# THE FORGOTTEN WORKERS: MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD AMONG AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN THE SOUTHWEST UNITED STATES, 1930-1964

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In March 1932, an official from the Mexican Consulate visited a labor strike that was taking place in San Clemente, California. The official sought to understand the conditions that were aggravating the workforce to strike against farmers. While trying to act as a moderator between the primarily Mexican laborers and the Anglo farmers, the official found that his inability to speak English made it impossible to communicate with the farmers. The farmers, in turn, could not speak Spanish, so the negotiations reached a standstill. A plucky thirteen year-old girl, Jesusita (Jessie) Lopez, took note of the problem and stepped forward, translating for the consulate official, the strikers, and the farmers.[1] Unfortunately, little progress was made in the negotiations that day, but this rather insignificant episode illustrates the pivotal role played by Mexican American children in the larger labor process of the southwestern United States.

Because of racism, paternalism, historical ignorance, and the tendency of scholars to underestimate childhood as a vital component of the historical narrative, Mexican American children working in the agricultural industry are largely absent from the historical record. This essay addresses this problem by examining childhood among Mexican American agricultural workers as it existed in the years immediately preceding the emergence of both the Chicano Civil Rights movement and the United Farm Workers movement. Using records from the most important child labor reformist group in the United States, the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), it will show how Mexican American children were slighted during progressive-era reforms. Using oral testimonies and memoirs, it will examine and then re-construct life as it existed for these children from 1930 through 1964. Finally, it will analyze how family unity provided a sense of stability in a turbulent environment. In examining this topic, this essay seeks to reinstate the participation and recognize the challenges of Mexican American children involved in the labor history of the southwestern United States. This paper first details the work structure and working conditions that existed for Mexican American children involved in agricultural work. It then examines the challenges these children faced as they entered the American school system. Finally, it investigates the dynamics of family and reveals how the centrality of the family unit became a mechanism to buoy Mexican American children living and working in a harsh and unforgiving environment.

In the nineteenth-century United States, children primarily worked in agricultural, textile, and mining industries, as street vendors, or in similar vocations requiring nimble hands. As the Progressive Era advanced, many perceived child labor as an impediment to modernity. Progressives reasoned

[1] Gary Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker* (New York: Persea Books, 2000), 19-20.

that if future generations remained illiterate and impoverished, the ultimate fate of the nation was in question. Crusading organizations like the NCLC were critical in turning the spotlight on the hardship, suffering, and injustice inherent to child labor. The NCLC was ultimately successful in setting child labor standards that reverberated throughout the nation. Unfortunately, as historian Shelley Sallee points out, the push for modernity through the abolition of child labor had racial implications. "Whiteness" became a critical component of national identity and twentieth-century labor reform, including child labor reforms.[2] To elevate whites before they "sank" below minorities, it became imperative to get white children out of the mills and into schools. Progressive northern organizations such as the NCLC furthered this white supremacist ideology and fought to pass reforms for white children. The work of photographer Lewis Hine exemplifies this phenomenon. Hine, working for the NCLC, took photographic records of child laborers (agricultural, textile, etc.) to raise public consciousness of the evils associated with child labor. But he only managed to document white children, even as he ventured into Texas and California, two states with the largest Mexican American populations in the U.S.
The NCLC navigated the passage of some state and federal legislation (notably the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938) to ban most forms of child labor and promote compulsory education within the states, but waged an uphill battle to implement the reforms. Even as child labor reforms were being enacted across the country, many children continued to work under strenuous conditions. By 1954, the NCLC finally addressed and advocated in favor of rights for migrant farm workers. Their efforts culminated in 1964 with the passage of the Manpower Development and Training Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, and the Vocational Education Act. By that time, however, Cesar Chavez had begun a career of championing minority causes in the agricultural industry, and the Chicano civil rights movement would follow suit soon after, making the NCLC's efforts superfluous.

Despite the emergence of Chicano history as a discipline during the 1960s and '70s, the field has left holes in the process of re-constructing Mexican American participation in national development. Between 1848 and 1964, the dominant educational discourse in the United States emphasized assimilation. This meant that Mexican American culture, history, language, and religion lying outside the parameters of White Anglo-Saxon standards were often suppressed or discarded. The focus of Chicano studies since 1964 has emphasized the reintegration of this 'lost' culture into the Mexican American consciousness. But, as ethnic studies professors like C. Alejandra Elenes explain, in order to do so, Chicano Studies has insulated itself in a pedagogical bubble that embraces archaic notions of Chicano nationalism.[3] Elenes, points out that this nationalism is filtered through a male, heterosexual, working class, and politically active urban standard that

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[2] Shelley Sallee, *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

[3] C. Alejandra Elenes, "Reclaiming the Borderlands: Chicana/o Identity, Difference and Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 47 no. 3 (September 1997): 359 – 375.

alienates many in the Mexican American community. She believes that this opposition is a "consequence of racism, sexism, and homophobia" and asserts that Chicano history/studies should be more confrontational and should directly inject the Chicano narrative into U.S. history rather than isolate the Chicano experience or define the Chicano experience in opposition to the dominant Anglo narrative of the United States.[4] Children's contribution to the Mexican American experience is often overlooked because of paternalism in Chicano Studies, racism in historical studies on child labor, and paternalism in agricultural labor practices that allow children to be forgotten or dismissed as another facet of the larger experience. As Elenes points out with Feminist and LGBT studies, marginalized participation needs to be accounted for in minority studies to have a better understanding of the topic as a whole. Similarly, childhood is unique experience unto itself and deserves separate consideration. Mexican American childhood, particularly in a non-urban pre-Chicano Civil Rights Era, has fallen into this void, but scholars like Richard Valencia, Vicki Ruiz, and Gilbert Gonzalez have begun to uncover facets of the Chicano childhood experience. It must be noted, however, that Valencia, Ruiz, and Gonzalez focus primarily on educational issues. While many scholars like Ruiz make a point to incorporate first-hand testimonies, dialogue from the primary actors involved is still, disappointingly, sparse. Valencia, for example, examines the legal history shaping Chicano students and education, but he fails to incorporate firsthand accounts, turning children into pawns of a legal game that is played out in the American judicial system.[5]

The number of Mexican American children working in the agricultural industry of the southwestern U.S. during this period will likely never be known. An estimate given in 1942 by the NCLC projected the number of children in the industry to be around half a million; that number, however, is merely speculation.[6] Also, these numbers only reflect the participation of Anglo or African American children. Mexican American and Asian American children were rarely acknowledged in either government or NCLC studies.[7] Historian Neil Foley, looking at an earlier period, estimates that children represented one-third to one-half of the available workforce in agriculture for the state of Texas alone. Foley, however, is incorporating Mexicans, African Americans, and Anglos in that number.[8] No matter what

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[4] Ibid., 371.

[5] Richard R. Valencia, *Chicano Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

[6] Gertrude Folks Zimand, *Children Who Work on the Nation's Crops* (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1942).

[7] Despite their strong presence in the agricultural labor force, few of the sources acknowledged the distinctive presence of anyone outside the 'black' or 'white' binary. In 1925, for example, a study titled "Child Labor Among Cotton Growers of Texas" by Charles Gibbons only recorded categories of "white" and "negro" despite the fact that Texas has historically had one of the largest Mexican American populations in the United States. 1930's *Biennial Survey of Education* conducted by the U.S. Dept of the Interior records the same racial binary.

[8] Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 144.

speculation on the actual numbers might reveal, children of all races were a formidable presence in the agricultural industry, including Mexican American children.

Mexican American sharecroppers and day laborers were a prominent fixture within southwestern agricultural society moving into the 1930s and, as Foley notes, even began overshadowing many of their white and black counterparts in socio-economic representations.[9] Mexican American families in both rural and semi-urban areas were relegated to an agricultural life because of rampant poverty and an overabundance of agriculture.

The family dynamic was at the heart of work in the agricultural industry. Tenant farmers were appropriated land according to the size of their families. Landowners were hesitant to give land to tenants with new or small families because there were fewer hands to work the fields, leading to lower productivity. Landowners preferred employing Mexican American families not only because they were traditionally large but also because they typically included extended relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins.[10] Additionally, the family dynamic ensured that income was maximized as families worked as a single unit to generate income. Since farmers paid according to weight (cotton, for example) or by the box (oranges, strawberries, etc.), it was economically advantageous for as many hands as possible to participate in production. While adults performed the majority of the labor, every family member was involved in the process to some degree. Joe Lopez, for example, began working in the agricultural industry of Redlands, California at the age of ten. He recalled that children were responsible for procuring the fruit at the bottom of the tree because it was within their reach, while adults took care of the top of the trees.[11] Marie Vasquez recalls being involved with picking cotton in the San Joaquin Valley around the age of three: "At that age, my grandfather turned it into a game. I was given a small potato sack and told to see if I could fill it up. I picked for a while but usually fell asleep on top of the sack under a tree somewhere."[12]

While actual economic contributions of children working in the fields may never be known, it is safe to say that it was not enough to fully support the family. The unique paternalistic dynamic associated with agricultural work clouds the understanding of children's contributions. Children in agricultural settings were essentially attached to their family unit, and child laborers in the industry, unlike their millworking counterparts, were represented by the head of the family unit (typically a male figure), who was paid for the family's harvest collectively. Luis Garcia remembered that his father was paid for both he and his brother's work; his mother was given their wages to budget for clothing and shoes as well as more basic

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[9] Ibid., 36.

[10] Ibid., 144.

[11] Joe Lopez, interview by Ron Banderas, tape recording, CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, May 20, 1971.

[12] Marie Vasquez, interview with author, Los Angeles, December 11, 2008.

food items like rice beans and potatoes.[13] Male heads of household, however, frequently complained that the collective family income was never enough to provide sufficiently for their families. Migrant laborer Antonio Lopez lamented:

> Even with my large family working we did not have enough to eat or buy clothes. My wife, when the children didn't have clothes to wear, used to go around to the farms where the rancher had the feed for the cattle in sacks and she would make us shirts out of the sacks and dresses for the girls.[14]

Children working in agriculture generally performed a variety of fieldwork based on their circumstances. It was not uncommon for children in rural areas to work anywhere from nine to twelve hours per day during the harvesting season.[15] Children were typically in the fields before the sun rose and did not return until after sunset. Frances Esquibel recalls:

> For an early riser, such as I was, the sound of women somewhere rolling out tortillas at four o'clock in the morning meant that it was time to get up. By five, the day's early light would be just right for heading out towards the fields.[16]

Children of tenant farmers would perform assorted tasks during the course of the season including plowing, planting, transplanting, cultivating, weeding, and hoeing in addition to a plethora of odd jobs which differed by species of crop raised, type of farm, and system of farming. Hired children, or children of migrant workers, were usually only responsible for harvesting the crop. Picking prunes tends to be the simplest orchard work for children because it often involves merely shaking a tree and picking up the fallen fruit from the ground, but even this work could be taxing:

> One crop they [children] hated picking was prunes …for picking prunes they had to get on their knees. On the first day they would gather the fruit on the ground, placing it in a basket. After an hour in such a tortured position, their knees were killing them. Their necks hurt, too. Everyone inhaled dust and continually swatted away insects.[17]

Plums, nectarines, peaches, apples, and citrus fruits, however, involved more effort and often created more work than they should have for both children and adults. To elaborate, Joe Lopez remarked that after a fruit tree was seemingly completed, a "shiner" would inevitably remain on the tree:

> A shiner was always that one damn orange that would be left on the top of a

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[13] Luis Garcia, *Packed Up, Squeezed Out: Placentia Packinghouse Oral History Project*, Kathleen Frazee & Amanda Tewes ed. (CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, 2009).

[14] Sandra Weiner, *Small Hands, Big Hands: Seven Profiles of Chicano Migrant Workers and their Families* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 15.

[15] Foley, *White Scourge*, 144. Foley's assessment concerns central Texas specifically.

[16] Frances Esquibel Tywoniak and Mario T. García, *Migrant Daughter: Coming of Age as a Mexican American Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 59.

[17] Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz*, 36.

> tree after you finished a row...all the oranges had to be picked off the trees and I recall that if one of these things would be up there 'shining' at you, you had to go back and cut that orange.[18]

Also, carrying heavy cumbersome ladders is commonplace in agricultural work and became a challenge in itself for children. Frances Esquibel recalls that she developed a "good sense of balance" while both moving fourteen-foot ladders from one tree to the next and climbing up and down them with a bucket of fruit in one hand.[19]

Harvesting tomatoes, beets, cotton, and strawberries requires what is known as "stoop" labor, which is more intensive because laborers often bend or stoop over for extended periods of time, putting considerable stress on the back and knees. To add to this stress, the weight of boxes or bags increased as the harvest was collected, testing both the strength and endurance of children. During the period in question it was not uncommon for a small child to carry large sacks frequently exceeding his or her body weight. The 1929 U.S. Department of Labor publication, *Children in Agriculture*, noted that small children were often subjected to "bucking sacks," explaining that it was not uncommon for young children to haul 50 pound sacks of fruit on their back as they worked.[20] Gary Soto notes that "sometimes the sack weighed over a hundred pounds, a heavy load to lug down the rows."[21] Frances Esquibel recalled balancing a "two-hundred pound sack of cotton" on her shoulder.[22] While interviewing children for the *Fresno Bee*, journalist Ronald B. Taylor encountered 22-year-old Narciso, who tried to impress Taylor with recollections of his childhood strength:

> I could really get on top of a row of cotton, man, because I was a damn good picker. I was only 12 or 13 years old but I could pull! I could pull 900 pounds. The only other ones that could do that were 23 or 24 years old. Not even my own father, who was a strong man, could beat me. It was a skill when you weigh only 80 or 90 lbs to pull 120 pounds in the cotton sack.[23]

While it is unclear if Esquibel and Narciso's recollections of pulling hundreds of pounds are meant as an assessment of their daily harvest or merely an exaggeration, the stories illustrate the imbalance between children and the heavy loads they carried.

Children's work was often compounded by peripheral responsibilities in the workplace and at home. In addition to household chores, it was commonplace for children to act as translators for monolingual adults (English or Spanish). As the story of Jessie Lopez

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[18] Joe Lopez, interview by Ron Banderas, tape recording, CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, May 20, 1971.

[19] Esquibel Tywoniak and García, *Migrant Daughter*, 58.

[20] Nettie McGill, *Children in Agriculture* (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, 1929), Bureau Publication 187.

[21] Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz*, 25.

[22] Esquibel Tywoniak and García, *Migrant Daughter*, 58.

[23] Ronald B. Taylor, *Sweatshops in the Sun: Child Labor on the Farm* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 70.

demonstrates, children commonly translated in matters pertaining to the agricultural industry, household issues, and any number of official transactions. Historian Ernesto Galarza, for example, recalled acting as a translator for an inspector from the State Housing Commission when he came to visit their migrant camp outside Sacramento, California: "He [Simon Lubin of the State Housing Commission] sent an inspector out there who walked around the camp with me as his interpreter and I pointed out all the problems…so this made me a sort of a person in town. I had connections."[24] Galarza often felt empowered when conducting important business; and, after translating for the official from the Mexican Consulate, Jessie explained that she felt *useful* for the first time.[25] Galarza's simple act of translation for the housing inspector, however, served a more important function because it revealed the dangerous and deplorable living conditions of agricultural workers.

Poor nutrition, mediocre housing, inferior sanitation, and exposure to chemicals used in crop production were the primary causes of poor health in agricultural communities between 1930 and 1964. Health and safety issues in the agricultural industry have changed very little since the 1930s. Even today, agricultural workers often exhibit a state of health thought to exist only in the third world. Cholera, tuberculosis, and even leprosy remain prevalent among farm workers living in migrant camps. Migrant worker Elizabeth Loza Newby remembers that the only way her family was able to escape the epidemics of tuberculosis, influenza, measles, and other contagious diseases was to stay in their truck.[26] Limited access to health care often delayed treatment, and when medical care was obtained, patients were typically in an advanced stage of disease, well beyond treatment.[27] Today, groups like the Migrant Clinicians Network are helping to alleviate some of the health concerns associated with the migrant community, but the organization did not come into existence until 1984. Beforehand, there was very little assistance available to the migrant community. Antonio Lopez remembers being hit by a piece of mesquite and losing an eye while working on a cattle ranch. He noted that "we never got any help from the people where we were working; relatives helped us."[28]

Health and safety concerns were issues for children as well, even if they were not always aware of it at the time. The most common complaints involved harvesting of the crop. Cotton, for example, was grueling because the seedpod hardened as it matured, creating sharp edges that easily punctured young skin. Jessie Lopez recalled that her fingertips often bled from encounters with the cotton boils. Citrus trees, notably lemons, were challenging because of large thorns on the branches. Joe Lopez sought to alleviate this problem by wearing long sleeved shirts but found that this cure

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[24] Kay Mills, "Ernesto Galarza: Activist Historian," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1982, D3.

[25] Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz*, 19-20.

[26] Elizabeth Loza Newby, *A Migrant with Hope* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977), 17-30.

[27] Daniel Rothenberg, *With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 226. Based on the testimony of Pennsylvania physician Ed Zuroweste.

[28] Weiner, *Small Hands Big Hands*, 15.

became problematic when temperatures in Redlands, California soared.[29] Insects also made the harvest of crops tough; Nora Granger remembered that the grape vines in the San Joaquin Valley were infested with black widow spiders, turning the collection of grapes into an arduous matter.[30]

At times, the health and safety concerns were more dire, since pesticides were prevalent in the agricultural industry. Children were often exposed to a various pesticides and other hazardous chemicals. During the period in question dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) was used extensively as an insecticide throughout the U.S. Not until the early 1970s was it finally banned. According to Ronald Taylor, however, the most common pesticides posing a threat to human health were phosphate and carbamate based products, which resembled WWII nerve gases. Other commonly used pesticides include Malathion and Sevin, both Cholinesterase inhibitors. Cholinesterase, an enzyme that the body produces naturally, is essential to normalize certain functions within the human body. The body may rebuild cholinesterase if there is limited exposure to a cholinesterase inhibitor; however, California law recommends that workers not enter a field that has been sprayed with a Sevin or Malathion pesticide for at least three days.[31] This is problematic because children had to take the word of adults that it was all right to enter the fields. In many cases adults were not entirely sure if it was safe to enter. Complicating matters is Nora Granger and her brother David's assertion that they, along with other children, frequently picked fruits like strawberries right off of the plant, often dusting, but rarely washing, off the powder residue. Nora, David, their sister Alice, and their niece Marie Vasquez all vividly recounted that a 15-year-old cousin, Junior Navarette, was in charge of spraying the strawberry plants with a powder pesticide.[32] The boy finished spraying the plants, went home, and sometime later, Alice explained, complained of feeling ill, laid down, and died. Not long after this incident, she remembers, another 17-year-old cousin performed similar work, developed similar symptoms, but was rushed to the hospital and survived.

One of the most common ailments afflicting agricultural workers was exposure to heat. Heat exhaustion, hyperthermia, and heat stroke were common realities throughout the southwestern U.S., since temperatures frequently reached above 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Joe Lopez explained that workers, depending on the crop, typically had to "suit up" to protect themselves from insects, thorns, and other nuisances involved with harvesting. It was not uncommon for workers to have long sleeves, hats, pants, and gloves on while working. Although Lopez cured his lemon thorn problem with long sleeves, he created a new one with the added layers. Some workers like Lopez sought out an assortment of remedies to beat the heat. He said that he would bite into an onion, but he could not explain if, or even

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[29] Joe Lopez, interview by Ron Banderas, tape recording, CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, May 20, 1971.

[30] Nora Granger, interview with author, Los Angeles, November 15, 2008.

[31] Taylor, *Sweatshops in the Sun*, 37.

[32] David Granger, interview with author, Los Angeles, March 18, 2010. Alice Granger, interview with author, Los Angeles, February 20, 2010.

how, that method might have worked. Workers also fell victim to dehydration. Sometimes water was provided for workers, but in other cases workers had to provide it for themselves. Marie Vasquez described how her family brought their own drinking water: "We brought our own mason jars filled with water. If you forgot it, you were out of luck!"[33] Tomás Rivera's autobiographical novel paints a vivid portrait of how incendiary temperatures wreaked havoc on children working in agriculture:

> At four o'clock the youngest became ill. He was only nine years old, but since he was paid the same as a grown up he tried to keep up [working] with the rest. He sat down, and then he laid down. Terrified, the other children ran to where he lay and looked at him. It appeared that he had fainted and when they opened his eyelids they saw his eyes were rolled back. The next youngest child started crying but right away he was told to stop and help carry his brother home. It seemed he was having cramps all over his little body. He lifted him, and carried him by himself, and again, he began asking himself *why*?[34]

It was rare for farmers to provide water, but those that did often placed restrictions on their workers' consumption. In his book, Rivera tells the story of a farmer who limited the amount of water workers could drink from the cooler. The children were still thirsty, so they began taking it from the cattle's trough. The farmer was bothered that the children were stealing the water from his cattle. He intended to use his rifle to scare the children; instead, he shot and killed one of them.[35]

The outside world was not the only place dangers lurked; a series of concerns also existed for children inside of the migrant camps. Poor sanitation, exposure to dangerous household products, and even child predators were issues within the confines of labor camps. The threat of fire, for example, was a common problem inside migrant camps. Most camps consisted of canvas tents. However, some of the senior members of the camps actually lived inside more permanent cabins. Both kinds of dwellings utilized fire for an assortment of chores from cooking to washing clothes, and, because of the close quarters, children often played in close proximity to flames. Jessie Lopez recalled a playmate, Maria, who had been playing near the fire used to heat the water for laundry. A spark from the fire caught Maria's dress on fire, engulfing the young girl. She was rushed to the hospital, but died soon after.[36] Tomás Rivera disclosed another story, this one about children who were cooking eggs when the stove's kerosene tank exploded, killing all of them. Products like kerosene as well as other petroleum products were a common fixture in the camps not only for cooking and fuel lamps but also for curing lice and other bug infestations. Nora Granger explained that adults used kerosene to kill head lice on children and joked, "We were a bunch senseless kids, and can you imagine if we had gone near a candle? Our heads would have turned into a

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[33] Marie Vasquez, interview with author, Los Angeles, December 11, 2008.
[34] Tomás. Rivera, *…Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1987), 111.
[35] Rivera, *…Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra,* 86-87.
[36] Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz*, 11.

barbeque!"[37]

Danger took a more ominous tone when Alice Granger caught a man touching a young girl inappropriately. The two were lying on a cot inside a tent when Alice peered in. Alice, in her late teens at the time, surprised the man by demanding to know where the young girl's mother was. She then informed the girl's mother of the situation, and a large group of adults organized and went after the man who had left the camp soon after being confronted.

Understanding life in the fields and labor camps is an important component when considering the everyday lives of Mexican American children in the agricultural industry; it was, however, not the only part of the story. One of the most fundamental concerns for any child remains the classroom. All children working in agriculture had to face the challenge of mediocre and compromised schooling; for Mexican American children, this experience was compounded by an institutionalized prejudice that struck at the heart of their identity.

In February 1918, the NCLC released a report that made the correlation between children performing agricultural labor and problems with children's education. The pamphlet, *Children in Agriculture*, stated that "the loss of all but the barest and most intermittent sort of education is one of the most serious affects of Children's work in agriculture."[38] It noted that the average number of school days in an urban environment was 180, while the average number of school days in rural areas was 140. For every 100 children in city schools, 80 attended classes on a daily basis. In rural areas that number dropped to 68. The pamphlet observed that rural school districts often arranged the school schedule to accommodate the harvest season. It was not uncommon for states such as Oklahoma and Kentucky to allow schools to be closed from February through July. Schools that made agricultural accommodations typically started early in the morning (around 7AM) and continued until noon, so children could join their relatives in the fields. And it was not unusual for children to stop attending school altogether after a certain age out of economic necessity. While this practice slowed somewhat by 1930, it did not end entirely, particularly in rural areas where the enforcement of labor laws was more relaxed, if enforced at all. The Mexican American experience compounds this educational dilemma faced by children in agriculture.

Historian Gilbert Gonzalez has noted three types of families involved in the agricultural industry during the first half of the twentieth century. The first was the urban working-class family that did not relocate in order to work. Families in this category were usually involved in farming (typically sharecropping), industrial, or manufacturing aspects of agriculture. The second was the occasional migrant-class family that was semi-urban and largely permanent, but did migrate on occasion to find work. The third was the true migrant-class family, characterized by continuous movement based

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[37] Nora Granger, Interview by the author, Los Angeles, November 15, 2008.

[38] Ruth McIntire, *Children in Agriculture* (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1918).

on seasonal agriculture.[39] According to Gonzalez, only half of Mexican American children who were involved in the agricultural industry actually enrolled in school.[40] Children in the first category of agricultural labor rarely relocated for work, meaning that it was possible for them to attend school regularly and work after class. Children in the second category followed a similar pattern, often working after school and during the summer recess. Children in the third category, the so-called "true" migrant class, were rarely afforded the privilege of attending a single school, if they attended one at all. Continual movement did not allow children to have a stable learning environment. Also, compulsory schooling enforcement by officials was difficult, if not impossible, to regulate assuming that officials actually cared:

> Somebody came around to note us down to go to school, but we never did. I guess nobody was interested in our education, not our parents, and not the school people for sure. Now we are ignorant. Nobody cared then, but we care now. We suffer much from these things. Somebody did us wrong...We were stupid to let them but our parents needed us in the fields, so we never went to school. We never learned to read and write.[41]

Furthermore, until the mid-1950s, many Mexican American children were relegated to inferior, segregated schools where they were subjected to what historian Vicki Ruiz describes as a "sink or swim" approach to learning.[42] It must be noted, however, that there is no single linear set of guidelines that dictated segregation. Segregation of Mexican children varied from place to place and from child to child. To elaborate on these irregular segregation practices we can look to Pasadena, California; in this particular instance, a 1913 photograph of Madison Elementary school shows a mixed classroom with white, Latino, and black children present, yet another photograph taken one year later at Garfield Elementary shows only Latino children present.[43] The Granger children present an interesting case regarding segregation practices and classifications because they have markedly Anglo names. Their grandfather was one of many English immigrants to settle in New Mexico and marry into Mexican American families, but this Anglo background did not exclude them from attending segregated schools in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Since they only spoke Spanish and their mother had Indigenous ancestry, they were classified as Mexican and segregated. In northern New Mexico, where the Hispanic tradition dominated, there were instances of integrated, even bilingual education in the early period of statehood (ca. 1912); however, by the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the socio-

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[39] Gilbert Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation* (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1990), 94.

[40] Gonzalez, *Chicano Education*, 100.

[41] Douglas Foley, *From Peones to Politicos: Class and Ethnicity in a South Texas Town, 1900-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 38. Quote from an unnamed 90-year old Mexican American woman reflecting on her school experience as a "true" migrant worker.

[42] Vicki L. Ruiz, "South by Southwest: Mexican Americans and Segregated Schooling, 1900 - 1950" *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Desegregation (Winter, 2001), 23-27.

[43] Roberta Martinez, *Images of America: Latinos in Pasadena* (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 48.

economic climate shifted, and the othering of Mexicans by the dominant Anglo culture significantly changed the social climate, resulting in an increase in violations of both civil and constitutional rights with lynchings and repatriation of Mexican Americans.[44]

The sink or swim dynamic was, in essence, a crash course on 'Americanization' meant to cleanse the child and his or her family of a Mexican or Hispanic identity and force them to acculturate to Anglo standards. Ironically, this assimilation process rarely included social mixing or integration with Anglos until a legal intervention was taken via *Mendez v. Westminster* in 1946 and later *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. Beginning in the Progressive Era, Children were seen as vessels that could relay modern middle-class American values to their family. It was believed that children could alter their family's Mexican-ness and introduce them to these values to ensure a "modern" Anglo sensibility, believed to be indicative of national progress. Learning the English language was the first step in this assimilation process.

Spanish was the primary language for nearly every Mexican American family in the southwestern U.S. between 1930 and 1964. Following the Mexican-American War, the U.S. annexed northern Mexico, which then became the southwestern U.S. The Mexican population that resided in the appropriated area was in a precarious position thanks, in part, to their new status as subjugated non-English speakers. This language conundrum came to a climax during the Progressive Era, as 'foreign' languages were looked upon with both contempt and suspicion. Progressive era conservatives believed the nation would be more cohesive with a single language to unite all Americans under the nation state. As a captive audience, children entering the U.S. School system were especially vulnerable to this markedly assimilationist curriculum and indoctrination.

While most children like Jessie Lopez and Ernesto Galarza gained a sense of empowerment from being bilingual, Mexican American children were often introduced to the English language with a blunt force that left them deeply scarred. These children, particularly in rural areas, were forced to either communicate in English while in a classroom setting or face physical abuse at the hands of their instructors, notwithstanding the fact that most children were entirely unfamiliar with the language. This created a series of misunderstandings and, more often than not, terror for children. Jessie remembered an incident in which the school nurse was inspecting a line of children's mouths with a tongue depressor. When she got in the office the nurse put the tongue depressor down her throat and she threw up on the floor in front of the nurse. A nearby teacher grabbed Jessie, scolded her

[44] Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994). Cabeza de Baca's memoir, states that bilingual, integrated education existed in the northern part of New Mexico during the early statehood period (ca.1912) but she speaks from an elite perspective in a region that identified primarily as 'Spanish' to lay claim to white privilege; also, it should be noted that few testimonies help to substantiate this 'multicultural' assertion particularly as we enter the 1930s when the depression necessitated othering and resulted in violations like repatriation.

and demanded that she apologize. Jessie, however, had a limited understanding of English and had no idea what was happening:

> She couldn't understand what was being said, but she understood her own sense of vergüenza - the shame of vomiting with so many classmates looking on, some of them chuckling. Suddenly, the irate teacher stepped in and started to shake Jessie whose body wiggled like a rag doll. She shook Jessie, crying, "say you're sorry!"[45]

In some cases, brute physical punishment was perpetrated against young children to ensure that they communicated only in English. In his memoir, writer Victor Villaseñor recalls an incident with a rebellious classmate who defiantly refused to speak English, much to the chagrin of the teacher. He notes that the teacher grabbed the boy by the hair, shook him and slapped him across the face repeatedly until his face was bloody. She dragged him out of the classroom, turned to the rest of the class, and shouted out, "…the rest of you dirty little spics get into your classroom RIGHT NOW while I wash this little twirp's mouth out with soap."[46] Villaseñor reported that he had become so terrified of attending school that he developed a chronic bedwetting habit. Learning English, however, was not the only means of using educational curriculum to 'Americanize' Mexican children; Vocation related education also played a significant part in the acculturation of Mexican American children.

Mexican children were encouraged to take courses to develop skills in the service industry. Some historians have asserted that this segregation and emphasis on developing vocational skills was a means to secure a solid racialized workforce in the United States.[47] Mike Acosta conveyed that "…mostly our school was a vocational school. There weren't many college preparatory courses. They trained you for carpentry, painting, stuff like that."[48] He explained that he wanted to attend pharmacy school and even approached the dean of the school for advice but was rebuffed. The dean told him that it was a "waste of time" and that he should move into carpentry, instead. Nora Granger revealed that the only scholarship given to a student of Mexican descent in her high school class went to a girl, and it was to attend beauty school.

Mexican American girls, in particular, were encouraged to take courses that would further not only a career in the service industry; they were conditioned for a life of domesticity rather than higher education. A 1929 book by Pearl Idelia Ellis, *Americanization through Homemaking*, was written with Mexican girls specifically in mind and laid the groundwork for much of the educational dialogue they were subjected to. The book covers everything from sewing, food, household budgeting, home nursing, preschool

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[45] Soto, *Jessie Lopez de la Cruz*, 7.

[46] Victor Villaseñor, *Burro Genius: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 65.

[47] Gilbert Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 90-91.

[48] Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Mexican American Family Album* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 120.

childcare, motherhood, the location and interior decoration of houses, and the important role young Mexican women played in the Americanization of Mexican immigrants. It incorporates not only racist but sexist undertones suggesting that "Mexican girls need a great deal of training in service and table etiquette, as being a waitress may be their method of obtaining a livelihood."[49] Pedagogical discourse, particularly in the 1930s, was rampant with dialogue urging teachers to promote moving Mexican girls into the service industry. To elaborate, a pedagogical study from 1938, written by a California teacher, noted "...many of the girls will very likely find employment as house servants. They should be taught something about cleaning, table setting and serving."[50] Another study written in 1933 noted that Mexican girls have inherited a "remarkable aptness with a needle and we should strive to foster it in them."[51] In most cases, this "aptness" for sewing and cooking as well as the ability to manage a large household and budget was nothing remarkable as most of these girls already knew how to cook, sew, and budget based on their everyday experiences at home. They were at school to acquire academic stimulation and development, not vocational training. While in junior high school, Frances Esquibel recalls being thoroughly unchallenged by the domestic curriculum:

> I remember being assigned to a homemaking class, where we learned to make applesauce. This to me was a minor and trivial activity. I already knew about homemaking, cooking for a large family, about budgeting. Or more precisely, about making ends meet. You have to be resourceful to provide for a big family. My mother was my model in this respect. I didn't have to go to school to learn about this. And yet, here I was. Stirring a little pot, making a cup of applesauce. It was a waste of my time.[52]

On top of educational discrimination, Mexican girls faced pressures to change their perceived behavior, appearance, and demeanor. The same 1938 pedagogical study that noted Mexican girls were likely to find work as house servants also portrayed these girls as though they were prostitutes rather than schoolchildren, as they "frequently create[d] very bad impressions with gaudy, inappropriate clothes, brilliant nails, cheeks, and lips, a mass of very oily curls, cheap dangling earrings, and heavily scented perfume."[53] While girls were subjected to a litany of cultural expectations at school, boys faced similar expectations outside of the school environment.

In many cases, feelings of inadequacy, apprehensions over financial issues in the family, or a combination of both pushed children to drop out of school at an early age, particularly Mexican boys. Chaoi Vasquez, who spent

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[49] Pearl Idelia Ellis, *Americanization Through Homemaking* (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing, 1929), 35.

[50] Katherine Hollier Meguire, "Educating the Mexican Child in Elementary School." (Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1938), 117-118.

[51] Laura Lucille Lyon, "Investigation of the Program for the Adjustment of Mexican Girls to the High Schools of the San Fernando Valley" (Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1933), 8.

[52] Esquibel Tywoniak and García, *Migrant Daughter*, 75.

[53] Meguire, "Educating the Mexican Child," 122.

most of his childhood picking citrus fruit, explained that he had what was likely a learning disability and never advanced beyond the fourth grade:

> I coulda gone to High School, College, but I just had to quit. My father was told by the doctor that, 'for these kids, it's hard to learn.' 'They can learn but they need a tutor, special education.' At that time, they didn't have nothing like they have now...I wasn't retarded, I just needed extra help[54]

Boys were often expected to live up to more traditional Mexican expectations of masculinity and help provide for their families. Chaoi went on to explain that he had a cousin who was academically proficient and very much wanted to finish school but was eventually forced out because his father needed him to help support the family. Like Chaoi's cousin, Joe Lopez was forced to drop out of school in the eighth grade because of the economic pressures placed upon him. Leaving school was primarily tied to economic obligations surrounding the family; these burdens, however, did not necessarily mean demoralization because the psychological impact of close relations became an anchor in a very chaotic world.

As noted earlier, the family was the key component in the agricultural labor process. Families needed to maintain their unity to ensure survival; this cohesion meant that families often formed a tight knit network of strength and support for one another. Assorted historians, novelists, and anthropologists have noted the dynamics of strength and support associated with Latino and Mexican American families and exactly how *la familia*, both nuclear and extended, played a significant part in bridging alienation and carving out a social space that overrode isolation, adversity, and racism.

Isolation is a common motif throughout the history of Mexican Americans after 1848. Mexican Americans experienced social segregation as they were marginalized and branded as foreigners in a land where many had, ironically, resided for generations. This isolation was reinforced thanks to the migratory nature of agricultural work. Families were continually uprooted from growing season to growing season, making it difficult for children, and indeed the entire family, to establish permanent connections. Individuals faced isolation as well, as many worked separately harvesting crops for up to 10 hours a day. The only constant and permanent social connections were within the family.

Mexican American children were isolated from the mainstream not only in the fields and among society but in educational settings as well. Most of the individuals who worked as young children recall that they never felt that their circumstances were dire, nor that they were overwhelmed by seemingly insurmountable poverty. In fact, many were quite happy. Eddie Castro, for example, noted that despite segregation and taxing work, he remembers his childhood in Placentia, California being joyful:

> It was segregated, yes. And, you know, we didn't know any different about being segregated. We were happy as children, and everybody was real happy. We

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[54] Chaoi Vasquez, interview by Ron Banderas, tape recording, CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, June 2, 1971.

> didn't have the education that normally the white children got at the more advanced elementary schools…we didn't have the best books and we didn't have the best of everything…But everybody was really happy. Those are the things that I remember.[55]

This contentment is likely the result of close bonds formed among brothers, sisters, and cousins. Children created an insular community where they could find relief from marginalization, ensure one another's safety, and establish lifelong social bonds.

To explain how the family dynamic became the core element in the Mexican American child agricultural worker, basic dynamics need to be explored. First, children in the third, "true" migrant class were continually moving and never able to establish permanent ties with anyone not directly connected to the family. If they were given the opportunity to make friends in migrant camps or schools, it was not long before they had packed up and moved on to another harvest in some other part of the country, dissolving peripheral friendships almost as soon as they were formed. Children of the "true" migrant class rarely had any other option other than to form bonds with siblings and cousins who were always in close proximity. Marie Vasquez noted that there was "…a lot of turnover, so you made no real close friends outside of the family."[56]

Once integration was implemented in the school system, children were socially isolated through racism by both teachers and other students. Teachers often made disparaging remarks directed towards Mexican children and treated them with contempt. Anglo children carried similar sentiments and often bullied and harassed Mexican children. David Granger explained that there was a divide between Mexican children and Anglo children in school during the 1950s that was laced with tension. When Mexican children were bullied by Anglo children, they found safety in numbers thanks to their numerous relatives. Older children typically watched out for the safety and welfare of their younger or weaker brothers, sisters, and cousins.

Not only did family provide a sense of physical safety, it added a level of psychological empowerment as well. In both of their memoirs, writers Tomás Rivera and Victor Villaseñor note that they were mercilessly bullied and disparaged because of their Mexican heritage. Rivera recalls spending an afternoon hiding under a house because he was too ashamed and afraid to tell his parents that he had been suspended for fighting. He eventually came out of his hiding place after he remembered the warmth of his father's words and the strength he derived from his Mexican ancestry. Villaseñor overcame his anger by channeling the strength that his family brought him:

> I breathed as I looked at Moses yelling at me and I felt strong and free as when I went home and passed through the gates of our huge rancho grande and I

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[55] Eddie Castro, *Packed Up, Squeezed Out: Placentia Packinghouse Oral History Project*, Kathleen Frazee and Amanda Tewes, ed. (CSU Fullerton Center for Oral and Public History, 2009).

[56] Marie Vasquez, interview with author, Los Angeles, December 11, 2008.

> knew that nothing bad could ever happen to me again because I had *familia* ... and their blood pounded strong in my *corazón.* I was set now. I was free. I'd found my place, this warm secure place where I could look out on the world without fear. Never again would I get so scared that I couldn't hold my pee.[57]

*La familia* reminded Mexican American children that they had a sense of self-worth and a social buffer against marginalization in an environment that, at times, had seemingly turned against them in nearly every way.

The thirteen year old girl who stepped forward in March 1932 to translate between the official from the Mexican consulate and the Anglo farmers eventually married and became Jessie de la Cruz, one of the leaders of the United Farm Workers movement. By 1964, Jessie would be at the forefront of the movement, entertaining leaders like Cesar Chavez at her breakfast table as they discussed strategies for the strikes that would revolutionize the rights of agricultural laborers across the U.S. The agency that a teenaged Jessie presented shaped her life and gave her power as she moved ahead in life. Childhood among Mexican American agricultural laborers in the southwestern U.S. prior to the emergence of both the Chicano Civil Rights movement and the United Farm Workers movement was, by no means, easy. The social and political circumstances that Mexican American children in the agricultural industry were subject to could have debilitated even the most seasoned of adults. These children faced circumstances that compromised their identity, challenged their health and welfare, robbing them of their childhoods, and, finally, erased them from the landscape of American labor history, a history in which they played a fundamental role. Despite these setbacks, Mexican American children garnered strength from family support and utilized their experiences in the industry to forge ahead in their adult lives.

[57] Villaseñor, *Burro Genius*, 39.