

"A Line in the Sand" Transcript

Underwriting: Lost Highways, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling for more than twenty years.

Underwriting cont'd: And, by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, exploring the human endeavor.

Noel's son: Is this good?

Noel: Yep, sounds pretty good. Can you remember the song?

Noel's son: Not really. I'll try.

Noel: When my son was in kindergarten, he memorized this song with the names of all 50 states in the U.S.

[Noel's son singing]: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware...

Tyler: And chances are, if you grew up in the United States, you did similar exercises in grade school: memorizing states, capitals, maps...

[Noel's son singing cont'd]: ...Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan... I'm not sure what the next one was, but...

Noel: These efforts, to teach children what their country looks like and where its borders lie have pretty much always been a key part of the school system. Here's Susan Schulten. She's a history professor at the University of Denver, and author of the book *A History of America in 100 Maps*.

Tyler: She's also one of the history advisors for this podcast.

Dr. Susan Schulten: Well, there's a long history of a tight relationship between geography in education and national identity. And for me, you see this really poignantly in the decades after American independence. One of the first things that surfaces in schools is the assignment of creating a map. Both the outlines of the nation, but also the internal boundaries. Right after independence, one of the most important goals of education was to inculcate a sense of national identity.

Tyler: Because prior to the revolution, it didn't really matter whether someone living in Georgia had a shared identity with someone living in Maine.

Noel: But then, the US became an independent nation, and almost overnight...it DID matter.

Tyler: And from there, for a great deal of US history, that national identity, as well as the lands which it encompassed, were constantly changing.

Dr. Susan Schulten: One of my favorite maps in terms of its power — it's a map that looks at the continental United States in terms of pieces. Here are the 13 colonies. Here's the states that came out of the Louisiana Purchase. Here's the land acquired from Mexico. Here's the Oregon territory. And it does so in a way that's freed of messiness and violence and ideology. Instead, it's just a story of spatial progression.

Noel: And there's something else that establishing a collective understanding of borders accomplishes.

Dr. Susan Schulten: Part of what a nation depends upon is the articulation of a boundary in order to separate us from not us. Who is we and who is not we? And, so the very essence of a nation state is that it doesn't include everyone

[Noel's son singing]: Ohio, Oklahoma...

Tyler: And it wouldn't be a stretch to say that THAT part of the shared community created by maps and borders is...having a moment.

President Donald Trump [news clip]: Build that wall, build that wall, build that wall!

[Music]

Noel: But that sentiment is nothing new. And Colorado has its OWN history of wanting to "build the wall" -- metaphorically at least.

Tyler: In the mid 1930s, a man named Edwin C. Johnson, one of the most beloved politicians in all of Colorado's history, established martial law on Colorado's southern border to keep out what he called "the Mexican Menace."

Dr. Tom Romero: He talks about aliens and indigenous persons that are invading the state. And that's why it was necessary for him to declare martial law. He deploys 50 National Guardsmen to the southern boundary.

Noel: This is Tom Romero. He's a law professor at the University of Denver.

Tyler: And he's also an advisor for this podcast. He's done a lot of work on the intersections of labor and immigration.

Dr. Tom Romero: So cars full of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, tracking them with these planes and then National Guardsmen in trucks are kind of chasing them down. You see pictures of National Guardsmen holding these big machine guns.

Noel: And the events that led to this experiment, as well as the arguments used in its favor, were not so different from the heated debates that we're still having about borders and national identity.

President Donald Trump [news clip]: We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first!

[Theme post]

Tyler: From History Colorado, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

Tyler: On this Episode: People crossing borders, borders crossing people, sugar beets, and one governor's attempt to put "Colorado first."

Noel: As a heads up, this episode deals with complex issues of race and ethnicity and includes language that some listeners might find offensive or upsetting.

[Theme out]

Noel: The story of the constantly shifting and often-contested borders of the United States is a long and convoluted one.

Tyler: In part because, well, what are borders anyway?

Dr. Susan Schulten: What are borders? That's a really, really important question. Part of what borders do are to create a sense of imagined commonality. So, they play a pretty powerful metaphysical role in defining what a nation is.

Noel: In other words, a border really only exists once it's put on a map. It's an abstraction, and one that's much harder to enforce in real life than it is to draw on a piece of paper.

Tyler: And while this is primarily a story about the borders between states as opposed to countries, it's still inextricably tied to a racialized view of immigration, and the idea that people of certain ethnicities are inherently "outsiders," whether they're US citizens or not.

Noel: To better understand how that view came to exist; how people like the Governor of Colorado might try to enforce that view with the military, it helps to have a broad understanding of how the United States border with Mexico came to be where it is today.

Dr. Susan Schulten: Texas or Tejas was the far northern province of Mexico in the 1820s. And the Mexican government, trying to control this really distant province, began to invite Americans in to take up some of that land, to try to create a more settled province. And they bring their slaves with them. And this becomes a grave point of contention between the settlers and the Mexican government.

Noel: Mexico had already outlawed slavery, and eventually decided that if Americans were going to keep their slaves, they didn't want them there.

Dr. Susan Schulten: In 1830, Mexico closes its border against the United States. Anglos who are settling in Texas who become increasingly dissatisfied with the Mexican

government and ultimately declare their independence in 1835. And that, of course, leads to the annexation of Texas by the United States, which leads to the war with Mexico.

Tyler: For much of US history, the country's Western border has been flexible and abstract at least, and contested at most.

Noel: Nonetheless, the American dream of Manifest Destiny would eventually be realized.

Dr. Susan Schulten: The United States defeats Mexico in the war that ends in 1848 and extracts a concession of land in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that gives the United States control over much of what we now understand to be the Southwest. And so that border is fungible for a while in the mid 19th century and contested. But ultimately, the United States takes control all the way to what we now know as California and the Pacific.

Tyler: And that's more or less how the American West came to look like it does today.

Noel: But even before the United States was concerned with immigration across national borders, laws were being passed to regulate who was entering towns, counties, and states.

Tyler: And that attention was often directed at poor people, or people considered to be "criminals."

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: So the fear that there were newcomers from elsewhere, the location from which people were coming was radically different. The threat wasn't perceived as a threat from across an international boundary, but across a city line or state line or a county line.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: My name is César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández. I'm an associate professor of law at the University of Denver and author of *Migrating to Prison: America's Obsession with Locking Up Immigrants*.

Noel: Hernandez says exactly which border US citizens are most concerned about has shifted over time.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: But it wasn't really until much more recently that the States' international boundaries became a focus of attention.

Tyler: By "recently," Hernandez means sometime around the late 1800s.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: And the first federal law about who can enter the United States from a different country was actually enacted in 1875. And that was focused on keeping out prostitutes or people who were perceived to be prostitutes. And quite often that meant pegging Chinese women who were coming to see what were then the very vibrant developing Chinese communities in the United States, in particular along the West Coast.

Dr. Derek Everett: We've had nativism in the United States since before the United States. The notion that outsiders are a threat, are a danger. Benjamin Franklin railed against the Germans in the mid seventeenth-hundreds because they were going to destroy our morality and they were going to take our jobs.

Noel: This is Derek Everett.

Dr. Derek Everett: I'm a member of the history departments at Metropolitan State University of Denver and Colorado State University.

Tyler: You may remember Everett from our episode about the Spanish Flu. He's writing a book about Colorado's sugar beet industry and ethnic labor, both of which are essential to Governor Johnson's rationale for trying to shut down Colorado's border with New Mexico.

Noel: Everett says that the concept of Nativism has been deeply ingrained in the United States ethos from the very beginning -- if not earlier.

Dr. Derek Everett: We saw a huge burst of nativism in the 1840s and 1850s, mostly in response to the Irish migration during the potato famine. There's the burst of nativism toward the Chinese in the 1870s and 1880s, leading to Chinese Exclusion Act. Infamously, nativism against Japanese-Americans during World War 2 to the point where we lock up American citizens in concentration camps. Obviously, we're going through a little belch of nativism today as well.

[News clips]: To immigrant communities across the country bracing for an ICE crackdown to kick into high gear now—those deportation raids sparking new protests overnight.

[News clips cont'd] Immigration and customs enforcement conducted about 1,300 of these workplace audits in 2017. This year they expect a 300% increase

President Donald Trump [news clip]: We have some bad hombres here and we're going to get 'em out.

Noel: And as he mentioned earlier, Nativism has an uncanny ability to scapegoat whichever immigrant group is most convenient at the time.

Dr. Derek Everett: Nativism is like a gun constantly in search of a new target. It's the same story. It's the same refrain. It's the same threat. They're coming to destroy our identity. They're coming to take our jobs and to weaken our character. It's just that the "they" changes depending on time, depending on circumstance, depending on which immigrant group is perceived at different times in American history as being the threat de jour.

Tyler: The target of nativism is constantly shifting. And as the mixed-race son of a Southeast Asian immigrant, I've seen that firsthand. Whether it's people assuming my mom is a nanny in Los Angeles in the early 90's, or dirty looks after 9/11, I've been mistaken for whatever ethnic group is the current scapegoat for most of my life. Most

recently, Americans seem fixated on the same "Mexican Menace" that Big Ed Johnson was talking about when he tried to close Colorado's border with New Mexico in the 1930's.

[music + news clips]: It's pretty clear that right now is literally the last moment that unemployed Americans should have to be undercut by foreign nationals as they look for desperately-needed jobs.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [news clip]: There isn't any sensible approach except to do what we need to do simultaneously: secure our borders with technology, personnel, physical barriers if necessary.

Tyler: In doing interviews for this episode, I spent a lot of time asking why this kind of nativism is so persistent. And pretty much everyone I talked to said that it's because, just like many stories about race, the story of Colorado Governor Big Ed Johnson trying to shut down Colorado's border in 1936 is also a story about labor.

Dr. Tom Romero: This story is really kind of about is contextualized and placed in larger literature of policing and the way that policing is really kind of been used, which is really about labor control, it's about controlling the supply of labor, keeping a force readily available and sort of sharpening their, you know, their impulses when they choose to organize.

Noel: The relationship between policing and labor in Colorado could easily be an episode unto itself. But when Romero says "policing" here, what he's mostly talking about is the policing of borders.

Dr. Tom Romero: And I think in the American West in particular, you had a interesting connection of immigration and labor. In the late 19th century we had immigrants and migrants from China. And it was pretty clear within both national as well as state laws that the Chinese at the national level could not become citizens and at the state level they could be excluded.

Tyler: A great example of this intersection is the Chinese Exclusion Act, which we talked about in our previous episode about bonsai trees and incarceration of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II.

Noel: It was one of many ways in which different immigrant groups have become primary labor sources for various industries...

Tyler: ...only to then be scapegoated, and kept from working in those industries for fear that they were taking jobs from white people.

Noel: But in case you need a quick refresher, here is William Wei again from our Bonsai episode. He's a professor of History at the University of Colorado Boulder, member of the state historians' council, and author of "Asians in Colorado: A History of Persecution and Perseverance in the Centennial State."

Dr. William Wei: Asians historically have been unwelcomed to the United States. They were viewed as unwelcomed immigrants.

Tyler: Dr. Wei told us that Asians have been coming to the United States pretty much since Western Imperialists first landed in China. But Asian emigration to the American West really started taking off in the mid 1800s during the California Gold Rush, when huge amounts of Chinese prospectors came to the West Coast.

Noel: After that, Chinese labor became a major part of the US economy.

Dr. William Wei: The most famous of which was the building of the western portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. And once the transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory Point they were dumped on the western labor market, which included building the infrastructure of the American West which quite frankly made it a viable place to live.

Noel: And Chinese labor became such an essential part of the expansion happening in the West that many began to resent them.

Dr. William Wei: This would result in inter-ethnic competition and ultimately lead to the Chinese Exclusion Act. They became the only group named specifically in legislation to be excluded from the country.

[Music]

Noel: The vacuum that was left as a result of no longer being able to rely on cheap Chinese labor was then filled by Japanese immigrants.

Dr. Tom Romero: Early 20th century, as a result of what's known as the Gentlemen's Agreement, between the United States and Japan, the ability of the Japanese to come to the United States through immigration is pretty much shut down completely beginning in 1905.

Tyler: It was also around this time that the US Government was starting to invest a lot of resources in developing the American West.

Dr. Tom Romero: 1905 is right around the time that we also get passage of the Reclamation Act. So the American West wouldn't have been able to grow without the federal government really kind of coming in and subsidizing large-scale irrigation, which supported large-scale agricultural. And that large-scale agriculture required laborers. And so you suddenly no longer have a supply from either China or from Japan. And so Mexicans come to fill that void in particular.

Noel: Over time, these various out groups and racialized labor groups, from chattel slavery, to the present day, have been regulated in many ways, both official and unofficial. But the Chinese Exclusion Act was a major turning point.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: And this is really a moment where the United States very clearly becomes a gatekeeping nation.

Tyler: This is Jessica Ordaz. She's an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: You have moving forward the creation of the first federal border police force known as the Border Patrol and this passes in 1924.

Noel: The border patrol may seem like it's been around forever. But despite historic vigilante violence against Mexicans by groups like the Texas Rangers, there wasn't a formal police force entirely dedicated to patrolling the US border until 1924 -- less than a hundred years ago.

Tyler: Meaning that the United States was around for almost a hundred and fifty years before the border patrol was created.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: And that happened in 1924. And not as many of us these days would assume because out of a concern about Mexican migration, but actually out of a concern about Chinese migration.

[Music]

Tyler: What's really fascinating is that Hernandez says the border patrol was established as a way of enforcing the United States' border with Canada.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: Because, of course, many folks who were making their way to the United States from China were heading to the West Coast by

boat and landing or heading into Canada, and then trying to make their way south to Seattle and San Francisco.

Tyler: After that initial crackdown on Asian immigrants coming into the US from Canada, things started to change.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: And so, not surprisingly, Chinese migrants found a work-around: Mexico, and then head north. And so eventually the focus of the Border Patrol expanded. And, the rest is history. Clearly, the focus of the Border Patrol's attention for the vast majority of its existence has been the U.S. border with Mexico and not the U.S. border with Canada.

Tyler: Shortly thereafter, the US economy started tanking.

Noel: And this is where Colorado specifically starts to become a great illustration of the country as a whole.

Tyler: Because at the time, Colorado was one of those agricultural economies we talked about earlier, which were being affected by the ebbs and flows of immigrant labor. And Dr. Derek Everett says that if you want to understand why those laborers became such an obsession for Governor Johnson, you have to start with one of my least favorite vegetables.

Dr. Derek Everett: One hundred years ago, Colorado's economy was dominated by an ugly root vegetable. It's hard to comprehend just how important the sugar beet was to Colorado in the early 20th century. You know, we had started out as a state dependent

on mining, gold mining and especially silver mining. But in the panic of 1893 silver mining collapsed in Colorado and the salvation for Colorado was this root vegetable, a sugar beet. The reason a sugar beet is valuable is that you can take a beet and distill it down into the exact same sugar that you get from sugar cane.

Tyler: In that way, the sugar beet was an economic life-saver. Because you can't grow sugar cane very many places in the United States.

Noel: But you can grow sugar beets. And you can grow them pretty much all over Colorado: in the North, in the South, on the Eastern Plains and the Western Slope.

Dr. Derek Everett: And by the 1920s, Colorado produced more sugar than any other state in the union. At some points in the 1920s, Colorado produced more sugar than every other state in the United States put together. So, we are the nation's Sugar Bowl.

Noel: Initially, a lot of the labor of harvesting sugar beets was done by Germans, who'd helped develop the sugar beet industry in Central Europe.

Tyler: At first, they had been recruited by the Russian government to grow beets there.

Noel: But the Russian government eventually turned against German laborers.

Tyler: So, they came to the United States and did the same thing that they had done in Russia. They worked as highly skilled migrant laborers, doing the meticulous job of growing sugar beets.

Dr. Derek Everett: A sugar beet is a finicky, obnoxious, pain-in-the-neck crop. You have to know what you're doing. It's not something you can just drop some seeds in the ground and then harvest six months later. It takes a lot of skill to do that work. And so Germans from Russia were the ones who had the most skill.

Noel: But after a while, as often happens, they got sick of doing all the work and not reaping the profits

Dr. Derek Everett: And so within a few years, Germans from Russia started buying land, start establishing their own farms.

Tyler: And the same thing happened with Japanese immigrants, who had become Colorado's big source of migrant labor after the Germans from Russia started their own farms.

Dr. Derek Everett: So, there was a transition both for the Germans from Russia and Japanese immigrants who were such an essential part of the beet sugar labor from being the workers to being the farm owners.

Tyler: This shifting dependence on various ethnic labor classes reflects the broader, nationwide version of that same phenomenon that we talked about earlier.

Dr. Derek Everett: Of course, infamously the first ethnic labor class in the United States was enslaved, kidnapped people from Africa. But, by the time we get to Colorado's beet sugar industry, this notion that ethnic groups exist to do the hardest labor for the lowest wages. That pattern had been very well established.

Noel: All of this opened the door for people living south of Colorado's border, as well as the United States' border, to fill that ethnic labor class vacuum.

Dr. Derek Everett: In the 1910s, Mexico goes through a civil war, The Mexican Revolution, that makes the United States civil war look like a Sunday school picnic. There are dozens of different factions fighting each other for control in Mexico. And if you can get out, if you can find some safer place to be to support yourself, then that's appealing.

[music]

Tyler: In addition to those factors that made Mexican immigration to the US appealing, many Mexican Americans had already become migrant laborers within the US.

Noel: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War in 1848. It explicitly promised that Mexican citizens who stayed on their land and became American citizens would keep their property.

Tyler: But Tom Romero says that for decades, US officials had been using various loopholes and other shady practices to kick people off their lands.

Dr. Tom Romero: Mexican Americans who no longer have access to land are now sort of forced into wage labor.

Noel: Dr. Derek Everett

Dr. Derek Everett: In Colorado in the 1910s, beet sugar is a thriving business. We are making money hand over fist from these root vegetables. But our sources of ethnic labor for field work were being cut off.

Noel: And because the work of growing sugar beets was so specialized, there was eventually a push to make this migrant labor more permanent as demand continued to grow.

Tyler: Once that labor force became less migratory, Latinos in Colorado started to get stereotyped as agricultural laborers.

Noel: Then, the Great Depression happened.

Tyler: As jobs started to dry up, the sugar beet industry was still going strong, which led to a shift in the discourse that's still common today.

[Jobs/agriculture news clips]: Now to a massive ICE raid. Hundreds of undocumented immigrants taken into custody in Mississippi in what officials are calling the largest single-state operation in history.

[News clips cont'd]: Federal immigration agents are escalating efforts to crack down on businesses hiring undocumented workers. New data released this morning shows ICE visited 122 businesses over the past 5 days.

[News clips cont'd]: Homeland Security agents went from business to business in a five-day sweep serving dozens of employers with notices of inspection.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: It's definitely racialized, but it's also about status. Right. So if you are a white worker and you might be poor and sort of desperately looking for work, but if you are at the end of the day a U.S. citizen, there is much less the agricultural growers can get away with than if they are relying on unauthorized labor.

Tyler: In other words, the reason that various kinds of manual labor are often done largely by certain immigrant groups is that, in some ways, it's easier for business owners to exploit them. And then over time, those people become the most knowledgeable group about the difficult and precise agricultural work that they're being underpaid to do.

Noel: Meaning that in addition to white Americans typically not volunteering to fill the vacuum when those racialized labor forces are restricted, business owners don't want to give those jobs to them anyway.

Tyler: That's a lesson that in the mid 1930's, one of Colorado's most beloved politicians of all time would learn the hard way. And it's a lesson a lot of Americans still haven't learned.

[News clip]: It's a tedious trope that you Americans are just too lazy or unwilling to do the jobs that only illegal immigrants will do.

U.S. Senator Dick Durban [News clip cont'd]: Go to the local meat processing plant or the chicken processing plant and watch who comes out of that plant at quittin' time:

Hispanics and Africans. Not many of us say to our sons and daughters: “I’m hoping the day will come that you decide to go and pick fruit for a living.”

[News clip cont’d]: If my immigrant workforce is taken away, I don’t have anybody to harvest my fruits and vegetables. It will be the end of our business.

[Underwriting]: To learn more about the stories you hear on *Lost Highways*, check out History Colorado's 8 museums around the state. Like the El Pueblo History Museum in Pueblo, which features a series of exhibits, events, and more related to the Borderlands of Southern Colorado. From a place of meeting between indigenous tribes, to a physical border between nations, from the boundary between mountains and plains to everyday convergences of cultural and ethnic borders. This exhibit illuminates the site’s specific geopolitical border history, as well as the region’s historic and ongoing borders of cultures, ethnicities, landscapes, industries, religions and identities.

Noel: As the Great Depression continued, times were getting more and more desperate, setting the stage in places like Colorado for major upheavals around immigration and labor.

Tyler: But the depression and the dust bowl didn't do as much damage to Colorado's sugar beet industry as they did to other industries. Here's Dr. Tom Romero.

Dr. Tom Romero: Despite the Dust Bowl, despite the drought, there was still a need and a demand for agricultural labor. And much of that need fell in the sugar beet industry, which was really some of the hardest work you could do. You were kind of on

your knees for 12 hours a day, from March and April and extending all the way out into November or December.

Noel: Many of those laborers were locked into brutal and exploitative contracts.

Tyler: Those contracts were typically given to entire families who agreed to work an allotted amount of land. And payment only came at the end of the harvest, based on the amount of beets those families produced.

Noel: During those 8 or 9 months, families were given meager housing on or near the land they were working.

Tyler: But in order to have that housing, as well as food, supplies, and other basic necessities for life, families had to take out a loan from the beet growers, which often kept them on the hook to come back the following year, creating even more dependence. It was similar to systems like sharecropping that were implemented in the American South after slavery was abolished, or the company-owned mining towns that led to violent massacres across the country in the early 1900s.

Noel: The work was brutal, and often dangerous. Workers spent all day stooped over in muddy fields. In the summer months under the intensity of the Colorado sun, laborers risked dehydration. In the winter months, they risked frostbite or hypothermia. Here's Derek Everett.

Dr. Derek Everett: You couldn't just find someone off the street to come work in a beet sugar field. The people who worked in those fields needed to know what they were doing. You would walk through the fields with your beet knife, which was essentially a machete with a little hook on the end, and you'd use the hook to swing down, grab the beet and pull it up to your leg. When you'd use the long blade part to chop off the top of the beet. The number of beet sugar workers who were missing fingers is astonishing.

Tyler: But despite the unglamorous and highly skilled nature of the work, the thriving sugar beet industry, built on the labor of migrant workers trapped in exploitative contracts became an easy target for those who were suffering the economic consequences of the Depression.

Noel: Enter Big Ed Johnson.

[Music]

Dr. Derek Everett: Ed Johnson was a phenomenally complicated figure. And it's always important to remember Ed Johnson was probably the most successful politician in Colorado's history. He served multiple terms in the state legislature. He was elected lieutenant governor. He was elected three terms as governor, three terms as a U.S. senator. No one else in Colorado history has had the success of a political career that Ed Johnson did.

Tyler: Edwin C. Johnson is hard to put in a box.

Noel: For example, he was an anti-new deal Democrat.

Tyler: But even though he resisted FDR's economic policies at home, he liked the way Roosevelt handled the war. And he spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan -- which was a dominant political force in Colorado in the 1920's.

Noel: But he still managed to play into the nativism that was running rampant at the time.

Tyler: Everett hesitates to reduce Johnson to just a keen political operator. But he had a natural talent for connecting with voters and getting them on his side.

Dr. Derek Everett: In 1970 when he died, he had a state memorial service. His casket laid in state at the base of the stairs in the Capitol Rotunda and there was a story in the newspaper that people who passed by his open casket would reach into the casket and grab his hand as if they were shaking Ed Johnson's hand one last time. I mean, if you are a glad-handing politician, even after you're dead, that demonstrates how incredibly skillful and popular a figure he was.

[music]

Noel: It was spring of 1935, and Colorado's sugar beet growers were about to start preparing their fields.

Tyler: The sugar beet labor force at that time was approximately two thirds Latino.

Noel: The federal government had just stopped providing extra funds to states for unemployment relief.

Tyler: And Latino laborers who used that relief in the offseason became an easy target for all kinds of derision. Ed Johnson was among those making the same arguments we hear today.

Dr. Derek Everett: He said, quote, Hundreds of Mexicans are holding jobs which should be held by American citizens. Many of these Mexicans are employed during the crop season in the sugar beet fields when fall comes. They go on welfare at the county or state level.

Former US President Bill Clinton [news clip]: The large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country. The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants. The public service they us impose burdens on our taxpayers. That's why our administration has moved aggressively to secure our borders more by hiring a recording number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before, by cracking down on illegal hiring, by barring welfare benefits to illegal aliens.

[News clip]: I mean obviously you believe that they are putting a massive strain on our social safety net and on taxpayers, but do you believe that illegal immigrants are taking jobs away from Americans?

[News clip cont'd]: When you don't even have your Americans back in the workforce yet, why would you want to open up, really, people's lives to only be pushed into the welfare system?

Noel: But the politically savvy Big Ed Johnson saw an opportunity to capitalize on the popular nativist sentiment of the time.

Tyler: It wasn't necessarily a practical plan. But it was a popular one.

Noel: Johnson thought that by restricting migrant labor -- specifically what he called "The Mexican Menace" -- he could kill two birds with one stone: open up jobs for Coloradans, and free up relief money. Here's Dr. Tom Romero.

Dr. Tom Romero: And he was hoping the federal government would be a partner with him in it, in that the federal government basically said, no, that's not that's not our policy, that's not our practice. Yeah, you're talking about people that are coming to the state that are just looking for jobs like anybody else. Our policy as the federal government is not to punish the hungry and those that, you know, are trying to make a better life for themselves.

Dr. Derek Everett: And on March 25th, 1935, Johnson announces that non-Coloradans are going to be deported.

Noel: The original plan was to set up -- in the government's words -- a concentration camp near Golden, where so-called "Mexicans" would be held and deported en masse.

Tyler: Many Coloradoans were ecstatic, and Johnson got countless encouraging letters from his constituents.

Dr. Derek Everett: They send their messages to Governor Johnson saying finally, somebody is standing up and doing what needs to be done, saying what needs to be said.

Noel: A lot of people loved Johnson's new plan, and they let him know. Some of them even provided leads on people they thought might not belong.

Dr. Derek Everett: Johnson starts getting letters from people saying, well, so-and-so who lives two doors down the street from me, I'm not sure they're really an American or this person who lives in my town or live lives next door, they've been wearing awfully fancy clothes. They're obviously making a lot of money, but they're not really an American. They're not really a Coloradan. There's some horrifying stuff.

Tyler: The plan for the concentration camp and mass deportations was barely under way, but everything already seemed to be going smoothly.

Dr. Derek Everett: Until something happened in Trinidad. On May 7th that day, there was a truck, a great big farm truck that had 27 Latinos who were coming over Raton Pass, what's now I-25, is just a two lane U.S. highway at the time.

Noel: After a recent trip to New Mexico, I drove back to Colorado over that same pass. I noticed how most cars slipped by without so much as slowing down for the invisible border. It's marked only by two signs: "You are leaving New Mexico: Hasta La Vista" and then the iconic and ironic brown and white "Welcome to Colorful Colorado" sign. All passed but one New Mexican family who'd stopped and gotten out of their car to pose for a photo in front of the Colorado sign. It's a gorgeous pass where the dry juniper scrub desert of New Mexico gives way to the first high mountain views of Colorado.

Dr. Derek Everett: They'd come over Raton Pass from New Mexico and they were headed to Greeley. They had their letters saying, you know, we're ready for you to come back. But the beat season is getting ready to start and we're going to need you for the summer labor. And so twenty seven people are in this truck, but the truck's out of gas and they don't have money to buy more.

Noel: So they asked the county relief agent for help.

Dr. Derek Everett: And the relief agent remembered. Oh, wait. The governor's trying to stop non-Coloradans from taking Colorado jobs. So instead, the relief agent called the county sheriff. The county sheriff arrived and decided to detain everybody in the truck.

Tyler: So, the sheriff telegraphs Governor Johnson and asks him what to do next.

Dr. Derek Everett: He says as fast as they come in, put them out. And he tells other sheriffs to do the same thing. If anybody else is starting to come into Colorado, turn

them around, stop them, because we've got too many people here already that we're talking about removing.

Tyler: Johnson, believing he had stopped the quote "Mexican Menace," was satisfied.

Noel: But there was just one problem.

Dr. Tom Romero: They ultimately sort of make their way back into the state of Colorado just a couple of days later. They make their way to the Mexican consulate in Denver and they explain what's happening. And this creates a little bit of a international incident.

Dr. Derek Everett: Just three days after the truck first came over Raton Pass into Trinidad, on May 10th, 1935, Governor Johnson receives a telegram from a man named Cordell Hull, who is the United States secretary of State, our representative to the rest of the world. And essentially, Hull just says, why am I getting this call from the Mexican ambassador? What's going on?

Tyler: So, he did what many politicians would do in that situation. He lied.

Noel: Johnson told the secretary of state that the people at the border were Mexican citizens who either didn't have the proper documentation, or their papers were in such bad shape that they couldn't be verified. But when the secretary of state called the immigration officials in Denver, it just wasn't true. Many of them were actually American citizens. And the ones that weren't, did have the right papers.

Dr. Derek Everett: So now the governor has been caught lying to the Secretary of State. This becomes a huge embarrassment and Johnson is forced to back down. The deportation idea essentially disappears and the people who had been stopped in Trinidad and several other towns by that point are allowed to continue on to wherever their jobs were.

Noel: Well, for at least about a year. Because once again, Big Ed Johnson has an ace up his sleeve.

Dr. Derek Everett: He's planning to run for a U.S. Senate seat in Colorado in November of 1936. And he wants to be popular. And he knew just how popular this deportation idea was.

Dr. Tom Romero: A year later, almost exactly, kind of to the day, Governor Johnson, big Ed, kind of doubles down on this this practice and sort of moves beyond what he had proposed in 1935.

Tyler: And Dr. Tom Romero says that this time, he wasn't messing around.

Dr. Tom Romero: So, April 18th, 1936, Big Ed Johnson declares martial law.

[Music]

[News clip]: The military needs to be deployed to our southern border immediately to stop the caravan of thousands of illegals pouring into our nation.

[News clip cont'd]: Nearly 700 undocumented workers arrested and detained at a number of food processing plants.

[News clip cont'd]: With one simple phrase, national council of La Raza president, Janet Murguía, signaled the height of Hispanic American anger at US president, Barrack Obama, saying, quote, “For us, this president has been the deporter in chief.”

Dr. Derek Everett: Essentially, the order was to prevent anyone who was not self-sufficient, who couldn't financially support themselves from coming into Colorado, meaning that you're coming into Colorado to get a job and we need those jobs for unemployed Coloradans. If you're not a Coloradan, you shouldn't be here working.

Tyler: The National Guard was also aided by local vigilante groups, who went around the state posting bright orange placards warning all non-Coloradoans to leave.

Noel: And the press -- always looking for something sensational to sell -- were loving it.

Dr. Tom Romero: The *Rocky Mountain News*, as the other kind of major competitor to *The Denver Post*, are showing National Guardsmen that are that are standing around families, you know, pregnant women with children, and they're asking them for their papers.

Dr. Derek Everett: And if they can't prove that they are self-sufficient, that they have enough money quite literally on them in their pockets to support themselves, then they're not allowed in.

Noel: Many of the people of Colorado were also pretty keen on the blockade. And just a heads up that the language you're about to hear is highly offensive and could disturb some listeners. If you're uncomfortable with that, you might want to skip forward about 45 seconds.

Dr. Derek Everett: The one letter that I think is the most powerful, the most astonishing to me, came from a resident of Mancos, Colorado, which is down in the southwestern part of the state near Cortez and Durango. And Manco's praised Governor Johnson by saying, quote, "You have taken to preserve the white race as the selected people to run Colorado in the future, not to be run over by a scourge of black and tans, to dilute the blood of the race and polluted with every virile disease that can accompany any bunch of Mexicans over ten in number." So, the great epidemiological science of Colorado on display there in 1936.

Tyler: But once again, just as Big Ed was sitting back to bask in the glory of this popular decision, things got complicated.

Dr. Tom Romero: Reporters for the *Rocky Mountain News* covered this incident in which the National Guard pulled five people off of a train and four of them were Mexican or Mexican-Americans. And the paper made a point to talk about them being these bums, right, who had no claim to be in the state. But the paper made this really important point of highlighting this one person who they thought was worthy, who should have been in the state, who was this disabled veteran who was white as well. An American citizen.

Noel: It was a PR blunder Big Ed Johnson hadn't anticipated.

Dr. Tom Romero: And the newspaper talked about the unfairness of this action against people like him. He was just trying to come into Colorado. He happened to be on a train. He was trying to make a better life, you know, in the midst of the Great Depression. And the newspapers talked about how reporters sort of took up a collection for him to help him out. And I think it highlights for me that the larger racial politics that are at play.

Noel: The press was all for the exclusion of Latino laborers, who they saw as a burden on the system despite the fact that they were essential to Colorado's economy. But the thought of a white person being turned away -- who would almost certainly not be picking up work in the beet fields -- was seen as a great injustice.

Tyler: The sugar beet growers, one of the most politically powerful lobbies in Colorado at the time, weren't too happy about the blockade either.

Dr. Derek Everett: The chairman of the Great Western Sugar Company said, quote, "We'll employ all the beet labor available in Colorado. And after that, well, if the governor doesn't want beets grown in Colorado, that's that." Because Great Western, among others, knew you needed experienced people who knew what they were doing.

Dr. Tom Romero: Despite the rhetoric all of these Mexicans and again—whether they're Mexican or Mexican-Americans—were taking jobs from Coloradoans, one thing became obvious very quickly is that this embargo on labor. There all of a sudden wasn't a rush for those living in the state of Colorado to fill those jobs. And in fact, the jobs were remaining empty.

Noel: Even when the state government explicitly asked unemployed Colorado citizens if they wanted sugar beet jobs, most declined.

Dr. Derek Everett: And this is where we come back to the notion that that stereotypical notion that there are jobs that Americans just don't want to do, because Johnson received a report on April 28 that the state employment office had contacted thus far about 300 people on the relief rolls in Colorado, on the welfare rolls in Colorado. And 90 percent of the people that they had contacted said that they would rather stay on relief. They would rather continue to get a welfare check from the state or the county or whatever than to go work in the sugar beet fields.

[News clips]: The inflow of all this cheap immigrant labor hurts Americans.

[News clips cont'd]: Food growers in Florida are worried that a crackdown against undocumented immigrants could really make a short labor supply even scarcer and they are worried that it could lead to their crops, in part, this season, rotting in the field.

Tyler: It wasn't long before Governor Johnson's stunt started to gain national attention. And at the federal level, the blockade wasn't so popular.

Dr. Tom Romero: Federal senators were on the floor of the Senate, lambasting Governor Johnson for such actions. The ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union was,

sort of, talking about the fact that this was a potentially unconstitutional action. It was unprecedented in American history and they were certainly threatening litigation.

Noel: In the meantime, migrant laborers had started camping just south of the border, assuming that they'd be able to get into Colorado eventually. And what Governor Johnson did next didn't help the situation.

Dr. Derek Everett: Governor Johnson starts to worry that the people in these temporary camps just south of the state line are plotting, essentially, they're planning an invasion, they're going to sneak into Colorado when the National Guard's back is turned. And, so he has members of the National Guard dress as farm laborers and go down into these camps, essentially infiltrating them, looking for intelligence.

Tyler: The spies from the National Guard didn't exactly fit in with the rest of the migrant laborers.

Dr. Derek Everett: It doesn't really help that the National Guard members who were sent down there are either Anglos who speak Spanish in some sense or are, perhaps, one of the very few Latinos who would have been employed with the National Guard. But you'd be dressed in farm clothes that they just bought in a nearby town. So, you obviously don't look like you've been working in the fields for very long. You've got brand new clothes and you're walking into these camps from the wrong direction. It doesn't take very long to realize that there's some nonsense going on with this, these newcomers who just strolled in.

Noel: And eventually, word got back to officials in New Mexico.

Dr. Derek Everett: When it becomes clear that Colorado is sending military spies into New Mexico, the governor of New Mexico just loses it. He is furious.

Tyler: Between criticism from sugar companies, the press, and members of the United States Congress, as well as the fact that the blockade didn't create any jobs, this litany of problems would bring the fiasco at the border to an end within a mere 10 days of when it started.

Dr. Derek Everett: So, the blockade comes to an end as an embarrassment, as a failure. This this did not work the way Johnson expected it to. In a sense, Johnson was not only shocked, he also felt betrayed because he was trying to protect Colorado jobs for Colorado workers. Coloradans didn't want them.

Noel: Both fiascos, in 1935 and in 1936, ended up being an embarrassment for Johnson. That said...

Dr. Tom Romero: It certainly didn't seem ultimately to hurt Governor Johnson's political fortunes. He ends up securing the nomination, wins the vote later that that fall.

Noel: As for Johnson himself, he always stood by his decision. And, so did the person conducting this Oral History from the History Colorado archives recorded in 1959, talking about the migrant workers who had gone on relief in the offseason.

Governor Edwin C. Johnson: And in Denver, most of them had been Mexican labor the year before, but they graduated and got on the relief rolls. And I just thought it was

wrong. I told them so. And they just laughed at me. And, so I called out the National Guard to take the labor off. And send 'em back. I still feel that I was right about it.

Johnson's Interviewer: I think you were too.

[music]

Tyler: Again, the ebb and flow of immigration restriction and border enforcement is a product of both nationalism and economics.

Noel: For example, in 1942, just six years after Big Ed Johnson's attempt at using martial law to enforce Colorado's border, the federal government started the Bracero Program -- once again -- because of a labor shortage. Here's Jessica Ordaz.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: So, the bracero program first started because, according to the U.S. government, a lot of Americans who were at war could no longer work in an agriculture essentially and partially in railroads. And, so the Bracero Program brought Mexican nationals to the United States to work while Americans were fighting in World War Two.

Tyler: The program perfectly embodies the United States' history of oscillating back and forth between inviting immigrant workers in, and kicking them out.

Noel: Except the bracero program also led to an increased in unauthorized migration. Which meant that this time, they were doing both at once.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: The definition of the Bracero Program is that you're importing authorized workers, people who are here on contracts. However, there is a real side effect to that, which means that Mexican migrants in, say, like small rural communities in Mexico will hear, "oh, hey, the U.S. government is recruiting this massive wave of Mexican migrants." Then the U.S. government claims, "Well we have, you know, this invasion," which is then what the government uses to ramp up enforcement along the border.

Tyler: César Hernández.

Dr. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández: In many ways, Big Ed Johnson's call for the national guard to protect the Colorado community from outside invaders is a different take on a very similar feel that we see articulated in more recent years that the United States is so fragile that we have to be protected from people whose motivation is to seek safety or to seek work. And my view of the United States is that we are a wonderfully prosperous country, in part because we have been willing to transform ourselves time and time again.

Dr. Jessica Ordaz: In terms of the case study in Colorado in 1936, it sent a very clear message to migrants, to working-class people, to Mexican workers that they were not welcome, which is exactly what immigration enforcement and border policing is all about.

[Music]

Tyler: Working on this story and learning about the way capitalism relies on these racialized and exploited ethnic laborers reminded me a lot of experiences in my own life. Like the time I was in a friend's wedding and the bride's grandparents, seeing me in a bowtie, tried to order drinks from me. Or the time I was working at a five-star resort in Colorado Springs, and a lady threatened to talk to my manager because she didn't believe me when she asked where I was from and I said "Colorado." She even told me she thought I had an accent and accused me of lying. It was like she couldn't wrap her head around the idea that the person refilling her water was an American citizen. I've always wondered why she got so upset. But this story of Big Ed Johnson's fiascos at the border is a reminder that people always see the world from whichever side of the border they're standing on. It's why people want so badly to "Build That Wall." I don't think it actually has anything to do with jobs or welfare or taxpayer dollars. So often, it's about fear, and having someone to blame. But it's also about superiority, and feeling okay that the person harvesting your food or serving your water is somehow less deserving than you.

Noel: It may not have been conscious or intentional, but Big Ed Johnson knew that all too well. And somewhere in the back of our minds, I think we all do. It starts the second we walk in the door on our first day of school.

[Noel's son singing]: South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming!

[music]

Credits:

Tyler: Lost Highways is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios.

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Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor.

Tyler: And to Amanda Lane of History Colorado, who recently transcribed all our episodes.

Noel: If you'd like to see the transcripts, either as a matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use Lost Highways in your classroom, you can find them at historycolorado.org/lost-highways.

Tyler: The music for this episode was by Earth Control Pill. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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and Cara DeGette

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black.

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.
