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Lords of Agave: Eladio Sauza, Agraristas, and the Struggle for Land in Tequila, Mexico, 1932–1937

Ulices Pina

Introduction

It must be admitted that the real developments of the Revolution did not in any way resemble the enchanting pictures which created the enthusiasm among its first adepts; but without those pictures would the Revolution have been victorious?

—Georges Sorel¹

On July 18, 1932, the residents of El Medineño stood before the Governor of the state of Jalisco to petition for a grant of land measuring a modest 110 hectares. Claiming that they “lacked the indispensable land needed to satisfy their most basic necessities,” their petition was forwarded to the respective Local Agrarian Commission, which initiated the process of land reform on August 9, 1932.² For this agrarian community of 117 individuals, life would never be the same.

In the years leading up to the Mexican Revolution, the principal cause of unrest and strife in the rural population was the loss of communal landholdings through sales, concessions, and adjustments made by local authorities.³ When the Constitution of 1917

was adopted, the decree of January 6, 1915, which established that the rights of villages had been violated because they could not sue at law, was raised to the status of constitutional provision and incorporated into Article 27. Through this now-enshrined right, municipalities and settlements with a communal character regained the legal capacity to own real property. The right to eminent domain was extended to include the division of large landed estates taking from them the necessary lands and waters in order to endow villages and other communities. The owners were to be indemnified for the property taken, and, if they considered themselves despoiled, had recourse to proper tribunals.⁴

Before the land reform tequila companies produced the agaves needed for the process of distillation; shortly thereafter they became dependent on *ejidatarios* for their supply of agave.⁵ This article follows the divergent paths of one local agrarian community and one tequila industrialist—Eladio Sauza—through the bureaucratic avenues of Mexico's post-revolutionary land reform. Using Sauza's correspondence, memos, and letters, as well as those of the *agraristas* of El Medineño, I show that their stories were not only indicative of the change that the tequila industry faced; they were also part of a larger national narrative on the development and implementation of labor and agrarian legislation in the Mexican countryside. What was decreed and then ordained into law more than often unfolded on the ground in different ways than intended. Although the Constitution of 1917 provided the legislative framework for land reform, it remained highly susceptible to the pressure from landowners and local communities.

Over 14,115 hectares of land were redistributed as *ejidos* in the municipality of Tequila between 1927-1941.⁶ The uphill battle *agraristas* waged against Sauza to assert their right to land is an inquiry into the lives of individuals who through the state sponsored *ejido* system became empowered and integrated into the nation's revolutionary project.⁷ Examining the conflicting goals of Eladio Sauza and El Medineño's *agraristas* not only uncovers the resistance and negotiation that occurred in response to national legislation, but also provides a narrative of the grassroots movements which developed in its wake. I ask three questions: how did the actual process of land redistribution affect landowners and *agraristas*? Did the Revolution's progressive labor and agrarian legislation benefit

the people it was intended to help? What bureaucratic strategies did *agraristas* and affected landowners use or develop?

Agrarian Quagmire

By the spring of 1933, frustrations had been steadily building at hacienda El Medineño. It had already been well over five months since Engineer Luis Morfin conducted the agro-census that made 117 inhabitants, 26 heads of household, and 30 eligible for ejidos.⁸ That day Eugenio Martínez sent a complaint to Mexico City candidly requesting that Engineer Morfin surrender the general planning report he had undertaken regarding the lands of the ejido because, “we have yet to be given provisional possession of the land because of the engineer’s delay.”⁹ In the grand scheme of things, this delay was minute compared to what lay ahead in the coming months. Just two days before, Eladio Sauza filed an injunction to set in motion a *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* against Martínez and fourteen of his fellow workmates. The injunction called for their eviction from his property because of an apparent breach in the labor contract they had signed on February 25 of that previous year.¹⁰ El Medineño’s status as an agrarian community was on the line. If they were to relinquish their official addresses at the hacienda, the eligible individuals would be reduced to half their size; five members shy of the required petitioners to trigger Article 27. For this agrarian community, their first battle against Sauza occurred, not in the fields of agave, but instead in the intimate deliberations of a labor tribunal.

Labor and employment disputes in Mexico are settled through a special set of arbitral boards that lie just outside of the judicial system. *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje* were tripartite organizations consisting of representatives from government, management, and labor. Their composition allowed workers to have sectoral representation in the administration of labor justice and provided them with an important channel for the resolution of disputes outside of the workplace. Whether they involved collective bargaining disputes or allegations of a violation of employment rights, labor claims and disputes were heard in a single stage before the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje*—federal or local—that had jurisdiction over the matter. Proceedings were predominately oral; the members of the *junta*, the claimant, and the defendant were present at the hearings, which generally created a sense of intimacy. The proceedings

were initiated by the filing of a petition before the appropriate board, which identifies the parties to the dispute. After the petition was filed, the board set a specific date and time for a pre-trial settlement hearing. The defendant was then served with a notice of this hearing date and warned that failure to appear would be considered a refusal to settle as well as an acceptance of the demands of the claimant.¹¹ In order to allow for a full examination of the workers' claims, writing motions, and other procedural formalities—usually observed in judicial proceedings were dispensed—within matters presented before *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje*.¹²

William Suarez-Potts has argued that employers viewed the labor boards as encroachments on their managerial prerogatives and strenuously opposed them.¹³ The conflict discussed here between Eladio Sauza and El Medineño affords a different perspective on how employers sought to protect themselves from such injustices occurring within the workplace. Although there are many fundamental issues that undergirded Sauza's choice to pursue a hearing before a *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, his decision represented more than just a stalling tactic in the face of a menacing land reform; it exemplified how the interpretation of recently enacted legislation, its uses, and whom it was intended to help, was in a constant state of negotiation.

El Medineño's fifteen *agraristas* were sent summons to appear before a *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* on July 15, 1933.¹⁴ Two days later, Rosalio Guevara—manager of Sauza's interests—wrote to the municipal president of Tequila to bring attention to the conflict “provoked” by the residents of hacienda El Medineño and to also name Amado Alcaráz as the individual who would represent the management in the *Junta*. Both parties gathered the following day at the office of Municipal President Juan Zeremeño, who shortly thereafter formed the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje*. The *Junta* consisted of: José Jesus Hernández (President of the *Junta*), Amado Alcaráz (representative of the management), and José R. Regalado (representative of the defendants).

The *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* convened again at 18:00 hours on July 18, 1933. This time with the objective of communicating to the defendants the specifics of the lawsuit Guevara introduced, which consisted “in asking for the eviction from various houses, at [Sauza's] hacienda El Medineño, which the *peones*

acasillados are inhabiting.”¹⁵ The words expressed by the accusers were intentional. In 1933 *peones acasillados*—agricultural workers who resided in housing provided by an hacienda owner—were still not eligible for agrarian reform for contractual reasons, until 1934 (provisionally) and (fully) in 1937.¹⁶ When it was his turn to speak, Regalado—representative of the workers—expressed that, “the defendants were not willing to leave because they are no longer *peones acasillados*, rather they have constituted themselves a legal agrarian community. [That] until they find out the resolution of their file for land grant, the peons will not leave the houses as it is their official addresses.” The Junta attempted to reach an early agreement. Regalado replied, “It is not possible to reach an agreement because my clients will not abandon the houses until they find out the resolution of their petition.”¹⁷ The session ended, shortly thereafter, because an agreement could not be reached.

The letter Eugenio Martínez sent to the President of the Republic that very same day the *Junta* convened, is especially revealing and provides us with a glimpse of the community’s reaction to the events. Moreover, it sheds light into the dynamic and multilayered character of the petitioning process. Letters written by communities and addressed to the President went directly to his personal secretary. Once received, it was the secretary’s job to inform the President of the matter who would then take the appropriate action. While the previous messages sent by Martínez had not received an official response, the latest correspondence would set in motion a chain of events and actions that would significantly alter the course of the outcome. Martínez asked, on behalf of El Medineño, for guarantees, “because Eladio Sauza has initiated a lawsuit before the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* so that members of this community would leave the houses we have at the hacienda, with which we would lose our right to petition for an ejido. We have complained to authorities, but due to Eladio Sauza’s friendship with the Governor of the state, our complaints have fallen on deaf ears.”¹⁸

On July 24, 1933, Rosalio Guevara presented a list of petitions that introduced three witnesses for examination. They were dated on the twenty-first and were received on the twenty-second; this detail would later form a backbone of the defendants’ defense. Shortly after, Guevara presented a written document to the Junta that proposed to cover the costs, up to 20 pesos, for the relocation

of all the workers being sued, “if they cede and willfully leave the houses.” Regalado quickly interjected on behalf of his clients and replied, “I do not agree with accepting such a proposition because it is not in the best interests of my clients.” The President of the Junta peremptorily called for both parties to conciliate their interests in this conflict, in which he states:

That in the present conflict peons who were residents of the hacienda El Medineño are being sued, and because they are not currently rendering their services to the said property and because there are other campesinos who are rendering service to the hacienda and lack housing for their families, the latter have the right to occupy the houses of the hacienda, destined for the peons and for the time being it appears that the defendants should be evicted from the houses.

Alcaráz—representative of the management—jubilantly agreed with the Junta President’s opinion, citing the fifth clause of the contracts signed by the peons, which obliges the defendants to leave the houses once they have stopped rendering their services to the property. Eladio Sauza himself could not have planned a better outcome.

In what proved to be the pivotal moment of the deliberations, Regalado—representative of the defense—exclaimed that, “the evidence presented by the claimant should not be taken into consideration because it is extemporaneous, since it should have been presented within the allotted time frame of three days that Article 505 of the Federal Labor Law grants.” The proceedings had officially begun on the 18th of July. Sauza’s representative had turned in his evidentiary petitions on July 24. The petitions had, under official law, expired three days before. Therefore, the evidence presented before the board was inadmissible. Regalado further argued that the witnesses examined were biased, “because it is well known that they are ardent supporters of the management [...] the three witnesses assured that everything they put on record is true [...] but they find themselves in a lie.”¹⁹

The defense also accused Sauza of falsifying the labor contracts after he had learned that workers from El Medineño had organized into an agrarian community and that the right of an individual to petition for a grant of land was nullified if he had entered into a

binding labor contract with an hacienda. Regalado stressed that, “they [management] ask for the eviction of the workers because of the labor contracts, these contracts are from a later date, given that they were made to sign them in blank, so that they could manipulate them when they thought it opportune.” The defense refused to recognize the capacity of the Junta to understand the matter—given that *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje* exist only when there is a labor conflict between workers and an employer. Up until then, the Sauza representatives had yet to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the defendants were *peones acasillados* who were currently working for the tequila industrialist. Regalado closed with the following, “I do not find any conflict [...nor] recognize their capacity [the Junta] to understand this matter.”²⁰ The final session ended on July 24, 1933 at 21:00 hours.

Eugenio Martínez, President of the Agrarian Community of El Medineño, received word of the official judgment made by the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* just two days later. In a letter written to the President of the Junta, Martínez outlines the community’s reaction to the decision reached,

The resolution taken by the *Junta de Conciliación*, ordering us to abandon our addresses at the hacienda ‘El Medineño’ [...] violates the contents of Article 505 of the Federal Labor Law, which states that in light of evidence the Junta would meet within the third day with its members that form it, with their opinion as a friendly arbitrator. What you communicate is not an opinion, it is an order to evict the houses that we occupy, where we have our official address and where we are recognized as an agrarian community.

These were the words of a man well versed in the rhetoric of laws and reform. Martínez exemplified a keen understanding of the community’s rights and subsequently took the proper steps to ensure that these actions were thoroughly documented. The letter continued outlining, in great detail, the abuse that Martínez and his workmates had been subjected to, “In violating the law in this way, aside from the responsibility, you find yourself misinterpreting the article you invoke and find yourself intruding in the matters of our organization, protected by the inviolability of the Agrarian Communities; whose

matter should only be dealt with by Superior authorities of the same Communities.”

The President of El Medineño also forwarded this same letter to his superiors in order to give account of the violation against the agrarian community; not recognizing the legal capacity of the Junta to recognize a conflict between management and labor which in his words, “does not exist.” Martínez reiterated that the constituents of the community’s workers, “some who labor independent of the hacienda, and on the international road, [...] have nothing to do with Eladio Sauza and for the time being we are not his peons.” Clearly disapproving of the proceedings and the final dictated resolution, they refused to name a representative before the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* to finalize the dispute because of the threat posed to the agrarian interests of the community. “I manifest, that in the future all matter related with us should be addressed,” closed Martínez, “to the Attorney of the People and the Local Agrarian Commission, of whom we depend on.”²¹ The Junta ended in a stalemate. Both parties walked away from the matter satisfied. Eladio Sauza bought himself some more time and had found the angle he would utilize to undermine the community’s petition. For their part the *agraristas* would prove themselves adept at seeking out the right people in the offices of Guadalajara and Mexico City. With Eugenio Martínez at the helm and with the newly contracted *Attorney of the People*, Felipe V. Guerrero, the *agraristas* went back to the drawing board.

December Hangovers

The day before the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* officially issued its decision, Eugenio Martínez received a telegram from Francisco J. Gaxiola, Jr.—the personal secretary of the President of the Republic—in response to the letter Martínez had sent on July 18, 1933. The secretary assured Martínez that his original letter would be forwarded to the President of the Agrarian Commission for a final resolution. Documentation also confirms that Gaxiola subsequently forwarded a memo to the President of the National Agrarian Commission asking him to communicate the results of the deliberations dealing with the resolution of El Medineño to Eugenio Martínez.²² The pressure from below that Martínez had patiently applied throughout the preceding months, however

successful, only represented one side of the story. The proceedings of the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje* also revealed that Sauza was indeed expressing a legitimate grievance. With the current battle reaching a stalemate, Sauza now pleaded his case to the Local Agrarian Commission.

Indalencio Nuñez, who represented Sauza, informed the Local Agrarian Commission that various individuals currently residing at El Medineño, “who are considered to have rights to land grants, are peons [acasillados] who currently reside on his [Sauza’s] property; others have died; and one of them is a minor; some are widows without family and some do not live in the settlement, but instead reside in La Noria, which is another different settlement, in Tequila, and other places in close proximity.” He accompanied his allegations with various certificates from municipal authorities, some peonage contracts, and certificates from the *Registro Civil*, to prove his objections. With all the collected elements, on September 7, 1933 the Local Agrarian Commission emitted its provisional decision in favor of El Medineño proposing a dotation of 110 hectares of primary land or its equivalent in other kinds. Sauza’s protests were dismissed and the positive resolution was forwarded to the Governor of the state for consideration and approval.

December 5, 1933 proved a major set back for the Agrarian Community of El Medineño. The previous decision reached by the Local Agrarian Commission was overturned. Governor Allende declared the community’s petition inadmissible because they apparently did not meet the minimum number of eligible individuals needed for a grant of land. Their original petition declared 30 eligible individuals, but now the dispute over labor contracts, previously addressed by the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, was utilized by the Governor to reduce their numbers below the minimum threshold of 20 individuals needed for a grant of land. The Governor’s decision overruled a Local Agrarian Commission that was by and large more familiar and equipped to dictate on the matter. “A little before the provisional resolution of the Governor,” wrote Eugenio Martínez, “we knew that our file was going to be negatively resolved, which is when we contacted the then Attorney of the People of the State Felipe V. Guerrero.”²³ Martínez reiterated that the reports carried out by the Commissioner Luis Santos, who a couple of days before was the administrator of the property in question, were entirely

biased and false. “Without a doubt a doing of the landowner Sauza,” decried Martínez, “[and Santos] who affirmed lies that only benefited his boss, with damages to us and the truth.”

Attorney Felipe Guerrero informed the community of their right to conform with the legal precept of the Agrarian Law in effect and rectify the agro-census. Shortly thereafter, Guerrero wrote a letter to Governor Allende imploring him to rescind the resolution and return the file to the Local Agrarian Commission, “while a rectification of the census takes place whose action I will personally, as advisor of the petitioners, oversee.”²⁴ The Governor of the state did not return the file to the community nor did he answer the previous letter from the Attorney. Martínez interpreted this as a clear sign of his bias in the matter and also expressed solemn feelings, “the Governor acted with manifest injustice [...] because instead of returning the file like the Attorney asked, for the proceedings that we have a right to, he took the side of the enemies of the revolution and he condemned us to destitution and slavery.”²⁵ The rhetoric Martínez invoked played on the revolutionary sentiment that was still fresh in the minds of *agraristas*.²⁶ Martínez defended the interests of the Agrarian Community of El Medineño by portraying the Governor as an enemy of the revolution. But was that all that was at stake? Sauza’s company represented a significant industry for the state of Jalisco during a calamitous era of economic recession. Was it not in the best interests of the Governor to protect such an industry? What is clear is that actions of Governor Allende—between April 1, 1932-Februray 28, 1935—complicated the *agraristas* prospects for land and, for the time being, significantly improved Sauza’s landed interests.

The Point of No Return

The odds were stacked against the *agraristas* and even though they had overcome the contentious decision reached by the *Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, none seemed to hit home as hard as the difficult situation before them. In a turn for the worse the petition they had so dearly defended appeared to have slipped into a quagmire. The inevitability of land reform was deceptive; Sauza had managed to turn the table on an entire agrarian community. Yet even through these difficult times, the *agraristas* of El Medineño retained a calm certainty about them and remained hopeful.²⁷

On May 22, 1934 Eugenio Martínez wrote a letter to the Head of the Agrarian Department in Mexico City outlining their case. Martínez hinted at Sauza's friendship with Governor Allende, but also crafted a solid argument to support his assertion that Allende was biased in the matter. Devised and written as insurance to protect their interests the letter carefully documented all the steps that the *agraristas* had undertaken to ensure the rectification of the agro-census.²⁸ Following the rectification of the agro-census, the file of El Medineño was sent to the Agrarian Department for revision and a definitive sentence. The department thoroughly examined the data collected and came to the following conclusion, "that the contracts of peonage did not have any validity, in virtue that the signatories had to sign them under duress and under force and for further clarification, the penultimate paragraph of said contracts indicates that its duration is voluntary."²⁹ Moreover, the death of some individuals—who were originally part of the agro-census—was not enough of a motive to reduce the number of eligible ejidatarios at the petitioning settlement. The Agrarian Department concluded that 29 capacitated individuals met the requirements for the definitive resolution of the file, officially putting the community 9 people over the threshold. Therefore, Sauza's previous efforts to reduce the number of ejidatarios, only ruled 1 individual, who at the time was a minor, ineligible.³⁰

The passing year had not altered the bureaucratic avenues of post-revolutionary reform; the same strategies that had brought the *agraristas* of El Medineño justice were still sought out by its leadership. But the individuals who applied pressure from Tequila and those in the offices of Guadalajara and Mexico City appeared noticeably different. On May 6, 1935, José Martínez wrote his first telegram as President of El Medineño to President Lázaro Cárdenas asking for his intervention, "so that the land grant file of ejidos can be activated, which [we] have in negotiation since 1932."³¹ A day later, the President's newly appointed personal secretary Luis I. Rodríguez sent a correspondence to the Head of the Agrarian Department, attaching with it a copy of Martínez's telegram. Rodríguez also sent a response to El Medineño informing them that their request had been forwarded to the respective relating office.³² Not more than a week later, the General Secretary of the Agrarian Department, Engineer Efraín Gutiérrez, preemptively disclosed

to El Medineño that since April 9 their file, “has been definitively resolved, and the respective presidential decree will be executed shortly thereafter.”³³ On May 18, 1935 the *Diario Oficial* published the official Presidential decree awarding land to the twenty-nine *agraristas* of El Medineño.

Sauza’s pleas were taken into consideration only up until they had been founded upon reason, since a review of the agro-census had been made and only capacitated individuals were counted. The negative resolution of December 5, 1933, given by Governor Allende was rescinded and the agrarian community of El Medineño was conceded a total area of 277 hectares, “240 of which will be temporal land for the use of the 29 capacitated individuals and 37 hectares of grazing fields for communal use of the settlement that it benefits.”³⁴ Definitive possession meant another set of problems for the *agraristas*. Not more than two weeks had passed since the positive resolution, when the agrarian community of El Medineño complained that, “the Capitalist Eladio Sauza is the reason for the setbacks that the processing of the file suffers and because of that [...we] have not been given possession.”³⁵ In a last ditch effort, Sauza decided to exercise his rights and wrote to President Cárdenas asking for a hearing, “with the objective of treating matters that affect my interests and because you sir are the only authority in the present case who can concede me justice.”³⁶ Sauza’s troubles were just beginning. In the coming years he would continue to receive petitions for grants and amplifications of ejidos. Even though the *agraristas* had stricken a detrimental blow to the landed interests of Sauza, the industrialist would still not relinquish the land in question for quite some time. In a region that lives to the rhythm of the seasons, receiving land a couple of months too late could mean the difference between a bountiful or futile harvest.³⁷

Labor Pains in the Land of Agave

Land reform did not simply end when the land was redistributed; there were many subsequent options available to both parties. Those included, among other things, requests for ejido amplifications, protections, and sales. Following the loss of 277 hectares to the agrarian community of El Medineño, Sauza’s hacienda was faced with two pending petitions for land grants (San Antonio del Potrero and Los Camichines) and two petitions for amplification of ejidos

(Tequila and El Medineño). On October 28, 1932, Eladio Sauza's El Medineño had a total area of 5,323 hectares. By December 2, 1937, it had been reduced to 1,899 hectares.³⁸ These developments proved decisive for the landed interests of the industrialist. With four pending petitions, if Sauza was to retain any land of significant value, he had to make carefully calculated moves.

Shortly after hearing of the definitive land grant conferred to the ejido of El Medineño, on September 30, 1935, Sauza presented before the *Comisión Agraria Mixta* of the state of Jalisco a petition requesting the protection of 300 hectares of primary land on the property of El Medineño. The area formed a topographic unit comprised of the *potreros* of El Guarreño, La Joya, Mayorazgo Grande, San Pedro, Las Viboras, El Ocote, and El Algodón.³⁹ Sauza further stressed that in case of another reduction of the property, "the 300 hectares should be taken from the *potreros* La Joya and El Guarreño." The *Comisión Agraria Mixta* permitted the petition, which was registered and forwarded to the Agrarian Department in Mexico City. On April 14, 1936, the *Comisión Agraria Mixta* emitted its decision declaring the admissibility of the petition for the protection of 300 hectares of primary temporal land at El Medineño. The file was turned over to the Agrarian Department for its revision; definitive sentence was given on April 7, 1937. After reviewing previous studies and other facts obtained, the Department considered it necessary, in case other populations were to solicit amplification of ejidos, to only safeguard for Sauza 200 hectares of primary temporal land in the fields of El Mayorazgo Grande, Las Viboras, El Guarreño, Corral de El Casco, and the fraction of El Ocote.⁴⁰

What prompted Sauza to take such actions? The pending resolutions facing the property of El Medineño involved, in some way or another, these particular fields protected by the above decree. Given the recent experiences of the landowner and the rising number of petitions turned in by *agrарistas*, Sauza sought, once and for all, to safeguard the last remaining hectares of land that could be of use for his tequila business. The confrontations between Sauza and *agrарistas* just before the declaration of protection shed light into how the conflicts over land had started to affect the landowners tequila business. On March 29, 1937, Rosalio Guevara—administrator of the assets of Sauza—wrote to the Municipal President,

That today as a habit I ordered the agave harvesting of the potrero called El Algodón, property of Eladio Sauza, with the gentlemen Atilano Pacillas—member of the Agrarian Community of El Medineño—presenting himself before the jimadores, accompanied by other individuals, who suspended the harvest without presenting any written order nor saying who it emanated from. And since I have not yet obtained knowledge that the cited Agrarian Community has been given possession of the aforementioned potrero of El Algodón, it is for that very reason that I have ordered the harvesting of agaves.⁴¹

These actions were taken to destabilize the heart of Sauza's interests and to preserve the existing agaves. Possession of the primary materials needed to produce tequila opened up new possibilities for ejidatarios that allowed for an upsurge in clandestine tequila distillation.⁴² Guevara additionally made reference to a similar case at the *potrero* El Mayorazgo Grande where the harvesting of agaves was also detained. He noted that Máximo Sánchez accompanied by another two—the three being *agraristas* from El Medineño—arrived to suspended the harvesting of agaves, “giving as a pretext that they had an order to not harvest agaves in that place, because this property is one that they count on for the amplification, which the *agraristas* from El Medineño asked for, what I suppose up until this point has not been resolved [...]” The administrator of Sauza's interests bemoaned their lack of written orders and decried to the offices of the municipality, “I suppose that it is only about making sales of agave, as has been happening at *La Casa Cuervo*. For the time being, I plead you to try to arrange that they give us guarantees to not interrupt the labor of the Factories, which would cause us big damages.”⁴³ The *Comisión Agraria Mixta* heeded the call for action and diligently ordered the Commissioner of El Medineño to abstain from executing acts of possession or control of lands that have not yet been conceded for amplification.

The letters written by Guevara also hinted at the big prejudices Sauza's tequila business was suffering and subsequently asked for concrete guarantees from the Municipal President to continue harvesting agaves, “with the understanding that when the Supreme Government gives possession of those lands to whom it corresponds, I would not put up any resistance on my behalf.”⁴⁴ Two weeks later,

in a letter written to Eladio Sauza, the President of the Executive Agrarian Committee confirmed that they were about to be given possession of the amplification of lands they solicited, “we have agreed to write to you with the purpose of asking that you suspend the harvesting of agaves which exist in the said fields, in virtue that it does not benefit us.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

The story of El Medineño’s *agraristas* and Eladio Sauza offers a unique perspective into the dynamic and multilayered structure of Mexico’s post-revolutionary agrarian reform. It was in the spaces of contestation offered by the petitioning process that the crucial politics of agrarian reform played out. Although the legislative framework for land reform was provided from above, it remained mute without decisive pressure from local communities. The labor tribunal analyzed showcased the extent to which Sauza would go to retain his land and brought to the forefront how a local agrarian community was able to defend its right to land. Although land redistribution proved a destabilizing affair for the landed interests of the tequila industrialist, Sauza was able to retain ownership of the family distillery and shortly thereafter began to restructure the company.⁴⁶ The examples provided above were linked by Sauza’s refusal to give into conventional law. Overwhelmed by a revolution in land ownership that threatened to cripple his fledging tequila business, Sauza fought for his definition of justice while trying to dictate the terms of his surrender. And in the process put to test all that the Revolution had gained.

NOTES

¹ Knight, Alan. *The Mexican Revolution: Volume 2, Counter-revolution and Reconstruction*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 527.

² *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (hereafter cited as D.O.F.) May 18, 1935.

³ Phipps, Helen. “The Agrarian Phase of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Mar., 1924, p. 1-18), p. 10. See D.O.F. May 25, 1929 for an example of a petition for restitution of land submitted by the indigenous residents of Tequila in 1915.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 10-11.

⁵ Luna Zamora, Rogelio. *La historia del tequila de sus regiones y sus hombres* (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1991) p. 157. An *ejidatario*

refers to a recipient of a land reform grant, restitution, or amplification, who is entitled to individual or collective use of commonly assigned lands.

⁶ An *ejido* refers to a land grant given to individuals under the official agrarian reform; it is also used as a term for a landholding village endowed by the agrarian reform. See Rogelio Luna Zamora's *La historia del tequila de sus regiones y sus hombres* for information regarding the amount of land redistributed in the municipality of Tequila. Specifically pages 134-137 have detailed tables describing the petitioning communities involved, types of land, affected landowners and properties, and total amount of hectares granted.

⁷ See Christopher R. Boyer *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), Ann L. Craig *The First Agraristas: An Oral History of the Agrarian Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), John Gledhill *Casi Nada: A study of Agrarian Reform in the homeland of Cardenismo* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), and Timothy J. Henderson *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) for significant works that investigate the local impact of Agrarian Reform. For noteworthy examples on possible directions that agrarian studies should take, see Alan Knight's article "Land and Society in Revolutionary Mexico: The Destruction of the Great Haciendas" in *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1991) p. 73-104 and Emilio Kouri's article "Lo agrario y lo agrícola: reflexiones sobre el estudio de la historia rural posrevolucionaria" in *Boletín del Archivo General Agrario* (Mexico) (vol. 3, July 1998).

⁸ D.O.F May 18, 1935. In order to receive land from the reform an agrarian community followed a legal procedure composed of several important stages. The process began with a formal petition submitted by an agrarian community to the state governor; the petition specifies whether the land grant being requested is a dotation, restitution, or expansion. After meeting the initial land requirement, a census was conducted to register all eligible individuals and extensively survey each property. To be eligible for a dotation grant a community or village must have been in existence for a least six months prior to filing its petition, and at least 20 residents must be eligible to receive land.

⁹ Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter cited as AGN), Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 552 (723.2) 7 :9178. "Correspondence from Eugenio Martínez to the President of the Republic." March 23, 1933.

¹⁰ Archivo Histórico de Tequila (hereafter cited as AHT), Sección: *Justicia*, Serie: *Juzgado*, Año: 1933, Caja: 1, Exp: 21, Ficha: "Demanda Eladio Sauza contra Mozos del Medineño." March 21, 1933. See FS: 25-44 for copies of the labor contracts.

¹¹ Zamora, Stephen, et al. *Mexican Law*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 433

¹² *Ibid*, p. 432

¹³ Suarez-Potts, William J. "The Mexican Supreme Court and the *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, 1917-1924: The Judicialisation of Labour Relations after the Revolution." *Journal of Latin American Studies*. (Vol. 41, 2009, p. 723-755), p. 732-733. The author additionally notes that employers could not directly petition the federal executive branch for assistance against the state labor boards' decisions, many

of which concerned individual employee complaints and issues such as wrongful dismissal or work-related accidents.

¹⁴ AHT, “Demanda Eladio Sauza contra Mozos del Medineño”, FS. 55-83

¹⁵ Ibid, FS: 1

¹⁶ Before 1934 only day laborers were awarded grants of lands from the agrarian reform. The creation of the *Código Agrario* in March of 1934, acknowledged that peones acasillados from haciendas could be considered subjects with agrarian rights. Up until then, they were marginalized from the process of dotation and restitution.

¹⁷ AHT, “Demanda Eladio Sauza contra Mozos del Medineño”, FS: 2

¹⁸ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 552 (723.2) 7 :17689. “Correspondence from Eugenio Martínez to the President of the Republic.”

¹⁹ AHT, “Demanda Eladio Sauza contra Mozos del Medineño”, FS: 4

²⁰ Ibid, FS: 5

²¹ Ibid, FS: 7

²² AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 552 (723.2) 7 :16009. “Telegram from F. Javier Gaxiola to Eugenio Martínez/Correspondence from Gaxiola to National Agrarian Commission.” July 25, 1933.

²³ Ibid, 7. “Letter from Eugenio Martínez to the Head of the Agrarian Department.” May 22, 1934.

²⁴ Ibid, 7. “Excerpt from the Letter Felipe V. Guerrero sent to the Governor of the state.” November 25, 1933.

²⁵ Ibid, 7. “Letter from Eugenio Martínez to the Head of the Agrarian Department.” May 22, 1934.

²⁶ See *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* for an example about the forging of a revolutionary peasant ideology. In showcasing the conflicting loyalties and multiple identities that characterize the peasants of Michoacán and the period, Christopher Boyer argues that what became known as *campesino* identity in the 1930s is both the outgrowth of *agrarista* movements and institutionalization of land reform.

²⁷ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 552 (723.2) 7. “Letter from Eugenio Martínez to the Head of the Agrarian Department.” May 22, 1934.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ AHT, “Demanda Eladio Sauza contra Mozos del Medineño”, FS: 7

³⁰ D.O.F. May 18, 1935

³¹ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 404.1/2280 (F, 26) :35633

³² Ibid, F. 24-25 :27905

³³ Ibid, F. 23 :19145

³⁴ D.O.F. May 18, 1935

³⁵ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Ejidos, 404.1/2280 (F, 23) :39647

³⁶ Ibid, 111/914 :40326. “Telegram from Eladio Sauza to the President of the Republic.”

³⁷ See AHT, Sección: Presidencia, Serie: Ejidos, Año: 1921-1937, Caja: 11, Exp: 1, Ficha: Tequila Mpal Correspondencia, Number: 328, “Letter from Enrique Acosta to

the Head of the Agrarian Department in Mexico City,” for a specific example relating the importance of receiving land before the planting season.

³⁸ Luna Zamora (*La historia del tequila*), p. 134-137

³⁹ D.O.F. June 9, 1937. In 1934 the Agrarian Department was created, replacing the National Agrarian Commission. *Comisiones Agrarias Mixtas* were also established in every Mexican state to allow for the participation of local *agrарista* organizations.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ AHT, Sección: Presidencia, Serie: Ejidos, Año: 1937, Caja: 11, Exp: 1, Ficha: Tequila Mpal Correspondencia, *Letter from Rosalio Guevara to the Municipal President*. A *Jimador* is an agave harvester. For more information regarding how *jimadores* were contracted during these years see AHT, Serie: Agricultura, Año: 1935, Caja: 7, Exp: 10, FS: 83, *Correspondencia* and AHT Sección: Presidencia, Serie: Ejidos, Año: 1937, Caja: 11, Exp: 1, Tequila Cabecera Mpal Correspondencia. The *Jima* is the physical act of harvesting an agave plant using a specialized tool called the “coa”.

⁴² Luna Zamora (*La historia del tequila*) p. 157. The author claims that the number of clandestine distilleries, which existed in the 30s matched that of the registered distilleries, although their production output with substantially lower.

⁴³ AHT, Sección: Presidencia, Serie: Ejidos, Año: 1937, Caja: 11, Exp: 1, Ficha: Tequila Mpal Correspondencia, Number: 1662, “Letter from the President of the Comisión Agraria Mixta to the Commissioner of El Medineño.”

⁴⁴ Ibid, “Letter from Rosalio Guevara to Municipal President”

⁴⁵ Ibid, “Letter from Antonio Barajas to Eladio Sauza.”

⁴⁶ Luna Zamora (*La historia del tequila*), p. 154-156. Shortly after the expropriation of his hacienda, Eladio Sauza began to invest in other enterprises such as the urban real estate market of Guadalajara, founded that city’s first commercial radio stations—XED and XEDQ—started a trendy nightclub known as the Colonial Club, and two newspapers: *El Occidental* and *Avance*. The advent of World War II significantly altered the prospects of the tequila industry. Luna Zamora argues that these 5 years proved sufficient enough to eliminate the “indignation” caused by the expropriation of lands from the ex-hacendado industrialists.