

Topic: Working in the fields as a teenager.

Abstract: Every summer from the age of twelve on, I worked in the tomato fields with my father who was a labor contractor. In the fields, the lessons learned were timeless. I learned the responsibility of making and taking care of money. I also learned about my Mexican culture and folklore. I learned how to dance and have fun in any given condition. And I learned about racism which my father would make sure we had no part in as workers or as the discriminated.

Keywords: Racism, Mexican

Summers of Hell

My father was twelve years old when he moved to the United States. He came to “el norte” so that he could provide a successful future for himself and his family. Fifty-one years later, he can proudly say that he provided for my mother, three brothers and I with a house, food, and an Americanized “style” of living. Through this exposure, the traditional values and beliefs of the Mexican culture, pride in accomplishments of work, and responsibility has made me who I am today with aspirations and dreams that I can proudly say are rooted from my summers filled with sweat, dirt, and exasperation. Every summer was not filled with team sports, beaches, and vacations, but instead was carried out with what my mother would call “our little vacaciones.” My father, after being a laborer for twenty-five years, became a labor contractor for tomato-harvesting companies in the Central Valley and Imperial Valley. Our caravan, including my tio, mother, and two of my brothers, chugged our way in the smog contributing one-ton pick-ups loaded with luggage, 15 gallon water cans, welders, tool-boxes, and “small-town brownies” to El Centro, California near the border of Mexico every July; literally the day after school ended. Although groaning and maybe at some points of my younger life, crying, asking to stay with a relative or even by myself, the experiences and foundation for my

adulthood reflect my childhood memories of the sensory and emotional overload that was my childhood summers.

My father asked us to work, not as punishment or discipline, but to learn realities that cannot be learned in the class or at home. I started working in the fields at the tender age of twelve. Some might say this is exploitation of child labor, and it is un-ethical and unjust to have a twelve year old getting dirty and learning how to drive a tractor and how to grease bearings, and I might have agreed at the time I was being worked into “a man”, but exposure to a people, a culture, campesinos, and the unjust treatment of Anglo-growers and foremen along with the sweat and scars in a manifest of inner conviction that makes me me.

After a summer of work, my pay for the sorting of tomatoes, driving tractor, and translator of the field, would come in the form of a small stack of cash from my father with an ear to ear smile. What to do with this money was on my mind. Maybe a new Nintendo game console or slurpees for a year? But reality was that the next school year was eminent, so my mother would take me school shopping. In the mall loaded with merchandise and the masses exchanging greenbacks for the products, the tantalizing greed would set in. Conforming – fitting in with the kids at school with Nike sporting the Jordan logo, or the name brand sweatshirts and Guess jeans were the “in” thing. In not even near the time it took me to earn the money from my labor, the money was getting disbursed from my wallet. “Cuede tu dinero mijo, no necesitas comprar esas zapatos de cien dolares.” Take care of your money, you don’t need those one-hundred dollar shoes. These are the words that still strike truth today, and knowing what my Mexican heritage

ancestors had gone through, Americanizing a culture was the assimilation that contribution intended for outsiders.

In the fields, I learned Spanish. I learned Spanish that was not taught to me in my freshman high school classrooms. It was a Spanish that was truly unique to the field workers and their families filled with slang and foul language, but it was the language “del valle.” I got to make friends with many workers during our “breakas” and “lunches”. It was my adolescent curiosity along with their proud heritage, which made me aware of the oppression and struggle of a people only a generation away from mine. The same struggles my father faced when he moved to this country in which we take so much for granted. I wanted to practice Spanish, and they English. With our sometimes made up dialect and odd pronunciations, we learned each others language and shared laughs and hopes. I learned about the families they had left in Mexico and how they were working to take money back with them into Mexico to buy a rancho or send their children to good schools. I was young, and often times that would lead to the reminiscing of the aged Mexicanos. Working in a climate that produced one-hundred twenty degree weather, our shifts were from dusk till however many loads the cannery wanted us to pick that night. I was one of the few who even spoke English, so often times I was the translator for the growers, truckers, and workers. Mid-night barbeques were filled with stories “del ranchos in los sierras de Michoacan, Jalisco and Oaxaca.”

Growing up in California and with my father away for work for long periods of time in my youth, I was not really exposed to a true Mexican culture that originated in Mexico. My mother being from Santa Ana, she was my influential support as a little one. I heard the Spanish at family get-togethers, ate frijoles, and my parents listened to Los

Bukis, Tígeres del Norte, and Juan Gabriel, but this was only partial exposure and all around me at school was rock n roll, hamburgers, and milkshakes. The American culture shadowed the Latin American influence because it was what I was surrounded with. But working in the fields, I quickly learned what the word diversity was. I thought to myself that “these people are poor! Poor them, they drive around in clunkers and wear out dated clothes.” But learning the lives and stories of this “gente”, the pride and work ethic they had, my father quickly corrected me in assuming these notions. Some had come to work, buy a car, and take into Mexico with them where the car instantly gained appreciation and they would turn around and make a profit. Most had families they went back to where this green paper was like gold in the mid-twentieth century for them in Mexico. They were happy for the most part. Singing, dancing, smiling, and joking was the norm for everyday work in often time one-hundred degree weather. In dirt, dust, tomato sludge, and methane filled air, they bar-b-qued, blasted rancheras and cumbias, and shared stories of past years work. They made fun of each other, but no offense was taken. It was a culture that I was happy and glad to be a part of. Even as I went back to school and was besieged by Anglos, I would take pride in my heritage. I learned lots of folklore that I hadn’t learned at home like “La llorona” and “El Chupacabras”. And the narrators of these tales and stories were always so happy for them to be my first exposure to these legends. I was being converted into a Mexican whether I knew it or not. And I did not want to have to pick a side, so I gladly accepted both. Unlike some in the U.S, my experiences in the field let me to accept both cultures.

Observation came as an innate trait for me, and the attitudes toward the “gringos” from the Mexicanos, and Anglos’ view of the “wetbacks” were clear. I was caught

between the borderlands. I was associated by language with the growers and their mechanics, but also with the people that worked with my father year after year. I would listen to how my dad had to accommodate both cultures to earn trust and relationships. My father would never accept any racial slurs from any grower or foreman. He would correct them and enlighten them with the fact that if it were not for them, they would have no labor. Many a times, I was in the truck with my father while he and Mr. Grower would have a shouting match ending in cuss words and arms flying around, but in spite of the arguments and differences, the work had to get done. It was my father that taught me that no matter what race, what color, “todos son iguales por a dentro.” We are all the same on the inside. Oppression never stopped my father from striving to see his business grow by treating people with the up most respect that every one deserves. The symbiotic relationship between a business and its workers cycles to make all successful. My fathers’ philanthropic passions lead to a steadfast work force that traveled with the tomato harvest from El Centro and Brawley in the Imperial Valley to Firebaugh and Merced in the San Joaquin Valley. I quickly picked up the compassion and appreciation for all classes of workforce and all people.

My dad always told me that he took us to work in the fields so that we know what it is like to be a hard-worker. It was his way of showing us that being a man meant more than simply being born with the genetic Y chromosome. It meant we were the providers and protectors of the household-a cultural influence that subconsciously was imprinted in my head. My father is glad that I am in college. We are a direct reflection of my father and mother, and what we do and accomplish make them proud. They do not want us to struggle like they had to and come up from nothing. They worked hard to give us what

we had and in whom we are. My father is proud to be a Mexican-American. He is a citizen of the United States where his dreams came true and he is retired with my older brothers running the business he created. My fathers pride in work and his people show in the successful business that has been passed on. Ask any of the workers who work in tomato fields, and the all will tell you “Don Juan” is a respectable man who helped in making things right for the conditions in the field. No corners were ever cut-no expense too much. I am a whole mixture of many things, but mostly, a mixture of my mother and father - compassion for people, proud, hard-working, and respectable. These summers of inferno climates and depleted population concentrated with “trabajadores” are all in a labor of love making me, well, me. I will pass this onto my children one-day, and although there might not be the fields they can work in, they will not lose the lessons learned through my experiences as a laborer – compassion - genet de la raze.