Generational Wanderers: Seasonal Migrant Labor Over Three Generations

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In the wake of the First World War, the United States found that manpower for agricultural work was limited, thus requiring the United States to outsource its seasonal labor to migrant farm workers.[1] Despite the physical hardship of moving from place to place, migrant families would travel extensively during harvest seasons, working all over the country, leaving their homes for months at a time.[2] For the family of Natividad "Nati" Castillo, migrating around the United States during the spring and summer months for financial security had become a generational pilgrimage. Over three generations, the Castillos followed the same migration pattern with little variation. Although Nati's migratory experience ends just before the Agricultural Workers Movement lead by Cesar Chavez, his oral history conceptualizes the necessity of agricultural labor for migrant families and demonstrates how impactful Chavez's movement was for agricultural farmworkers. Nati's family, like many others, traveled on a seasonal track that moved ever north, out of the dry southern states, to states with plentiful crops waiting to be harvested.[3]

In the early 20th century, the agricultural migrant workforce was culturally diverse, primarily consisting of Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Filipino immigrants.[4] In the central United States however, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans formed the largest group of migrant agricultural workers.[5] While Mexican immigrants were informally accepted as laborers, American citizens did not wholly accept them as their neighbors due to their imposing presence in large

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[1] Willard A. Heaps, *Wandering Workers: The Story of American Migrant Farmworkers and Their Problems* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 155.

[2] Ibid., 16.

[3] Ibid., 15.

[4] Camille Guerin-Gonzalez, *Mexican Workers & American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 15-19.

[5] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*, 58.

numbers.[6] For instance, in the 1920s alone, approximately 459,287 Mexicans migrated into the United States.[7] In *Grounds for Dreaming*, which discusses the migrant work of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, Lori A. Flores explains that by the end of the first world war, one-third of the Mexicans employed in the United States worked in an agricultural setting.[8] This migration was largely due to the Mexican Revolution (1910 -1920) and WWI (1912-1918) occurring simultaneously. Flores asserts that "the Mexican-origin population of the United States increased with the social and economic chaos of the Mexican Revolution, [with] more than one million Mexicans [migrating] to *el Norte*."[9] Among these migrants was Natividad "Palan" Castillo, Nati's paternal grandfather and namesake, who was sent to Texas along with his sisters in order to escape the war in Mexico.[10] It was this initial migratory shift, that set Nati's story in motion.

In Neil Foley's "Little Brown Man In Gringo Land," he explains that after the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, many Mexicans were drawn to the cotton economy of the American Southwest.[11] By 1930, the majority of Mexicans living in the United States resided in Texas.[12] This Mexican majority was not simply a result of agricultural immigration and locational proximity to Mexico, but was also a long term result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 which allowed for Mexican residents in the southern United States to become American citizens in the years following the Mexican-American war. When the Mexican revolution caused another

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[6] Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 20.

[7] Ibid., 20.

[8] Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 20.

[9] Ibid., 19.

[10] Natividad "Nati" Castillo, oral interview, May 5, 2023.

[11] Neil Foley, "Little Brown Man in Gringo Land: The 'Second Color Menace' in the Western South" in *The White Scourge*, (Los Angeles: California University Press, 1999), 42.

[12] Ibid., 42.

wave of migration in the years immediately following WWI, the influx of Mexican families into Texas was both significant and concerning to the white population.[13]

After marrying into a family of butchers, Palan began doing seasonal migratory work with his family along the Pacific Coast and the central United States throughout the 1940s and 1950s. During this time, traveling as a family unit was especially common amongst Mexican families.[14] In *Chasing the Harvest*, an anthology of first-hand accounts of migrant workers in California agriculture, editor Gabriel Thompson explains how often familial relationships tie into migratory work; "Workers learn about a job opening and tell their relatives, the word spreading quickly from uncle to aunt to cousin."[15] Similarly, Willard A. Heaps, who authored *Wandering Workers,* examined similar behavior amongst migrant workers within the United States 50 years prior. In what he calls the Central Stream, the mid-continental migration system consisting of the 14 innermost states, Heaps notes that it "might as well be termed 'the family stream,'' due to the large number of Mexican families in that migratory circuit.[16] In agricultural jobs, children could begin working at just 12 years old.[17] For the younger children who were not old enough to work, it was common for the mother or an older sibling to remain behind in the living quarters in order to care for them while the rest of the family worked in the fields.[18] By the time Nati's own family unit began traveling as a group, they were up to 10 family members. This number included not only his immediate family, but also aunts, uncles, and cousins. This system had proven to be beneficial for farm owners, who took advantage of the extra hands.[19]

During his interview, Nati recalled similar experiences when traveling with his family.

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[13] Foley, "Little Brown Man," 41.
[14] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*, 58.
[15] Gabriel Thompson, *Chasing the Harvest* (New York: Maple Press, 2017),143.
[16] Heap, *Wandering Workers*, 58.
[17] Thompson, *Chasing the Harvest*, 163.
[18] Ibid., 58-59.
[19] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*,

`"When I was 13, we worked under a contractor, and he would transport a bunch of people [at once]. Sometimes, my tia would drive us. Or, when my dad would drive, my mom would sit up front with the youngest and the rest of us would pile in the back."

Nati was born in Del Río, Texas, in January, 1943, during the second world war. Shortly after Nati's conception, Bernardo, Nati's father and first-generation Mexican-American, left home to serve in the United States Army from 1942 until the war's conclusion in 1945. During WWII, an estimated 400,000 Mexican-Americans served in the United States military.[20] Despite their participation, Mexican-Americans returned to the United States with continued treatment as second-class citizens, which resulted in a lack of post-war resources and limited job opportunities.[21] In the years following his return from the war, Bernardo was able to return to his parents meat butchering business, and later went into business for himself as a sheep shearer. Nati recalls how going to work with Bernardo and his brothers, Bernie and Ramiro, required working in the early hours of the morning. At the time, the Castillos had to work out of another butchers slaughterhouse and could only conduct their work on certain days of the week before the owner arrived to do his own duties.

"My dad was a butcher, but after he got out of the military, he worked as a sheep shearer. He continued butchering into the 1950s. [While we were still in school] he would wake us up at 3 or 4 in the morning, and we would head over to the slaughterhouse. Everyone had a job to do. [My father] would contract out a couple guys that would butcher certain animals, and we would do the others."

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[20] Lora Key, Learning From the War: Mexican Americans and Their Fight for Equality After World War II, The National WWII Museum: New Orleans.

[21] Ibid., Key.

However, when Del Río was impacted by a severe drought, Bernardo ultimately made the decision to give up being a butcher and sheep shearer and return to migratory work to support his growing family.

"In about 1955, Bernardo couldn't afford to stay in business for himself [as a sheep shearer]. This was because there was a long drought in Texas, and he couldn't find any livestock to buy or butcher. Prices began to skyrocket, and [Bernardo] couldn't afford it - he couldn't compete with the large meat packing companies. So, 1957 is when [my father] stopped doing butchering. That's how we ended up [back] in California and working [more often] in the fields. When we moved to San Jose, everybody worked. We picked prunes, even my mother. We worked there through September."

For one month a year, Nati's family would reside in Bakersfield harvesting potatoes, followed by another month in San Jose harvesting prunes. At the summer's conclusion, however, Nati's family would return to Del Río. While some migrant farmworkers moved almost constantly, others returned home between harvest seasons. As evidenced by Nati's family, this could result in family units traveling greater distances together. Heap elaborates by explaining that, "by the end of the [harvest] season, some of these interstate migrants return to [their southern home bases]."[22] Due to the spatial proximity of the Central Stream, movement within this stream often required migrant laborers to travel farther between locations.[23] For instance, multiple farms throughout the United States filled Nati's spring and summer months. In March of 1960-1962, Nati's family would travel to Carlsbad, New Mexico, to shear sheep. While migrant farm workers are typically associated with the harvesting of produce, other jobs, such as sheep shearing, were also allotted

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[22] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*, 15.
[23] Ibid., 174.

to migratory workers. After this work was completed, the Castillos would travel back home to Texas, before heading out again in June.

"Right after school got out, we would travel to Sudan, Texas, and harvest cotton. By this time, [Bernardo] had recruited four other friends to help him out because now my family was a family of 14, and my mom had to stay home with my 10 younger siblings. My two oldest siblings were already married, so my brother and I were oldest and the ones able to work."

After spending the early summer harvesting cotton in Sudan, Texas, the Castillos would make a mid-summer journey out to South Dakota. At summers end, they would return again to Del Río. Nati explained that this migration pattern was usually the same, traveling to the same farms and contracting with the same farmers each year. Migrants would recruit friends and family to work with them in the fields, and it was through this system, that farmers could rely on a steady flow of cheap migrant labor.[24] Migratory work is typically economically based, and depending on how much a family was willing to travel, the labor served as full time or supplementary employment. For the Castillos, who had businesses that they could close for the summer months, working on farms allowed for them to make, as Nati explained, "a lot of money [all] at once - a few hundred dollars."[25] According to Camille Guerin-Gonzales's, *Mexican Workers & American Dreams*, Mexican workers made more in agriculture than they would if they worked on a railroad job.[26] This amount was still not much, with the average hourly rate being $4.00 an hour.[27] Guerin-Gonzales goes on to explain that," Few workers were able to work year-round, even if they worked a variety of jobs and occupations and migrated in order to find work."[28] This low rate likely

[24] Thompson, *Chasing the Harvest,* 166-168; This source uses a first-hand account of how farm-working opportunities were passed by word of mouth.
[25] Natividad "Nati" Castillo, oral interview, May 5, 2023.
[26] Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers & American Dreams*, 57.
[27] Ibid., 57.
[28] Ibid., 57.

contributed to the desire for families to work together, because it would result in a larger pool of income.

In 1963, after 6 consecutive summers, Nati stopped participating in migrant work. Against Palan's advice, Nati's father, Bernardo, demanded that Nati drop out of high school so that he could be available to harvest crops. Nati initially heeded to his father's request. By this time, however, Nati had already met and married his wife, Zobeida. With their first child on the way, Nati decided to discontinue seasonal migrant work. Nati's experience existed in a time between larger movements. Nati's grandfather arrived too early to be deliberately recruited by the Bracero movement, and Nati and Bernardo worked too early to be impacted by Cesar Chavez's plight for agricultural workers rights. When Heaps book was completed in 1967, the approximated number of interstate migratory workers was 250,000, but he estimated that it was likely closer to 350,000.[29] This variance is largely due to the transient nature of the workers.[30] According to new information, *Migration that Works*, an advocacy organization for migrant workers, estimates that as of 2020 there are approximately 1.6 million migrant workers in the United States employed through temporary work visas, representing approximately 10% of all farmworkers in the country.[31] As Willard A. Heaps so eloquently puts, "Because of the labor of the migrant's hands, his endless steps climbing up and down ladders, his stooping and digging into the earth, his plucking and picking from vines and branches, there are fruits and vegetables on our tables this day." [32] Migrant labor continues to remain a staple in the framework of American agriculture, impacting both current and future generations.

[29] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*, 91.
[30] Ibid., 91.
[31] *Migration that Works*, "Migrant workers are at the front lines: they need protections," 25 March, 2020.
[32] Heaps, *Wandering Workers*, 16.