PREFACE

The story of how my family came to live in Oxnard, California, begins with my father, Lamberto M. García. Recruited as a bracero in the early 1950s, he temporarily worked in Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, and California. He lived in Oxnard for an extended time, at Campo Buena Vista, which by the late 1950s had become known as the largest bracero camp in the nation.[1] Two of his brothers also lived and worked there. The camp was located on Fifth Street, east of Oxnard Boulevard and a few miles from the predominantly Mexican community of La Colonia. As he recalled, the men were transported to and from the fields each day, and they ate, slept, and engaged in recreation at the camp. To purchase their clothes and shoes, they were driven to and from a bracero-contracted store on Oxnard Boulevard. The spatial containment of the braceros represented a continuation of policies and practices in the city that relied on Mexicans as a permanent source of labor, yet sought to restrict them to La Colonia.

My dad searched for additional opportunities beyond the bracero program and found a job as a carpenter. By 1971 he had secured our U.S. residency and saved up enough money to move our family to Oxnard. My mom, Guillermina Frausto García, worked as a homemaker and a sales representative for Tupperware, Jafra, and other companies. She taught me as a young boy how to navigate the city by bus and I translated as we carried out daily errands. Through these bus rides, I became more conscious of race and place. I noticed that Mexicans mostly lived east of the railroad tracks and Oxnard Boulevard. I also saw that the more affluent White people lived west and northwest of the railroad tracks. I could not have known at the time that this racialized geography had been purposefully designed to segregate Mexicans from Whites in housing and schools.

I vividly remember 1974 because that was the year I rode on a school bus across town to attend kindergarten at Marina West Elementary School. The year before, my parents had purchased a home on Colonia Road, in a housing tract called Rose Park. As my four older siblings recall, I was assigned to attend Marina West because my neighborhood school, Rose Avenue Elementary, was overenrolled. What they did not realize was that it was overenrolled with Mexican and Black students. I now know that the bus I rode to kindergarten was part of a federal desegregation case affirmed in 1974, a ruling that aimed to remedy racial imbalance in Oxnard's elementary schools.

Though this book is not about me, the schooling, labor, and housing experiences of my family, friends, and generations of Oxnard residents resonate throughout the chapters. Originally established as a sugar-beet company town, Oxnard's narrative begins similarly to my family's story—with the recruitment of laborers, mainly immigrants from Mexico. With their work harvesting and processing sugar beets, walnuts, lima beans, barley, and other crops, these men and women contributed to the development and wealth of the city and the surrounding region. In return, these pioneer-laborers received very little access to opportunities for social or educational mobility for themselves or their families.[2] Oxnard's dual school system exemplified national policies "inducing, and even welcoming a certain class of people to perform the [nation's] cheap labor," while rejecting them "as . . . resident[s] and citizen[s]."[3] School segregation exemplified this contradiction, not by accident but by design.

Indeed, a select group of women and men, whom I refer to as the White architects of Mexican American education,[4] constructed schools to reproduce the socioeconomic and racial hierarchy. Having grown up in Oxnard, I was familiar with these individuals' names because they are memorialized in the schools, streets, and parks of the city. I understand few readers outside of Oxnard may recognize their names. What is more important, and what I emphasize throughout the book, are their efforts to systematically subordinate Mexican American, and later Black, communities as a commonplace way of conducting business within and beyond schools. As a historian, I am driven to recover this complex narrative, and to reclaim it as a narrative not just about a community's subordination and undereducation, but also about its assertions of self-determination and resistance.