Food Researched: Strawberry  
Focus of Research: Labor  
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Title

Labor in the Strawberry Industry: The Humans Behind the Harvest

Objective(s)

This research paper provides a brief look into the labor politics of the strawberry industry in the United States. This investigation includes accounts starting from as early as the 1930s and as recent as the year 2011. During these eight decades there have been, as expected, a number of shifts in the organization of this business. The industry had to adapt to both the direct and the indirect effects of technological advancement. The “who” and “how” of the labor systems changed with the increased mechanization of the cotton industry as well as farming in general. The “where” of American strawberries became concentrated in California as a result of the technological advances in nurseries and pesticide use. Despite all of these changes towards progress, some practices have stubbornly remained in the rotation, such as the disregard for the welfare of the part time laborers and the presence of child laborers.

Introduction

The strawberry is a widely popular “fruit” that is both consumed and commercially grown in the United States. It is considered to be a fruit in casual conversation, however the part of the plant that is recognized as the fruit is in fact the receptacle of the plant’s flower. The origins of the name “strawberry” are thought to have come from the straw that was once used as part of the mulch mixture surrounding the plant (Reich, 504). This berry is usually served fresh or in preserves because once frozen they lose some of their color and desired texture. Although, other fruits are praised for being plump size is not as important in strawberries because a larger berry just indicates that it holds more water than other berries (Reich, 505). Strawberries are valued for their freshness, but being fresh does not mean “natural” or “free of contaminants.” In fact, in a recently created list by the Environmental Working Group the strawberry ranked third in the “Dirty Dozen.” This organization is dedicated to keeping the public informed on the presence of pesticides on their fruits and vegetables. They update this list of the twelve worst “offenders” and recommend that consumers purchase the organic versions of those fruits and vegetables that are most contaminated by pesticides. Some strawberries were found to have as many as thirteen different types of pesticides on them ("Environmental Working Group"). Despite the many different “green” movements sweeping the nation pesticide residue is not a rare feature of American fresh produce. Another false popular impression is that since agriculture has been mechanized in this age of technology, none of the nation’s fruits and
vegetables is still picked by hand. As a matter of fact these goods, including strawberries, are still handpicked and there is a lot to learn about the laborers behind the harvest.

**Farming Innovation Shifts Where the Strawberries Are Located**

Agricultural technology, like the use of pesticides and fumigation, forever altered the strawberry industry. This technology has allowed California to become the leading producer of this well-loved berry. Americans can trace just around 80% of all their strawberries back to Californian soil (“The Salt: NPR's Food Blog”). This is an astonishing figure because right after the Dust Bowl, in the 1930s, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee and Missouri could claim the title of the “chief strawberry bed of the nation” (McCurry, and Fuller, 6). There was also a fairly widespread stretch of productive strawberry fields reaching northwards along the eastern seaboard. The industrialization process did not eradicate these various areas of strawberry cultivation; instead these regions just became comparatively less lucrative. California became such a high producer of strawberries because competitive growers noted that a period of cold weather helps these plants to yield maximum production and so were very well suited to Californian climate (“The Salt: NPR's Food Blog”).

The technical advancements in strawberry growth mean that the fruit we pick off a stem in a sun-filled field began its life in a petri dish. In this petri dish a small particle of a strawberry is cultivated. Then, as the organism grows, it sends out runners that are essentially clones of the mother plant. It is these clones that are then replanted into farmers’ fields. In both traditional and organic farming the nursery is fumigated with pesticides because growers do not want to implant a diseased plant that could contaminate the rest of their fragile crop. This is considered to be a point of controversy among organic consumers, but without this step, and the rest of this extensive process, the United States would not have the booming strawberry industry that we see now. (“The Salt: NPR's Food Blog”)

This concentration of the majority of profitable strawberry businesses in one state greatly impedes attempts to consume locally. The shift towards greater productivity has been a move away from eating local strawberries or simply not eating them if they are not available nearby. While this plant was never grown in all areas of the United States, in the 1930s there were strawberry fields present along the eastern seaboard, the southern row of states once described as the “strawberry bed of the nation,” and along the Western coastal states (Reich, 504). Now, there is a greater number of food miles allotted to most strawberries before its consumed, and a corresponding increase in the environmental impacts of transporting these goods.

**Who are the Strawberry Pickers?**

Picking strawberries has been a migrant workers’ job since the 1930s when machines and day labor replaced the tenant farmer system. This day labor was mainly migrant labor, with only 10% of strawberry workers local (McCurry, and Fuller, 11). The tenancy system faltered with the industrialization of another Southern crop: cotton. At this time period the strawberry and cotton industries had close ties because the Cotton South communities also housed many of the nation’s strawberry fields (McCurry, and Fuller, 5). As seen in the popular film and novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, the wave of industrialization that came at the end of this era, meant that tenant
families’ homes were razed or repossessed to open up farmland. With their homes gone, or at the very least their land seized from them, many American families lost their source of income. As this community lost their land holdings they also lost their permanent connection to the land. Their was a boom in technology and day labor on the larger plots of land and so farmers turned to the roads to pick cotton and strawberry as they were needed.

Present day strawberry laborers are often not only migrants, but illegal immigrants. The Bracero Program of 1942 encouraged a great influx of foreign migrant labor from Mexico. These hardworking individuals were highly sought after at the time due to an existing labor shortage (Wells, 60). Since this time period there has also been a significant presence of illegal farm laborers, and their high numbers are not likely to change despite praises of the E-Verify system. E-Verify is an online system for checking the legal status of workers by checking the validity of their Social Security number. The mandated use of this program would shift the responsibility of finding illegal workers from federally organized raids to individual farms ("E-Verify: Preserving Jobs for American Workers"). (See E-Verify section for more information)

Prejudice toward migrant workers is not a new phenomenon. Rather the same issues of animosity between different factions of the strawberry laborers could be seen as early as the 1930s. There were often empty outdoor areas where migrants would pitch tents or set up trailers while staying in a farm area. Then, when traveling in to work in the fields in the morning, both local and non-local workers would travel to the site by the truckload. There were a number of different subgroups within these strawberry pickers. Laborers were local, migrant, white, black, solo, a family group, one-croppers and all year migrants. Then of course there were newly dispossessed tenants versus the established migrants. The great diversity of this group, the short time that migrant laborers would remain in an area, and the large number of migrant workers moving through agricultural towns meant that disagreements between these groups was commonplace. (McCurry, and Fuller, 9)

**Tenant Farmer to Migrant and now - Back to Sharecropper?**

The organization of labor in the strawberry industry has gone through a number of changes, but have any great strides been made in empowering the laborers that work the land? If simply counting the number of individuals with the title of farmer, you may come up with a larger-than expected figure. The reason behind this false impression of a greater number of people owning the land is because of the resurgence of the widespread practice of sharecropping. These laborers are given a new title, and a slightly higher rank. However, there is not a corresponding, tangible pay raise to match the increased responsibility and financial risk. The company promises “to split the profits fifty-fifty,” however equipment, labor hires, and the uncertainty of a good crop all cut away at the “50%” that is allotted to this newly proclaimed farmer (Schlosser, 84). Under the veil of providing additional control and autonomy to laborers in the strawberry industry the managers of these large farms are in fact using these workers. They are placing on them the burden of all the variability that is inherent in agriculture. This systematic dodging of the pitfalls of the stresses of labor and immigration laws is especially pertinent considering recent legislation in E-verify.

**E-Verify**
There is talk of mandatory use of E-verify by all farmers, which could result in temporary shutdown of a high percentage of currently operating strawberry farms. Currently farm owners use this system on a volunteer basis (“E-Verify: Preserving Jobs for American Workers”). This type of halt in production could completely disrupt this segment of agriculture. As of June of 2011 President Obama said that he would endorse legislation for E-Verify as long as the system is “not riddled with errors” and “if it’s part of a comprehensive immigration policy overhaul” (Hotakinen). The political ecology view on this legislation is that if we make available these jobs being held by illegal immigrants than they will go to some of the 14 million unemployed Americans (“E-Verify: Preserving Jobs for American Workers”). However, this overlooks the fact that the E-verify system is flawed. It is common for laborers to be turned away or fired upon discovery that their Social Security number is not their own, and then a short time later they return with a new number and are able to begin working again. This cycle means that American workers are not filling these slots; instead the same illegal immigrants are able to return and be hired back as long as they obtain a new Social Security number (Hotakainen). In a hearing held February 10, 2011, the Judiciary House of Representatives discussed this very problem and said that if this program is to be effective there will need to be enforcement resources. These programs would work as checks on the system, so that workers are not being hired despite the fact that their photo identification does not match. Currently, these workers are being hired back because the farms need laborers to stay in business and the unemployed Americans are not coming forward to claim their vacated jobs. (“E-Verify: Preserving Jobs for American Workers”)

Children

Child Labor is an existing crisis in the strawberry industry. Usually the parents of these children are also farm laborers and the kids begin contributing to the family income starting at the age of 7 (Patel). In the 1930s, the families picking strawberries were seasonal migrants, moving with the crop along the eastern-seaboard of the United States. Along the way the family and children would house themselves in tents, sheds, barns, or on the rare occasion – housing provided by the farmer they worked for. During this era laborers knew that farmers were putting up families that would be most productive. This meant that having a greater numbers of available pickers, young or old, could decide whether or not a farmer hired a family for their fields. (McCurry, and Fuller, 9)

The presence of children in the workforce is a great detriment to their futures because of their lost opportunity for an education. With migrant children, there is also a loss in community and connection that create a support system to help children want to attend school. Also, when they have an unknown residence and only stay for short periods of time this diminishes any contact with a truancy system that would normally mandate their attendance. Instead of attending school children ages 7 and up can be found in the fields helping to supplement the family’s income. Whole families travel to the farms, with the older children looking after the younger ones who are not yet able to pick (McCurry, and Fuller, 13). These children are often
left to their own devices in a dangerous environment where they can be harmed by equipment, pesticides, exposure, or heat stroke (Patel).

Child workers have a place on commercial berry farms, both historically and at the present time. They are thought to be good for picking this crop because they are “quick of movement and their fingers are nimble…the youngsters can more easily stoop and reach the fruit” (McCurry, and Fuller, 14). Currently it is legal for these children to work on family farms, but not on large-scale commercial operations. Children laborers have the least protection in the area of agriculture. The children have been known to complain of back pains from the constant bending. They are also at risk of harming themselves with knives or by large farming equipment, not to mention the health concerns from exposure to pesticides. Pesticides can be especially detrimental to children because they are at a developmental stage and the scale of harm is greater for their smaller forms. It is the economic circumstances of these families that cause them to seek employment in the berry farms. They are often paid by the bucket-load, and so their children contribute whatever help they can, including working 10 or more hour days in unsafe working conditions. (Patel)

**Methyl Iodide – Gone at Last!**

A recent move in the right direction was reported on the United Farm Workers homepage: “Si Se Puede! Arysta pulls methyl iodide nationwide.” The manufacturer, Arysta, took this controversial pesticide off the market on February 14, 2012. The pesticide is used in strawberry farms by lacing the fields with it. First the methyl iodide is injected into the soil; next the area is covered with plastic sheeting. The pesticide wipes out every living thing from the soil and can easily disperse through air and water. This known carcinogen has been able to be used by farmers only as long as there is a sufficient buffer of land between their fields and areas for residences, schools, or hospitals. Precaution has always been taken in preventing contact between this pesticide and the public, but only this complete removal of methyl iodide can prevent the harm that it does to workers who come in contact with it on a daily basis. This choice by Arysta can be interpreted as an action of apolitical ecology because the firm is acting of its own volition, but following popular demand. The market pushed them to decrease, and finally stop their production of this pesticide, and they were also pressured by public outcry to remove it. ("United Farm Workers")

When looking out across a strawberry field the laborers can be seen wearing hats, kerchiefs, and gloves to protect against dust, sun, and pesticide (See Figure 1). While all of these possible harms have not been removed, the pulling of methyl iodide from use will greatly decrease one of the deadly harms faced by strawberry laborers (Hotakainen). (For more information on pesticide-use on strawberries see Ian Reeves’ research paper)
Appendix

Figure 1:

Image of the gear that pickers have to wear to battle exposure to harmful pesticides and the sun. Displays the amount of time workers are bent-backed while in the fields. (Image from Hotakainen)
Sources


Wells, Miriam. Strawberry Fields: Politics, Class, and Work in California Agriculture. Ithaca: