The Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter

Vol. LIII, No. 2
Winter 2021

Edited by Alison Clark Efford (Marquette University)
With Editorial Assistant Katherine Flight
And Digital Assistant Editor Bryan Zehngut-Willits (New York University)

In this issue:

• Immigration and Ethnicity in the Iowa Labor History Oral Project
• From the IEHS President
From the Programming Committee
Oxford University Press History of Global Migration Collection
In Memoriam: Wolfgang Helbich, March 24, 1935–November 13, 2021
Recent Member Publications
New Publications Noted

(Navigation links may not function on all mobile devices or in email clients. To use navigation links, please view this email on your PC or with your browser)

Immigration and Ethnicity in the Iowa Labor History Oral Project

Alison Clark Efford interviewing John McHerley
ACE: Thanks for talking with us about ILHOP. Can you start off by telling us about the project? What is it and where did it come from?

JK: The Iowa Labor History Oral Project was started by the Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, in the 1970s. The first interviews were conducted in 1977, although there had been some planning phases before that. It was a project that comes about in this moment when there’s a big nationwide boom in oral history and a new interest in “bottom-up” history and labor history in particular. These Iowa labor leaders are part of that wave. They were quite aware of the fact that the people who they associated with founding the Iowa labor
movement, really the industrial labor movement from the 1930s–1950s, were, by the seventies, starting to die. And these labor leaders were very cognizant of the fact that their history was disappearing. They saw themselves as recording these oral memoirs in order to stave off that disappearance. Over the last forty years, ILHOP has recorded approximately 1,500 interviews with Iowa workers, broadly defined, with new interviews recorded every year.

ACE: How did that develop over time? ILHOP is now associated with the University of Iowa. How did that happen?

JK: That association happened through the University of Iowa Labor Center. Although labor leaders started the project, they also recognized that they couldn’t do it alone. That meant a lot of collaboration. First, the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City came on board to handle what was then a physical collection—audio cassettes, paper transcripts, and a few photographs. Since 2013, we’ve digitized those materials and added new born-digital interviews and some new partners—the University of Iowa Libraries, which makes the digital materials accessible and the Iowa Labor History Society, which helps connect us to union members, historians, archivists, and supporters of labor and working-class people all around the state.

ACE: How did you get involved with the project?

JK: I got my PhD in US labor and social history at the University of Iowa way back in 2008. When I was there, I was active in the graduate employee union on campus—UE Local 896, Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS). After graduate school, I bounced around in a few short-term gigs—a few years as a documentary editor at the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland and a year as a journal editor at the State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia. In 2013, my old union president, who was now director of the Labor Center, decided that she wanted to revive the project and hired me to do it.

It’s been great to get to work with a project that started with the presumption that workers’ stories and memories should be regarded with the same kind of care and attention that the stories and memories of the powerful and formally educated are regarded. And that’s what ILHOP does. It takes those stories very seriously, applying the highest standards of collection, preservation, and access. And it’s done that now for over forty years, making the project one of the largest and longest-running, labor-focused oral history projects in the US. Maybe in the world. I feel very honored to be able to be part of that legacy.

ACE: Okay. So now that we have that background, let’s get to the heart of what is likely to most interest readers of this newsletter. Maybe the first thing that would come to people’s minds would be white men engaged in industrial labor. But from what I know about the project, it has things are going to interest historians of immigration who study other groups too.
What's the immigration angle here?

JK: Well, you're not wrong that we have a lot of interviews with white men involved in industrial labor. But there's a lot more to it too. For a couple of reasons. First, when the people who first had my job fanned out across the state—from the beginning, almost all of the project's oral historians have been professionally trained to some extent—they were focused on community histories as much as labor histories. In fact, they conducted interviews by sort of parachuting into one town or city after another, making contacts with local labor leaders, and doing interviews. In the early days, this meant that they collected a lot of stories from people who had close connections to European immigration, usually as the children of immigrants. Some people had come themselves as children or young adults. For example, the oldest person interviewed in the collection was a sawmill and railroad worker named Mike Dillon, who had been born to Irish immigrants in Clinton, Iowa, in 1878.

And I think the Iowa context is meaningful here. A lot of immigration literature draws a significant distinction between "urban" and "rural." Iowa breaks down that binary. Although Iowa didn’t become majority urban until after World War II, it had long been characterized by small urban places and pockets of what we might call rural industrialization. So we’re talking here about coal mining camps with immigrant workers and family members from places stretching from Wales, England, and Ireland, to Croatia, Hungary, and all across the southern and midwestern United States. But we’re also talking about small and to medium sized cities like Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, and Des Moines, which had, respectively, significant Irish and German, Czech, and Italian communities.

Over time, project staff also began conducting interviews with Mexican and Mexican American migrants, who came to the Midwest following the demand for railroad and farm labor, which sometimes turned into more longstanding employment in meatpacking and other industries in places like Mason City and Davenport. So, as ILHOP reminds us, the Latinx Midwest is a lot older than the more recent migrations of the last thirty years or so. And, back to my earlier point about place—these migrations are also taking place in and around towns and cities of a few hundred to a few thousand, or maybe tens of thousands of people. So, we have all sorts of dynamics that often interest historians of immigration and ethnic history—racial formation, cultural adaptation, and work and family life—all happening in these contexts that make us ask hard questions about the definition of place and its role in immigration and ethnic history over the long twentieth century.

ACE: I know that you have been working on more recent immigrants. Can you tell us a bit about that work?

JK: Yes. So, in 2015, we won an Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress to document the history of immigrant and refugee meatpacking workers in the Midwest—specifically Iowa and Illinois—since the late 1980s.
Working with our partners in the United Food and Commercial Workers union in both states, we conducted twenty interviews with workers who had come to the region since roughly 1988, including people from Guatemala, Mexico, Morocco, Liberia, Togo, the Congo, Burma, and refugee camps in Thailand. These interviews included the first conducted in languages other than English, specifically Spanish and a dialect spoken by people in Burma. I should say here too that I had the good fortune to work with a great crew of graduate student interviewers and co-interviewers from Iowa's Department of History, including people who had immigrant backgrounds and language skills that made those interviews possible and much richer than I could have accomplished on my own. Those interviews are now part of our collection and that at the Library of Congress.

ACE: Could you give us an example of a particularly interesting interview?

JK: I think I’d have to go with Simplice Mabiala Kuelo. He was born in the Congo, in Kinshasa, in the 1980s. He attended the University of Kinshasa, where he studied Family Law and became interested in politics. After helping a neighbor win a seat in the Congolese parliament, he came to the United States through the Diversity Visa program, which he says he applied for on a lark. Although he’d had some struggles early in his life—his father had died when he was young—he’d grown up fairly middle class, and he really emphasized how difficult it was to adjust to hard, manual labor in the only kinds of jobs he could get when he first came to the United States, especially before he picked up English (of course, he spoke several other languages, primarily French). He almost left and went back to the Congo after only a few weeks, but his friend, the MP, talked him out of it.

Eventually, he went from New York City, where he first arrived to Beardstown, Illinois, a little city of maybe a few thousand people. He had been laid off in New York, and a friend in Beardstown had recommended that he come out there because the city’s meatpacking plant was always looking for people with language skills. At the same time, he joined the union, UFCW Local 431, and took to it right away. He saw the union as an extension of the political work he had been doing in the Congo, and he rose up quickly through the ranks. When I first met him back in 2015, he was an organizer, but, just a few months ago, he was elected president of the local. To my knowledge, he’s the first recent immigrant—certainly from Africa—who has been elected to such an important position in the Iowa labor movement. It’s too early to tell, but his election might suggest a sea change about to happen in these locals that have been traditionally white-led but that have become increasingly Black, brown, and immigrant in their rank-and-file members.

ACE: So that brings us to how we can access these interviews.

JK: Right. Several years ago we were lucky enough to get some important
grants—especially from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and, most recently, the National Endowment for the Humanities—to digitize and make the audio and transcripts accessible through a new website hosted by the University of Iowa Libraries. This included beginning to revise and update a comprehensive transcript index, which allows users to locate information down to the page number, as well as to perform conventional keyword searches. Together, they constitute a very powerful resource for anyone interested in the history of Iowa workers—or workers who came to and through Iowa—from the late nineteenth century to the present. So we’re talking everything from pre-World War I Europe to the Liberian civil war of the 1990s, to the fascinating career of a British labor educator who worked in Indiana and Iowa before going on to serve in the AFL-CIO’s international arm in countries from Serbia to Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq. My great hope is that ILHOP will someday become a go-to collection for a wide range of researchers and teachers in the Midwest and far, far beyond.

In addition to his work for ILHOP, John McKerley teaches in the Center for Human Rights and History Department at the University of Iowa. He is co-editor of Civic Labors: Scholar Activism and Working-Class Studies (2016) and Foot Soldiers for Democracy: The Men, Women, and Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement (2009) and several articles and essays.
From the IEHS President

At a time when the abuse and exploitation of immigrants dominates the headlines, the Immigration and Ethnic History Society has a uniquely important role to play. To quote our Mission Statement:

"The Society’s stated purpose is to promote the study of the history of immigration to the United States and Canada from all parts of the world, including studies of the background of emigration in the countries of origin; to promote the study of ethnic groups in the United States, including regional groups, native Americans and forced immigrants; to promote understanding of the processes of acculturation and of conflict; to furnish through the Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter information as to research, organizations, meetings and publications in the field of immigrant history; to help organize sessions on immigration and ethnicity at meetings of learned societies; and generally to serve the field of immigration-ethnic history with special reference to professional scholarship."

Halfway through my first year as president of IEHS, my first and most pleasant task is to thank those whose work makes the society such a collegial and dynamic organization. We’re an all-volunteer organization, and our members and officers devote a remarkable amount of time and intellectual energy to promoting the field we love.

Alas, I cannot thank everyone by name, but let me mention a few. Maddalena Marinari has been extraordinarily active in all aspects of the Society since assuming the role of vice president/president elect in April. Leigh Ann Wilson, taking over as secretary from Tim Draper, has ensured a smooth and confident transition. With the unveiling of the new IEHS website, we have a new online
presence and communications infrastructure, thanks to the efforts of Heather Lee (digital humanities officer), Sergio González (social media officer), and the amazing behind the scenes work of our digital and public communications coordinator Bryan Willits, who is a doctoral candidate in immigration history.

I also want to salute the members of the executive board, along with the chairs and members of the programming committee, the nominating committee, our two book award committees, and our two dissertation award committees, for all the work they are doing on behalf of the society this year. Without their work, things would grind to a halt. For full details, see: https://iehs.org/about/people/.

Our most important task this year was to refine and implement the **IEHS Policy on Harassment and Sexual Misconduct**. Over the summer, an ad hoc committee consisting of Hasia Diner, Julie Greene, Madeline Hsu (co-chair), Debbie Kang, Rosina Lozano, Maddalena Marinari, Cian McMahon (co-chair), Mark Steiner, Omar Valerio-Jimenez, Leigh Ann Wilson, and myself worked on multiple drafts of the policy. Our goal was two-fold: to address a wide range of forms of harassment while retaining the central emphasis on sexual misconduct; and to produce a policy that could realistically be implemented in line with our resources and in conjunction with the OAH and AHA. The board approved the revised policy in September 2021, and Julie Greene, Anna Law, Maddalena Marinari (chair), Mark Steiner, and Omar Valerio-Jimenez kindly agreed serve on the first **Professional Environment Committee**.

As I write these words, planning for OAH 2022 remains uncertain. The conference will be in hybrid form; the balance between in-person and online remains unclear as winter approaches. The IEHS will certainly meet at the OAH in some form. I will send updates on our plans when we know more.

Kevin Kenny, November 2021

---

**From the Programming Committee**

The IEHS program committee is accepting submissions for panels for the OAH and AHA in 2023. For the OAH, our committee considers full panel proposals from IEHS members and chooses two sessions that are guaranteed acceptance. For the AHA, our committee can co-sponsor an unlimited number of sessions with acceptance of any of these sessions contingent on approval by the AHA.
Please submit complete panels for consideration to Maddalena Marinari at mmarinar@gustavus.edu by January 15, 2022. As you put together panels, be sure to remind panelists of the society's policy on harassment and sexual misconduct.

---

**Oxford University Press History of Global Migration Collection**

To mark United Nations International Migrants Day on December 18, Oxford University Press is providing temporary free access to a range of articles and chapters from its journals, Oxford Bibliographies, Oxford Scholarship Online, Very Short Introductions, and Oxford Handbooks Online. The initiative covers global migration, providing a rich array of outstanding resources for understanding and teaching migration history. Many IEHS members have work featured in the collection, including Maria Cristina Garcia, Ronald H. Bayor, Elliott Young, S. Deborah Kang, Stacy D. Fahrenthold, and Hidetaka Hirota. The content will be freely available on the press website until the end of February.

---

**In Memoriam: Wolfgang Helbich, March 24, 1935–November 13, 2021**

By Walter D. Kamphoefner

Texas A&M University
Wolfgang Helbich, a German historian of North America, died on November 13, 2021 at the age of 86. Helbich had served as professor at Ruhr University Bochum from 1974 until his mandatory retirement in 2000, and contributed significantly to German American history.

A native Berliner who witnessed the Russian occupation of Brandenburg as a ten-year-old, Helbich embraced the old German tradition of Wanderstudium, with stops at the Freie Universität Berlin, Heidelberg, the Sorbonne, and last but not least, as a Fulbright Exchange Student at Princeton, where he earned a BA magna cum laude in 1958. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of Princeton; he remained an active member of its German alumni association, and his desk and office always sported those distinctive orange and black Princeton school colors.

By 1962, Helbich had earned his doctorate in Berlin on the subject of German reparations. That same year, he became an assistant professor, and in 1969 an
associate professor of American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, where he taught until 1974.

I can safely say that I would not be where I am today had it not been for Wolfgang Helbich. We first met circa 1980 because of the Scheben collection of some 500 immigrant letters, done in the 1930s, which each of us had independently discovered and photocopied but had temporarily put aside. Although I was only a postdoctoral researcher in Münster with uncertain job prospects and he was an established professor, he offered me the opportunity for what has proven to be a very productive collaboration.

Thanks to Helbich’s grantsmanship, the Volkswagen Foundation provided six years of funding to the tune of more than a half million Deutschmarks for the collecting and editing of German immigrant letters; I merely provided the “North American scholarly cooperation” which the VW grant guidelines recommended. Helbich’s main strategy was to write an appeal to private individuals, which was published by seventy or so regional newspapers in Germany. Then he “picked the raisins” out of the first batch of letters he received and composed a full-page article that ran on the back page of Die Zeit, again appealing to holders of letters. Later he achieved a similar coup with Hör Zul!, the German TV guide, thus covering both ends of the social spectrum. Together with his wife, Ursula Lehmkuhl, Helbich helped launch a follow-up project, supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, to extend the collection efforts to areas of the former GDR that were inaccessible before German reunification. This collection, now housed at the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha under the name Deutsche Auswandererbiersammlung or DABS brought the tally of immigrant letters to some 11,000, with many of them transcribed and all freely accessible to scholars.

Helbich also made many of these immigrant letters available in publications, the first of which were two paperback collections of thematic excerpts from letters published in 1985 and 1988. More ambitious were two large anthologies of letters we published together. The first presented a typical cross-section of German immigration from the 1830s to the 1930s; the second was restricted to the era and topic of the American Civil War. We followed the same strategy with both letter editions: first publishing in the original German, and only thereafter doing an English version. In recognition of these contributions, Helbich received the 2017 Outstanding Achievement Award of the Society for German American Studies.

Ours was a productive collaboration, but not always easy. Those who read our Civil War anthology carefully may note that I give more credit to the idealism of “Yankee Dutchmen,” whereas Helbich approached the question of soldier motivation with greater skepticism, perhaps borne of his experiences in twentieth century Europe. Our division of labor on the background research for our letter editions was largely determined by which archives and sources were located on our respective sides of the Atlantic, but not entirely. It was not I but
Helbich who discovered while working in the National Archives that German was still used as the language of command in some Civil War ethnic regiments as late as 1863.

Helbich’s area of teaching and research was officially designated the history of North America, extending also beyond of the 49th parallel. He was a major force in Canadian Studies in Germany. On the side, he was a professional translator of some twenty books, mostly from English into German, among them works by Gordon Craig, David McCullough, a couple by Arthur Schlessinger, and last but not least, the two-volume collection edited by Frank Trommler from the German American Tricentennial Conference held in Philadelphia.

Helbich has served as an interpreter and translator between continents in a figurative as well as a literal sense. Drawing upon his American experiences, he was an influential force pushing for restructuring of the German university. And he continued to be an insightful but not uncritical observer and interpreter of American politics, occasionally in venues such as the Süddeutsche Zeitung.

Helbich’s retirement in 2000 brought no end to his scholarly pursuits and contributions. He had co-edited three books with me since then and soldiered on despite increasing infirmities on a fourth joint project involving forced and assisted migration of convicts and other unwelcome immigrants from Germany to America. His last email on the subject was sent nine days before his death.

Recent Member Publications


New Publications Noted

Khor, Denise. *Transpacific Convergences: Race, Migration, and Japanese American Film Culture before World War II*. Chapel Hill: University of North


Forward This Newsletter to a Friend