans immigrating to the United States. Mexico's patron saint served as **a cultural and spiritual anchor** that helped established solidarity and communities in the US.



The five major migration destinations from Guadalajara, Mexico, along with minor destinations to Chicago, Toledo, and New York City.



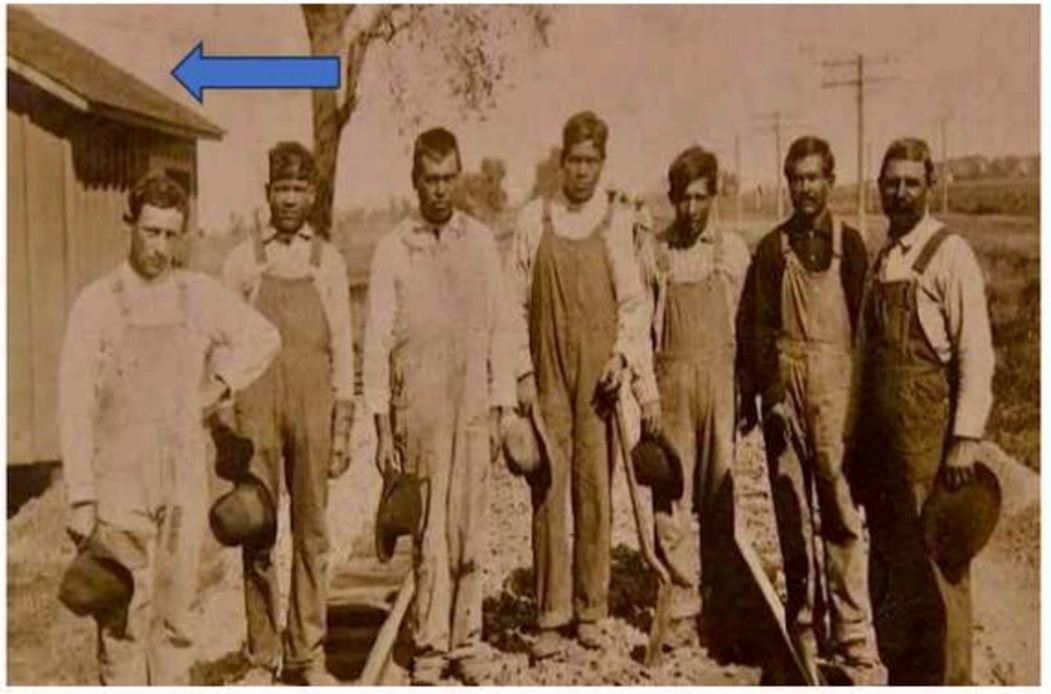
Recruiters, known as *"enganchadores,"* actively recruited contract railroad laborers in Mexico with free passage and boarding. Most workers who immigrated to Fort Madison crossed in El Paso, Texas.



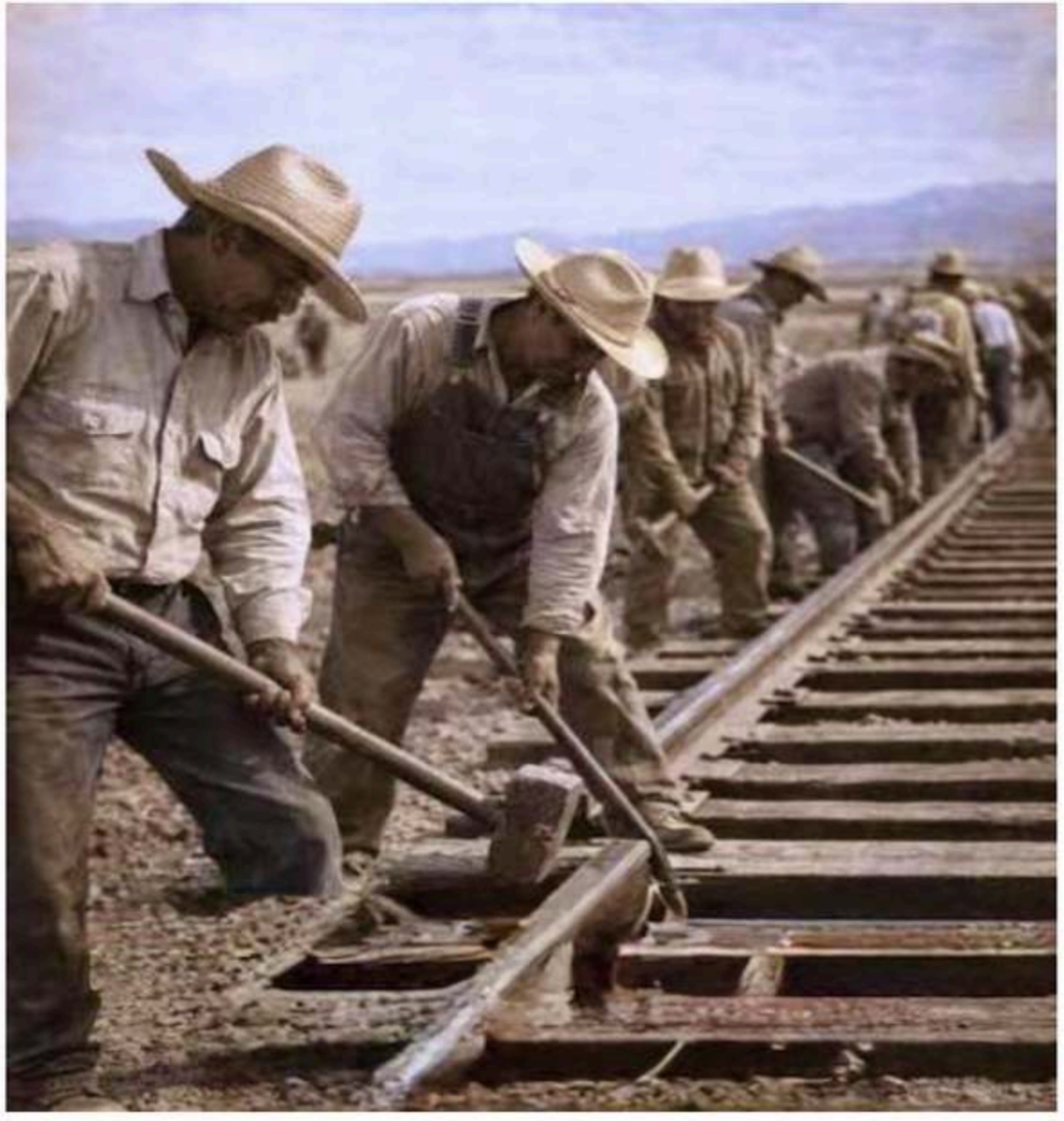


Initially, *traqueros* were housed in tents, boxcars on tracks, or bunkhouses as seen on right.





Traqueros became an essential part of building and maintaining America's railways.





Expansion of railways to Fort Madison, Iowa

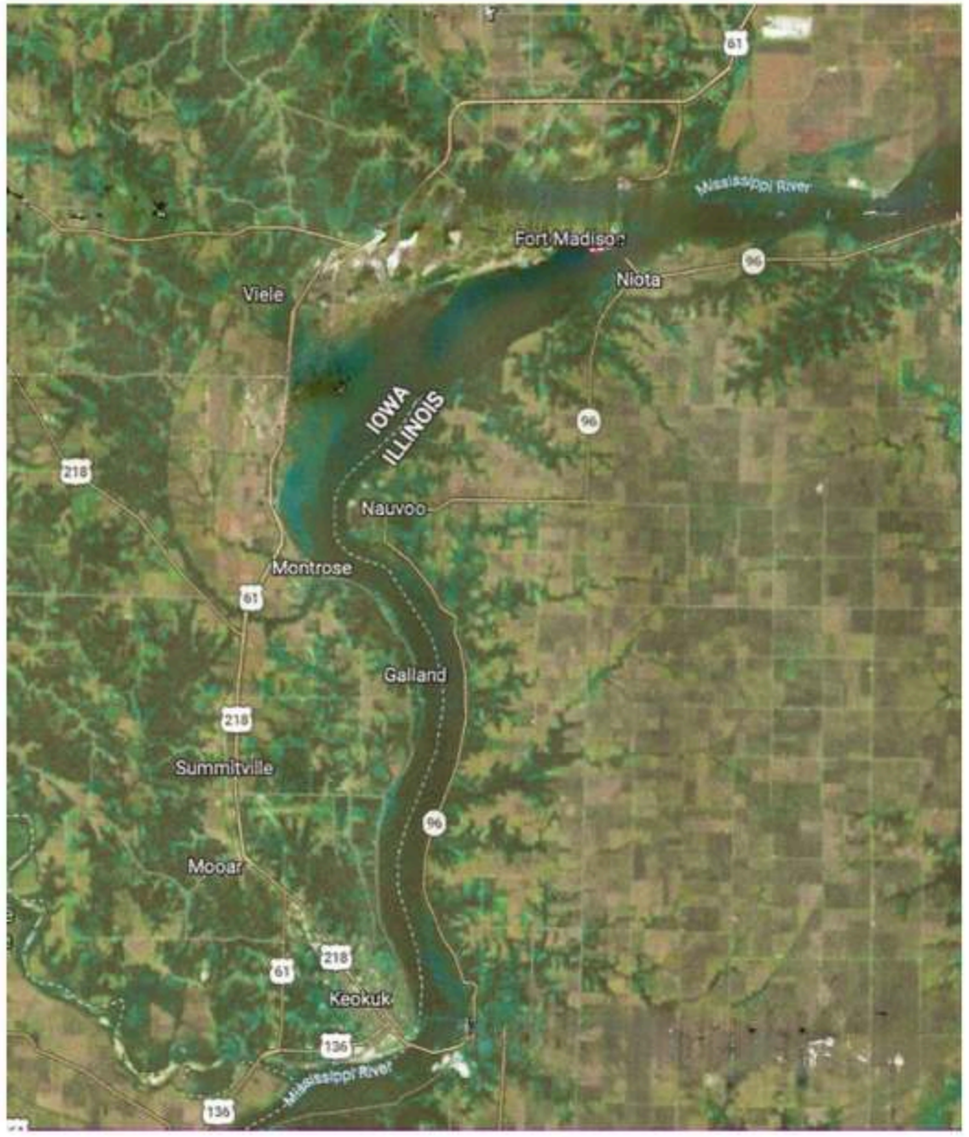
The earliest railroad route connecting Keokuk with Fort Madison, Iowa, was built by the predecessor to the CB&Q. The route did not open at the same time, but rather in phases which eventually created a single direct line.

- **1859**: The Iowa Southern Railroad tract construction in started in Fort Madison and built south to Viele, Iowa.

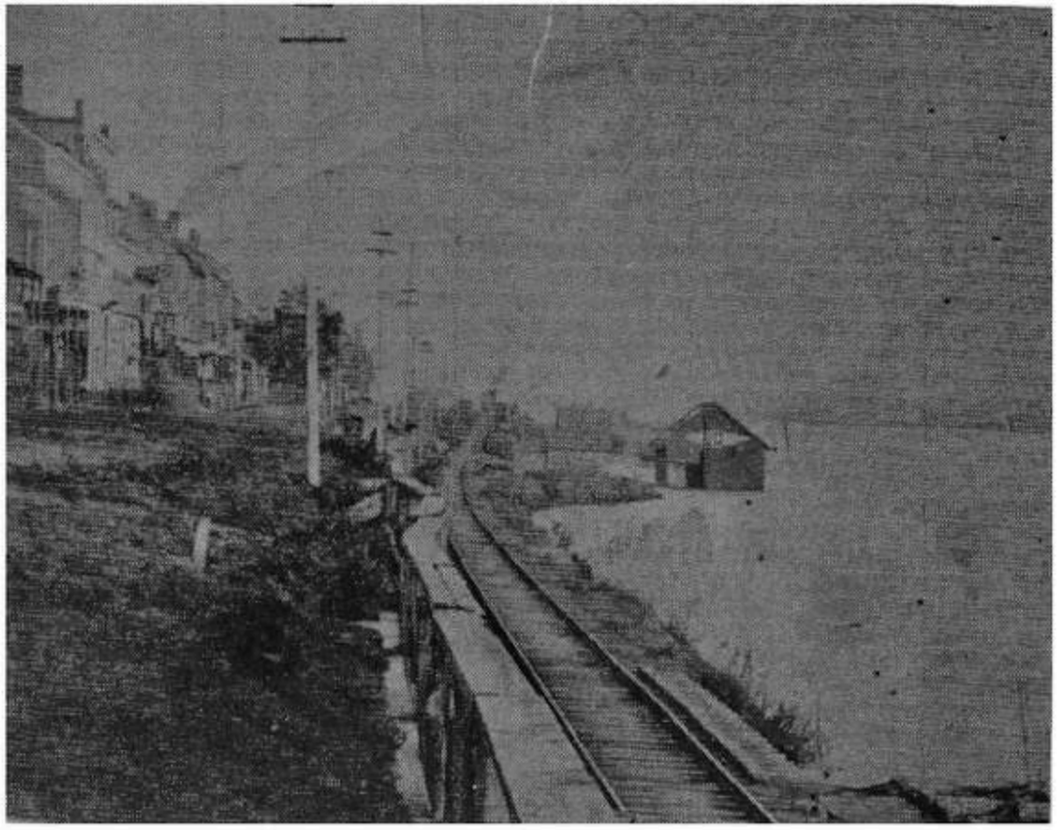
- **Late 1860s**: The Keokuk & St. Paul Railroad tracks were connected between Keokuk and Fort Madison.

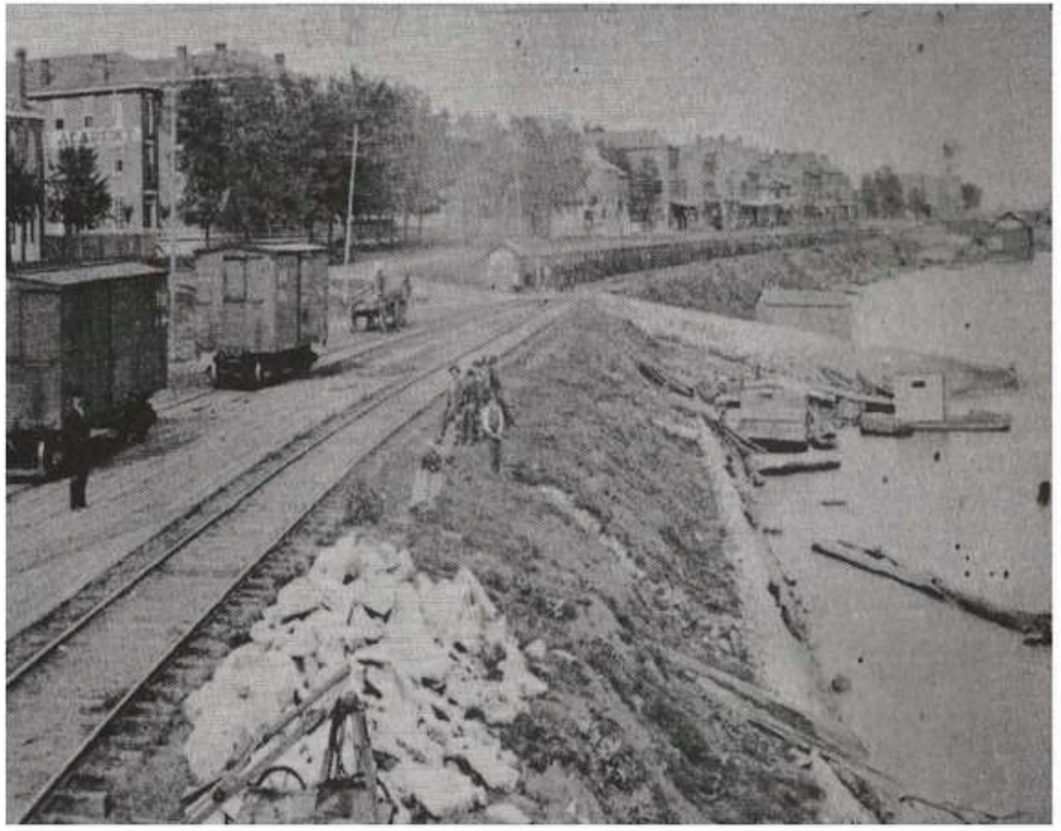
- **1869**: The CB&Q acquired both railroad companies. Under the CB&Q, the track became a vital segment of the Mississippi River.

CB&Q railway from Keokuk to Fort Madison, Iowa .

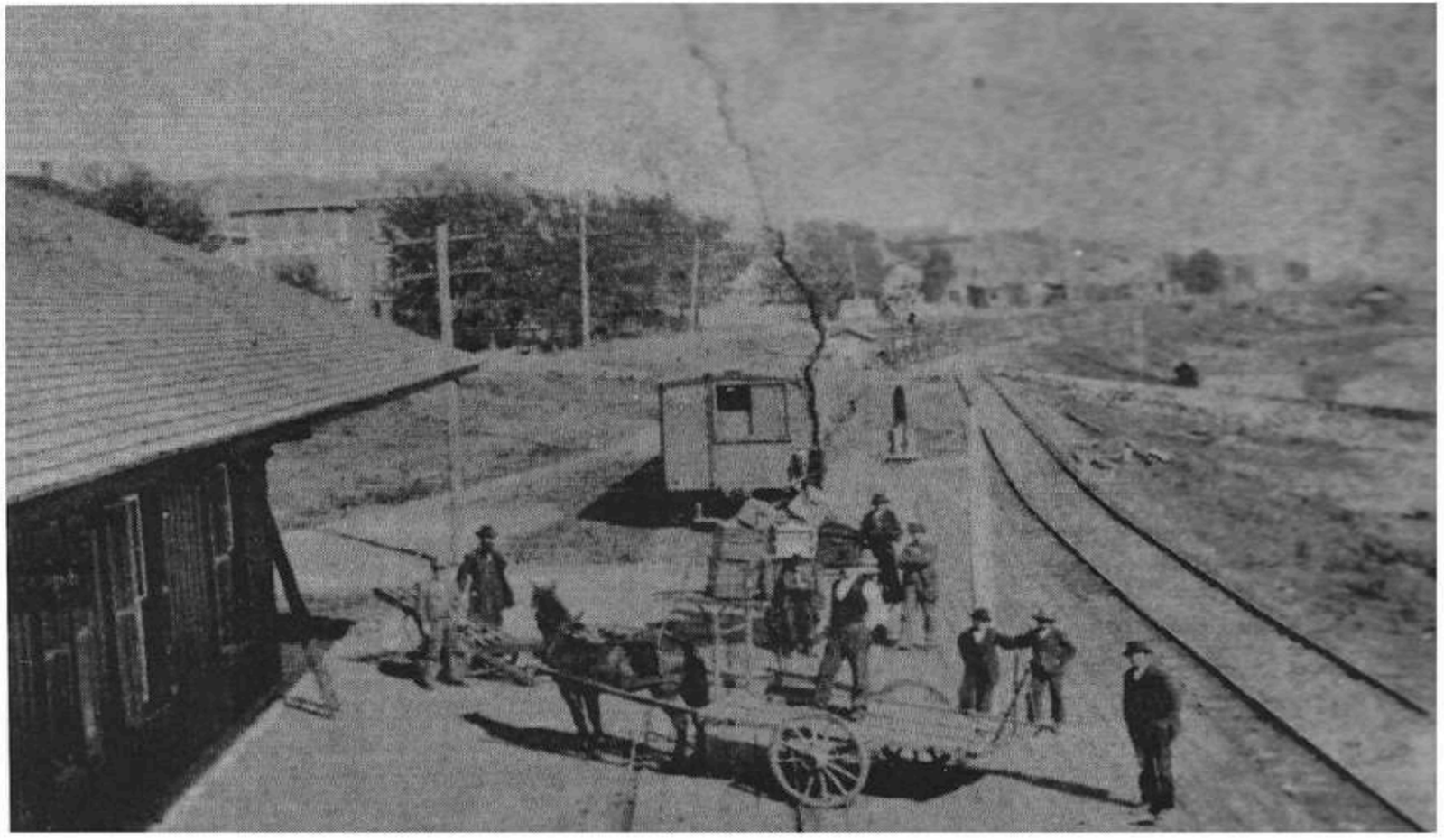


Left: CB&Q tracks along the waterfront (ca.1881). Right: Fort Madison waterfront view east from present-day 10th Street and the CB&Q tracks (ca. 1880s).

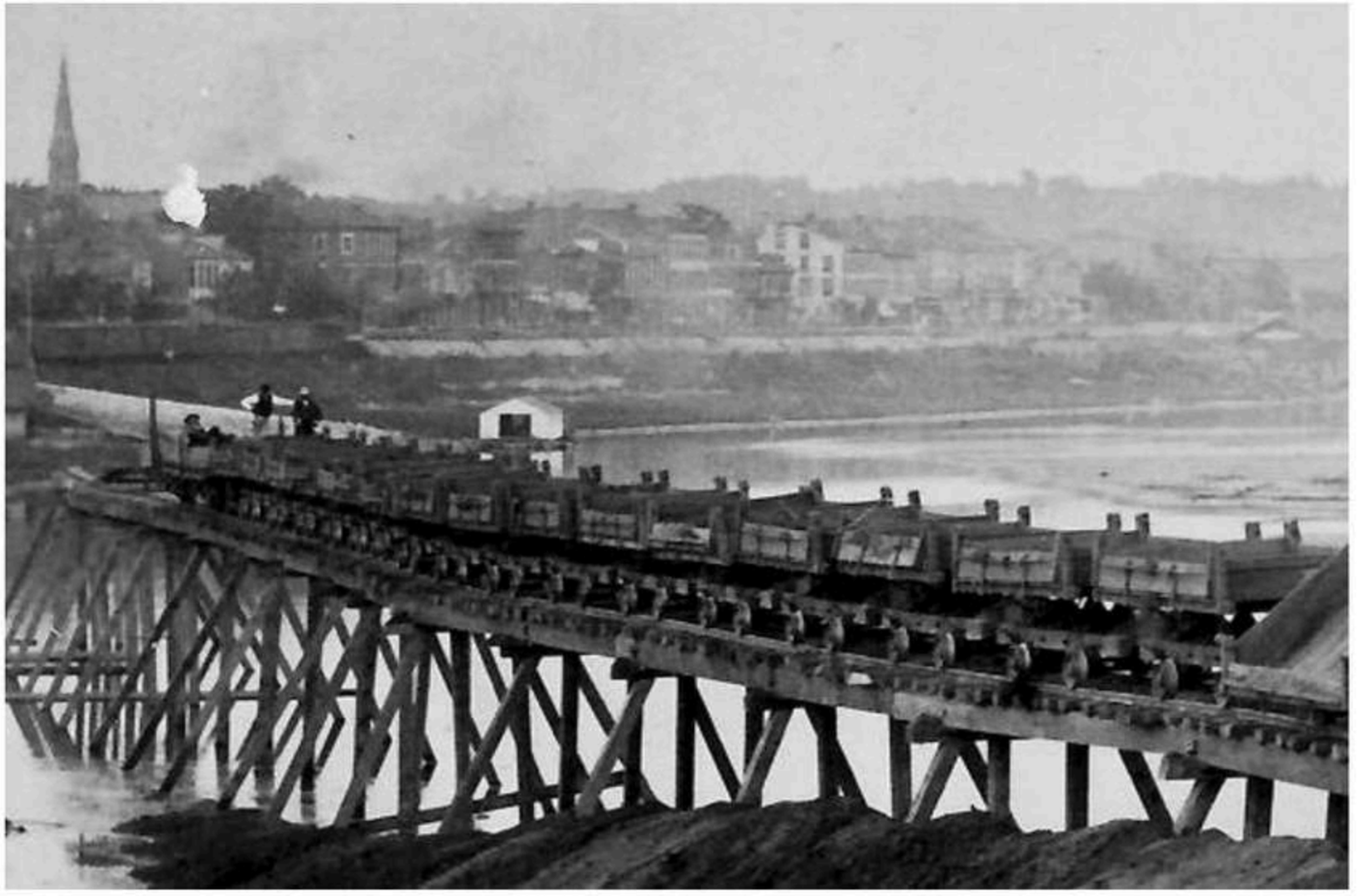




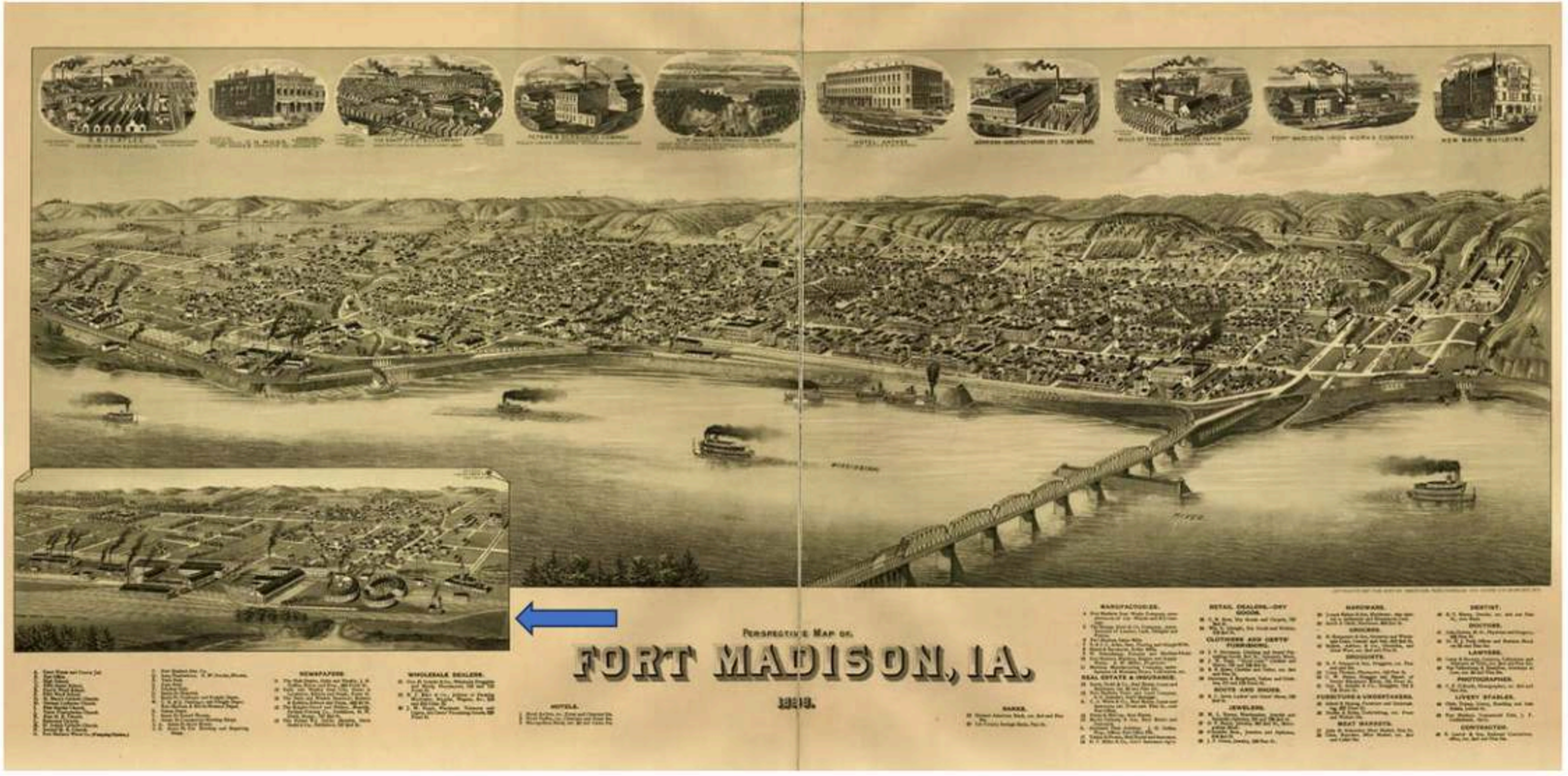
1883: Fort Madison CB&Q depot.



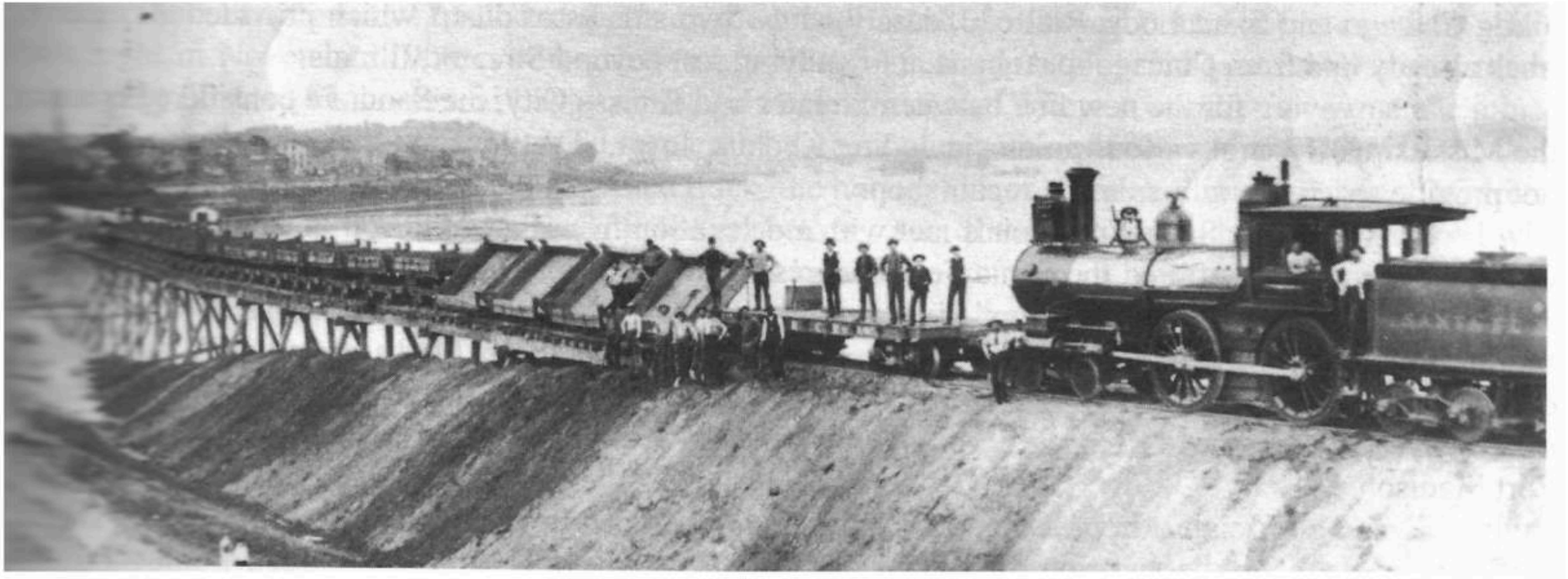
1887: Building the Santa Fe Bridge over the Mississippi River to Fort Madison.



1889 map of Fort Madison with drawing of the Santa Fe Bridge and rail yard on lower left.



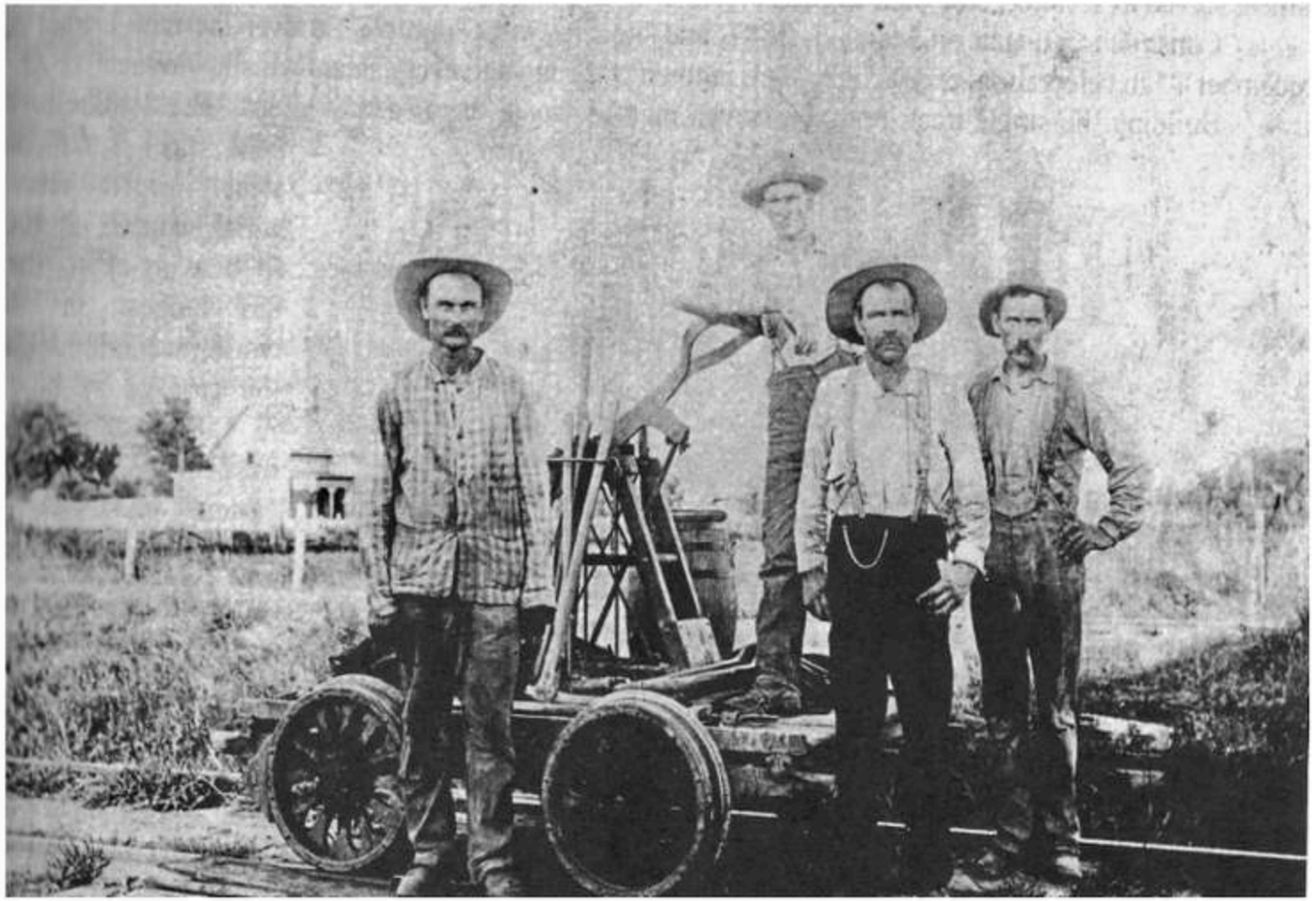
The Santa Fe first connected Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1887. Photograph of the Mississippi Riverbank being extended with earthen fill for the new Santa Fe rail line in Fort Madison (ca.1888).



1889: The first Santa Fe bridge to Fort Madison. Pedestrian and wagon traffic to Illinois used the cantilevered wooden plank road on the right. Traffic to Iowa used the opposite side. Toll house and workmen's "privy" .



Left: Railroad section crew workers, called “Gandy dancers,” in rail hand-car (made by Gandy Manufacturing Co.) with picks and shovels working in the Fort Madison area (ca.1889).



Fort Madison Santa Fe depot built between 1914 and 1915.



1906: The Santa Fe began recruiting and transporting contract laborers from Mexico to Fort Madison to convert the 30-mile track section between Niota and Stronghurst, Illinois, from single tracks to double tracks.



Unable to fill its labor demands, the Santa Fe recruited laborers from Mexico and brought them to Fort Madison to work beside Anglo-American railroad section crew workers.



1907: Contract laborers from Mexico were transported to Fort Madison by the Santa Fe for seasonal railroad work. They lived in bunk cars at Santa Fe *"La Yarda"* Mexican bunkhouse camp located between 23rd and 21st Streets.



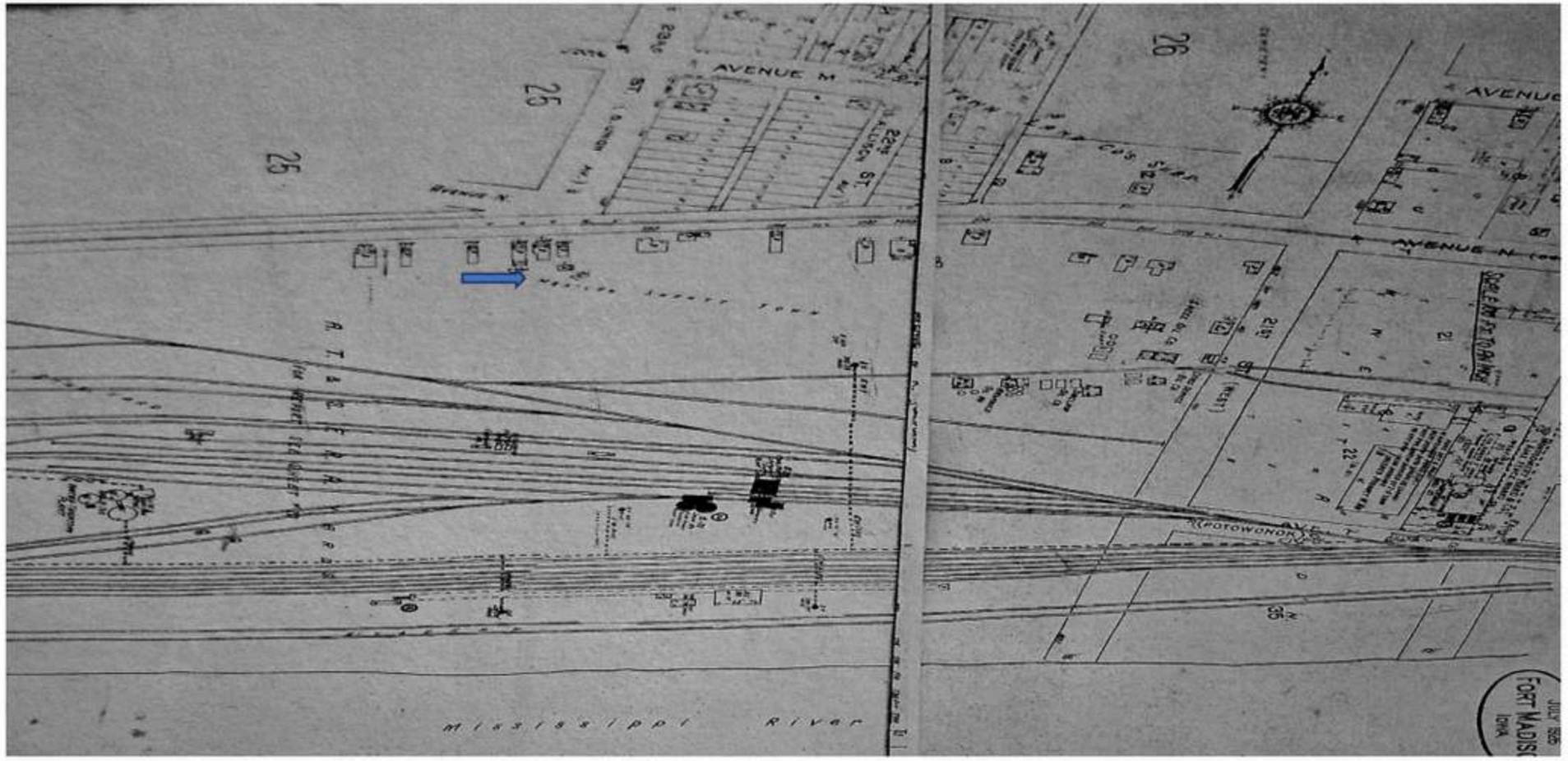
Santa Fe Shopton yard



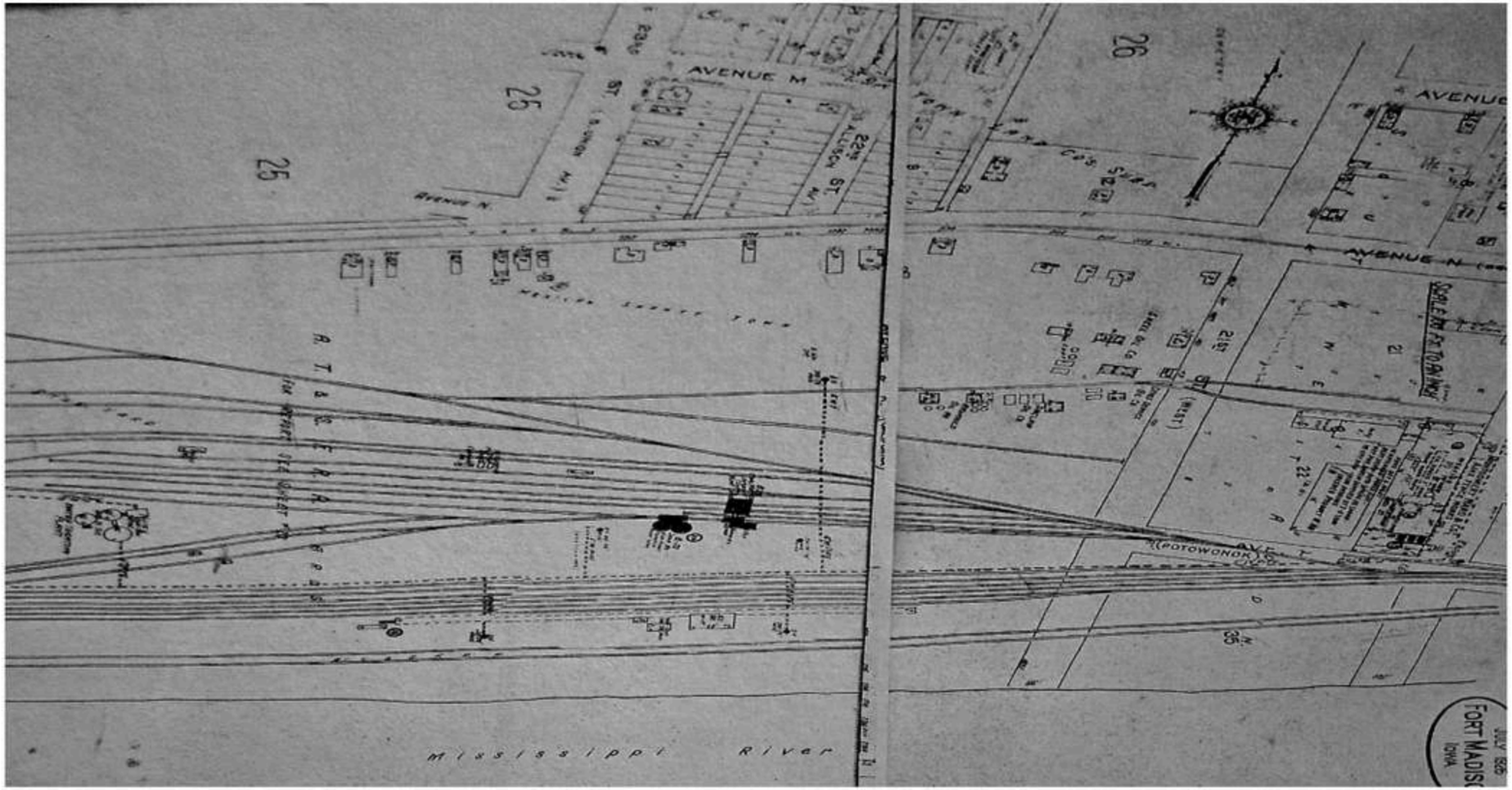
photograph of Shopton; the Santa Fe maintenance and office compound.

1 - Rail Car Shop
2 - Planing Mill
3 - Wheelhouse
4 - Storhouses
5 - Apprentice School
6 - Back Shop
7 - Blacksmith Shop
8 - Machanics Office
9 - Reservoir
10 - Roundhouse
11 - Powerhouse
12 - Engineers Building
13 - Yard Office
14 - Telegraph Office
15 - Reading Room

1926 Sanborn map: *"La Yarda"* Mexican bunk cars located on Santa Fe railroad land across the CB&Q tracks along what is now Avenue N , between 23rd and 21st Streets. "Mexican Shanty Town"
(Source: John Hansman, Melinda Blind)



Alternative oral history: Santa Fe *La Yarda* bunk car camp located between 22nd and 21st Streets accessed by *g*ravel road .
(Source: Lorin “Andy” Andrews)



Entrance to former *La Yards* location. Left: Avenue N along the BNSF tracks towards 23rd Street. BNSF property on other side of tracks. Right: Corner of Avenue N and 23rd Street.





Left: 23rd Street facing entrance to former Santa Fe rail yard , Avenue N on the right.
Right: Former Santa Fe property and houses across the tracks.





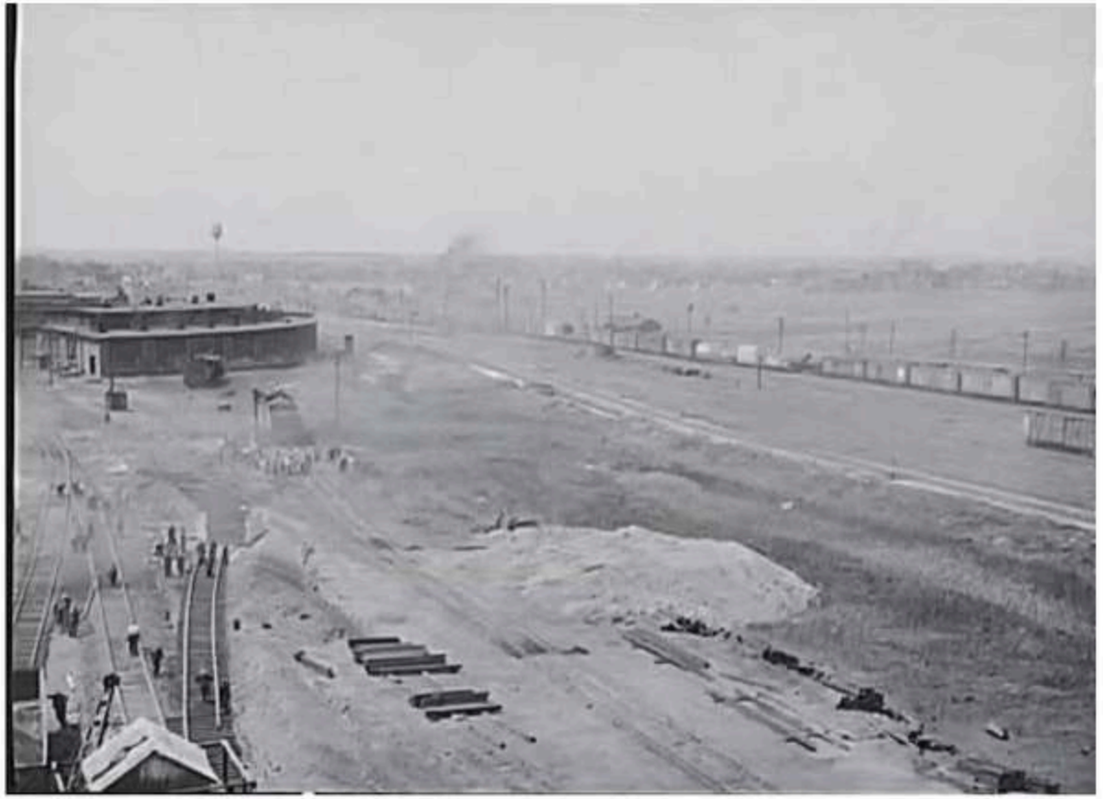
Entrance to the former Santa Fe rail yard with the Mississippi River in the background.



Second Santa Fe housing known as "*El Cometa*," (1910 sighting of Halley's Comet), for Mexican workers. Located on Santa Fe land between the end of 29th and 33rd Streets, across the CB&Q tracks .

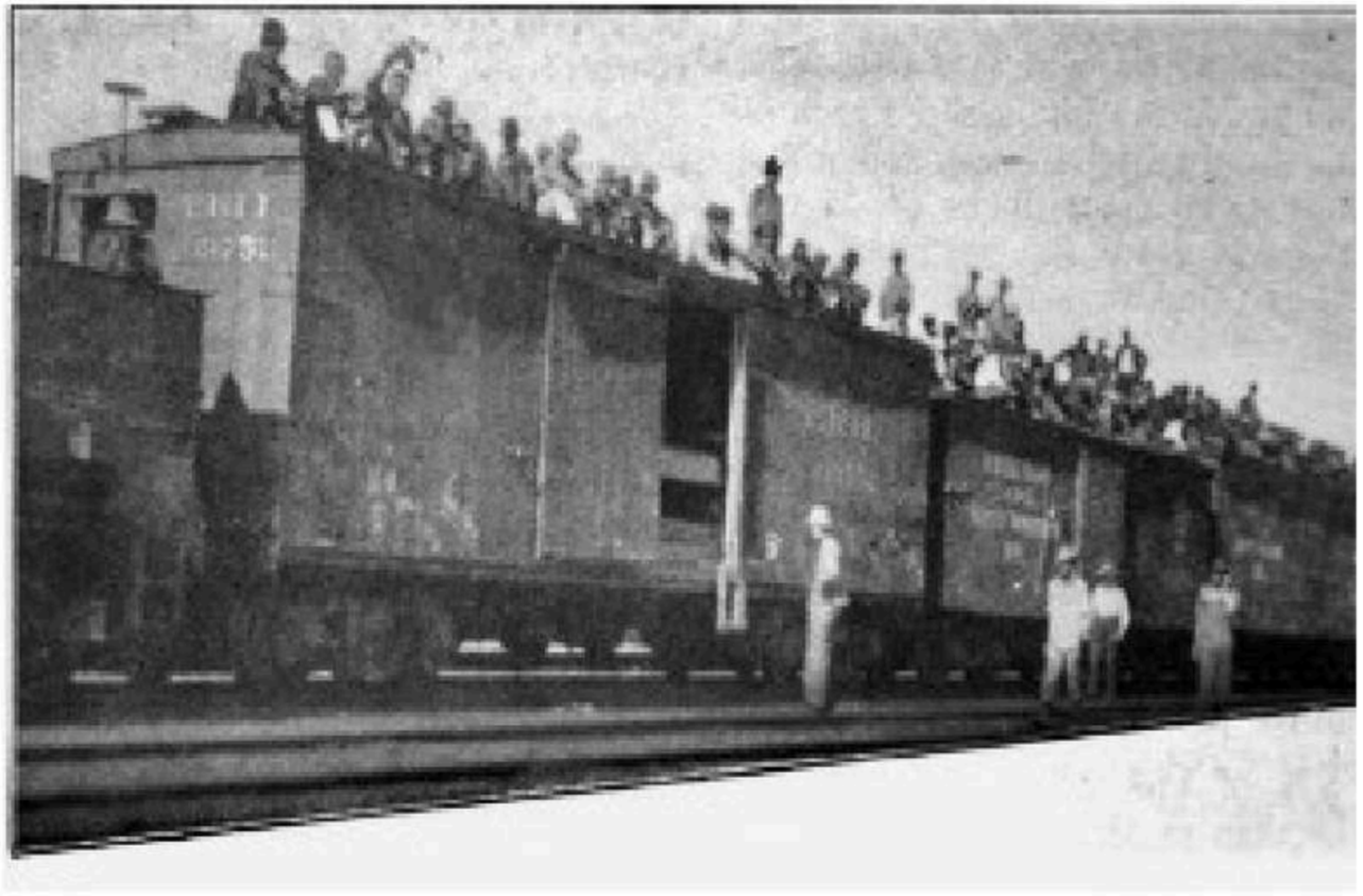


1917: When the Santa Fe decided to raised the Shopton switch rails an additional 17 inches, laborers from Mexico were recruited due to labor shortages during WWI.

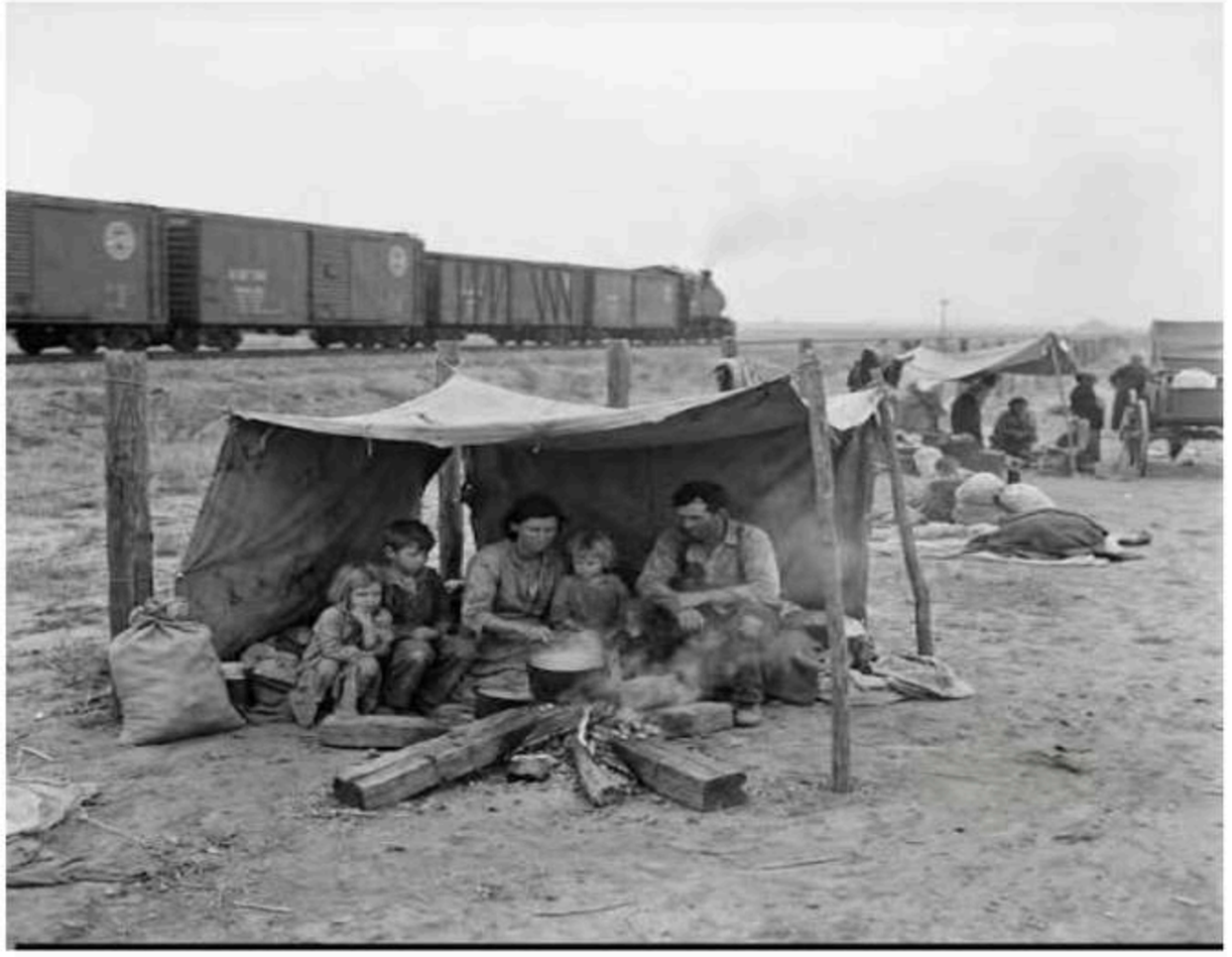




Contract Mexican laborers were transported from El Paso, Texas, to Fort Madison in box cars that often held up to 50 men. The overcrowded box cars created unsanitary conditions and pest problems. Once the men arrived in Fort Madison, they were “deloused” then began working.



1917: A fire destroyed most of *La Yarda* near 23rd Street. By 1918, many Mexican contract laborers were forced to live in tents provided by the Santa Fe. A subsequent fire at the Santa Fe yards that destroyed four additional bunk cars brought more urgency to the Santa Fe officials that bunk-car housing was substandard and dangerous.



As the Santa Fe increased the number of workers from Mexico to Fort Madison, shacks were built at *La Yarda and El Cometa s*ettlements whenever bunk cars were not available. Outdoor fires were used for cooking and to boil water for bathing and washing clothes. No electricity.



1921-1922: The Santa Fe constructed a Mexican bunkhouse compound in Fort Madison known as *"El Istafiate"* located at the foot of 35th Street, to house seasonal Mexican rail maintenance workers along with permanent workers and families. It consisted of four, four-unit, tile-block buildings which housed about 20 people each. One outdoor toilet per housing unit. Several outdoor standpipes were the only source of water. The CB&Q tracks the behind *Istafiate* (ca. 1953).



Satellite view of former *El Istafiate* Mexican bunkhouse compound located at the foot of 35th Street . CB&Q Railroad



View of the former *Istafiate* compound site, referred to as the “slough” (shallow swampy depression) from the 35th Street Bridge .





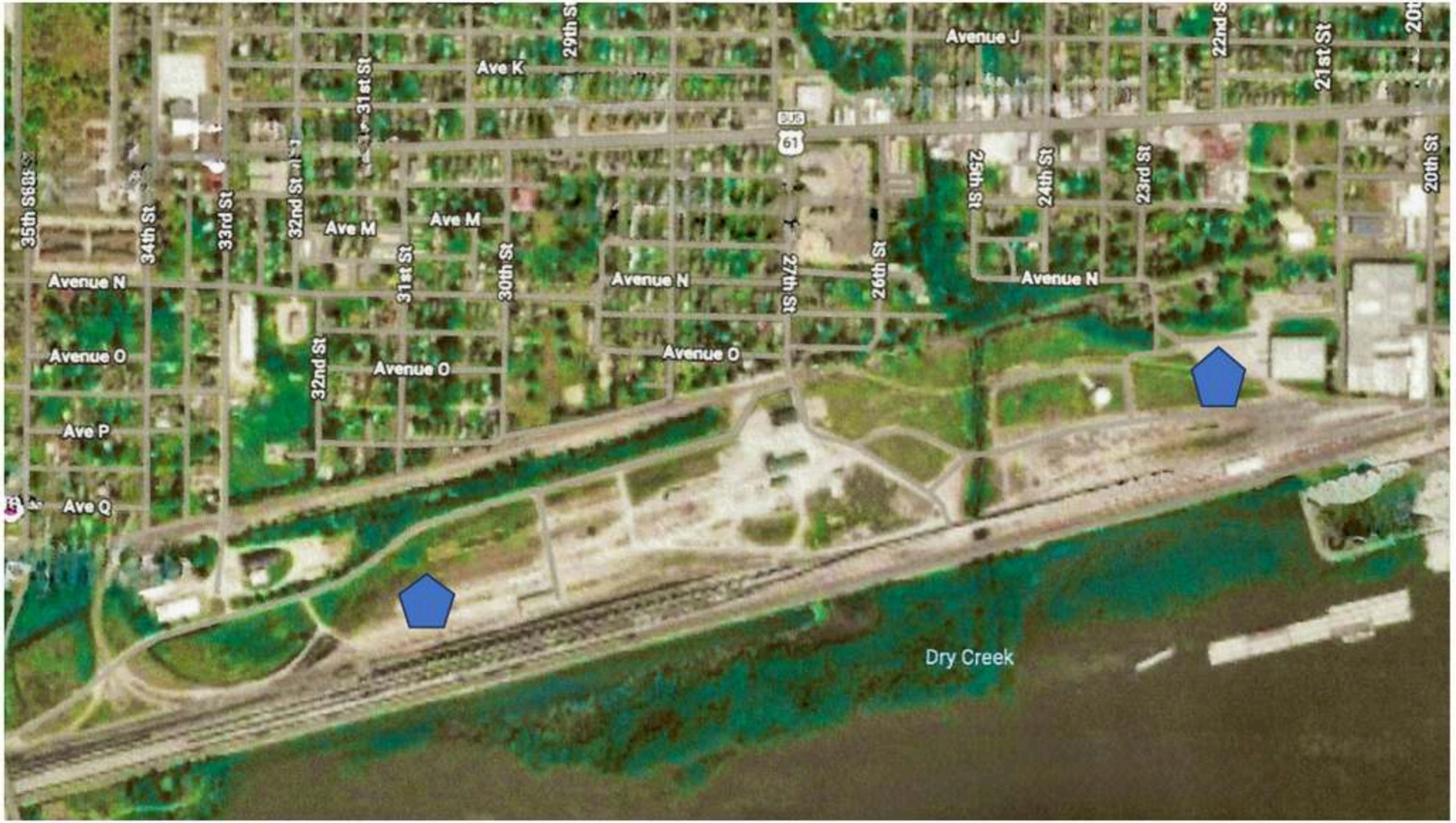
Istaifate (sagewort) grew wild in the area and was used as a home remedy ointment for burns, bruises and muscle joint pain.



Fort Madison, Iowa, Santa Fe Mexican bunk car camps.
Right: *La Yarda.* Center: El Cometa. Left: *Istafiate*



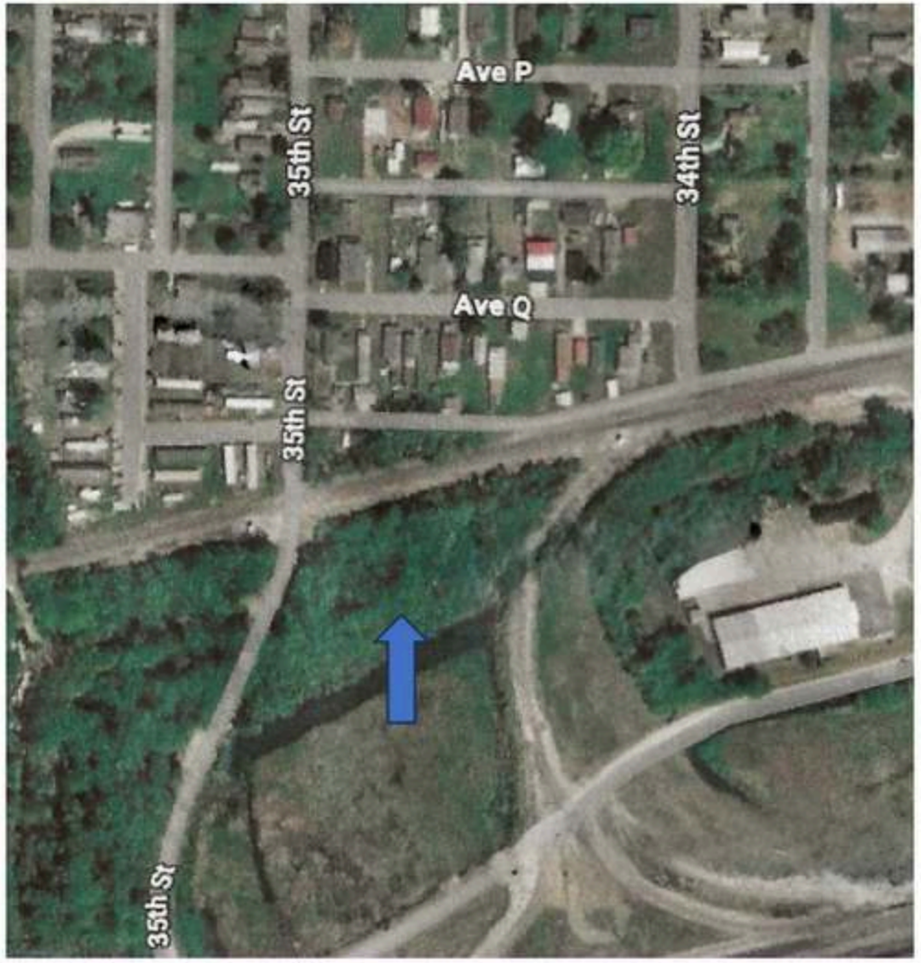
By the early 1920s, *La Yarda* (right) and *El Cometa* (left) settlements increased to about 50 families. The settlements were collectively known as *"La Colonia"* (The Colony).



1926: Heavy flooding at *El Cometa* caused water to reach the shacks' floor level. Wooden board were placed outdoors for walkways. Photograph of Fidel Alvarez wading through the flood waters at *El Cometa*. Santa Fe officials determined the area was not suitable for housing and instructed residents to move elsewhere. Some residents were provided temporary housing in bunk cars and tents.



Numerous Mexican families bought lots and began constructing modest houses along a two-city blocks of Avenues P and Q , between 34th and 35th Streets, called *"El Barrio Nuevo"* (The New Neighborhood). *Istafiate* located across the CB&Q tracks.



Early house in Mexican Village located on 35th Street near the BNSF tracks.





Left: First floor living quarters. Right: Stairs leading to basement where boarders lived.



