

Rebecca Burse, Overview of Migrant Labor in the U.S., December 15, 1998

Since the United States has been in existence, and even before it was known as such, agriculture has been an important part of life. Before the mass production of crops and livestock, it was how families fed themselves, both literally and from the profits of their sales. In this paper, I will examine the transformation of the agricultural labor force, and the reasons for those changes, since colonial times in Adams County, PA in particular, as well as the Eastern United States.

Prior to the Civil War, the family and friends of farmers took care of most agricultural work. This was possible because the farmer was usually growing just enough crops to provide food for his family. If there happened to be any surplus, he would sell it for a profit or trade for other things that the family may need. When more help was needed, early settlers turned to indentured servants from England and later to slaves from Africa and the West Indies. The willingness to use Africans for labor solved the problem of labor supply and exempted white planters of the "necessity of having either to repress or to bargain with white laborers" (Hahamovitch, 4). After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, members of a farmer's community in Adams County, as well as in other areas of the country, who wanted to earn some extra money provided supplemental labor. These were mainly high school students, housewives, the self-employed, and even some retirees (Heppel, Spano, and Torres, 3), as well as large numbers of freed slaves who entered into sharecropping agreements (Hahamovitch, 32). The supply of a willing and able work force was not a great concern for farmers at this time because labor seemed to be plentiful and easy to come by whenever necessary, namely, at harvest time.

Although farmers in some areas began to worry about a decrease in the labor supply as early as the 1890s, it was not a widespread concern until the early 1900s. The earliest concerns were due to the increasing industrialization of the United States and subsequent migration of Americans from rural areas into the cities, where wages were higher and factory jobs were plentiful. The invention of the automobile also made it easier for people to travel to and from jobs away from the home. In Pennsylvania, people may have moved from the rural areas into newly developing cities such as Harrisburg or York. Even if they chose to remain in rural areas, new transportation options made it possible for them to work in more urban areas. While more people were moving into urban areas, there was still a demand for fresh produce, even though there were not as many people working in the agricultural industry. Farming was also becoming more industrialized, although this fact did not necessarily mean that there was less of a demand for labor (Griffith and Kissam, 20).

Some farmers along the East Coast were unable or unwilling to compete with wages in these urban areas and began looking to recruit seasonal labor from

other locations (Hahamovitch, 28). At this time, the seasonal labor was most often supplied by Southern African Americans to Virginia and New Jersey, French Canadians to Maine, Vermont and New York, and Italians to New Jersey (Hahamovitch, 28). Expansion by the United States into areas such as Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and parts of the Caribbean around the turn of the century gave other potential sources for temporary agricultural workers (Griffith and Kissam, 7).

Just before the United States became involved in the First World War, farmers began expressing concern that there was going to be a labor shortage due to the number of men who would possibly be deployed. When the United States did enter the war in 1917, southern planters insisted that black migration be stopped because they were afraid that they would not be able to meet increased federal demands for food production (Hahamovitch, 92). Trying to do this actually caused more people to migrate out of rural areas and into urban areas due to slave-like conditions and low wages (Hahamovitch, 91). When Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens the same year, they were able to join the armed forces, as well as move between agricultural work on the U.S. mainland and the sugar fields of the island (Griffith and Kissam, 10). It happened, quite conveniently for growers, that agricultural workers were needed on the mainland primarily in the spring and summer months, while work in the sugar fields took place mainly in the late fall and winter months. This meant that there was little or no competition among mainland and island farmers for Puerto Rican labor at this time. While there had already been a great number of people who had left rural areas for urban centers where factory jobs were plentiful, U.S. involvement in World War I created the need for more factory workers. Because of this, the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States lost nearly eight percent of its rural population and the East South region lost double that through migration to the cities between 1920 and 1930 (Griffith and Kissam, 12). At this time there were social and economic difficulties in Mexico and a wage differential between Mexico and the United States that made it favorable to immigrate to the U.S. (Gomez-Quinones, 94). While a significant number of Mexicans chose to do this, those who immigrated most often ended up in the Southwest and very rarely did any come to the East Coast at this time. Even though there was a great loss of population in the rural areas and therefore a decline in the agricultural labor force, the reality is that there were still plenty of people to do the labor. However, it meant that there was a possibility that wages would be higher than the farmers wanted to pay because there was not as great a surplus of labor. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, migrants from Florida, California, and Texas supplied the labor for many harvests throughout the northern United States, even though these regions required the greatest number of farm workers to begin with (Griffith and Kissam, 11). This may have been possible largely due to the fact that these areas of the country had larger migrant populations from other countries to begin with, namely Mexico and Central America.

It was not until the onset of the Second World War and subsequent labor importation programs by the federal government that East Coast farm labor became more diversified (Hahamovitch, 201). Before these programs were implemented, East Coast labor consisted of southern whites and blacks, and later Puerto Ricans. At the onset of WWII, farmers again worried that they would be faced with a significant decrease in the labor supply, as well as the possibility of paying higher wages, when it came time to harvest their crops. In response, the U.S. government allowed farmers to legally import labor from Mexico in 1941 (Griffith and Kissam, 14). These programs were more to the benefit of farmers geographically close to Mexico, such as Texas, California, and Arizona than to farmers in the eastern United States. In 1942, the recruitment of workers from Mexico came to be known as the Bracero and West Coast programs and these programs were implemented through the Farm Securities Administration. By 1943, four thousand Mexicans had been transported to harvests in Arizona and California (Hahamovitch, 169). Although the Bracero Program, which was in place from 1942 until 1964, was beneficial to the U.S. agricultural industry, it was purposely vague in regard to labor rights and essentially made it impossible for these laborers to organize (Gomez-Quinones, 164). After the end of World War II, the integration of Mexican workers into the U.S. work force was slowed due to the conversion of the United States to peacetime production (Gomez-Quinones, 165). In 1954, for example, "Operation Wetback" began as a campaign to remove all undocumented Mexican workers from the U.S. (Gomez-Quinones, 204). This was happening primarily due to ethnic conflict, mainly in areas of the Southwestern United States, as well as economic recession in the United States (Gomez-Quinones, 204). It seems as if the U.S. government was allowing immigration from Mexico when it was economically advantageous and going on sprees to deport undocumented Mexicans when U.S. unemployment was high. This must have sent an incredibly confusing message to the Mexican government and its citizens since the Bracero Program was in effect when Operation Wetback began.

On the East Coast, there were two programs that were implemented by the federal government to bring farm workers in from other countries. In 1942 the British West Indies Temporary Alien Labor Program began bringing people to work east of the Mississippi River from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Barbados, Dominica, St. Vincent, and St. Lucia (Griffith and Kissam, 14). As of 1995, the British West Indies Program was still in existence. For example, West Virginian farmers have been using Caribbean workers since the implementation of the program, although some off-shore workers have failed to return to their home islands at the end of the harvest (Heppel, Spano, and Torres, 4). As with Mexican workers, the British West Indians probably make contacts with employers through relatives who have come to the United States to work before, getting jobs that way, rather than the employers always going through government agencies to get these workers. The other program used German prisoners of war (POWs), beginning in 1943, to perform agricultural labor in

the American South and East, where the POW camps were located (Hahamovitch, 178). There were two such camps in Adams County. These laborers were paid, and the War Manpower Commission stated that they could not be used to depress already low harvest wages, and they were only to be used when no other labor was available (Hahamovitch, 178). Although between 41,000 and 122,000 German POWs were used to perform farm work from 1943 until 1945, the workers often went on strike and growers found that when they did work, their output was substantially less than any other group that the farmers had previously employed (Hahamovitch, 178).

David Griffith and Ed Kissam cite the period from 1940 to 1964 as a key "formative" period in the United States' agricultural labor supply, saying that connections with Mexico and Puerto Rico, along with other overseas labor sources, were expanding while the importance of the Anglo worker was decreasing (16). While foreign workers were becoming more prominent in U.S. agriculture, they were geographically concentrated in a few areas of the country. Mexican immigrants were found mainly in the Southwestern United States and Florida, while Puerto Rican workers were found mainly in Florida. It was in the 1950s that Mexicans began migrating east and north in the United States due to the mechanization of the cotton harvest in the Southwest (Griffith and Kissam, 17). While the mechanization of the cotton harvest may have displaced a great deal of cotton pickers, it was not necessarily the case that the demand for labor decreased as technology in perishable-crop agriculture advanced. Some of the technological advances created new labor tasks or actually increased demand for manual labor due to improved crop yields. Also, due to the demand for unbruised, high quality fruits and vegetables, farmers could not mechanize the harvest of some crops. It is sometimes the case that the use of manual labor is cheaper for farmers than using mechanized means of harvesting or other tasks (Griffith and Kissam, 20). Unfortunately, this was also the time when government recruitment of foreign workers was interspersed with deportation programs (Gomez-Quinones, 204). In the late 1960's and early '70's, high inflation, unemployment, and the threat of economic recession in the U.S. should the Vietnam War end all contributed to anti-Mexican sentiments among Americans, which were propagated by politicians and certain interest groups (Gomez-Quinones, 204). They placed the blame on immigrants for the country's economic problems.

In 1962, when Parker Coble began his work with seasonal farm workers in Adams County, Pennsylvania, he said, "there were mainly Southern blacks that came to the area to pick cherries, peaches, plums, pears, and apples. Shortly thereafter, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Haitians, and Mexicans came to the area" (Sept. 24). The first Mexican family came to Adams County in 1964 (Sept. 24). Haitians began flocking to the United States in the 1970s to performed agricultural work. While there are still small numbers of Haitian workers scattered along the East Coast and Adams County, they were substantially replaced by Mexican migrants in the 1980s (Heppel, Spano, and Torres, 8).

Between 1965 and 1992, Mexican workers had succeeded in gaining entrance into every significant region for perishable-crop production in the United States (Griffith and Kissam, 17) and this has not changed considerably in the past six years, especially in Adams County.

Today in Adams County, Mexicans perform the majority of manual agricultural labor. Although most of the families who had migrated in the past have settled out of the seasonal migratory stream, single males still work to a large degree on a seasonal basis. These changes in migration patterns have occurred for several different reasons. The most common reasons for people to emigrate to the U.S. from Mexico are lack of employment and low wages there (Gomez-Quinones, 91). There is currently a great deal of emphasis on the U.S.-Mexico border region and the techniques being employed to curtail illegal immigration into the United States from Mexico. "Operation Gatekeeper" was introduced in 1984 and included the erection of additional fencing, as well as an increase in the number of Border Patrol officers (Hess, Kelly, and Juraschek, 5). While there is currently high demand from growers for foreign labor and the U.S. is doing well economically, it seems as if the political popularity of exporting illegal immigrants is overshadowing those wants. Something that seems to be unique to Mexican immigrants, though, is that many of them plan on returning to Mexico to live at some point in time. Sometimes this means a year or two from now, while other times they plan to return to Mexico after they retire. I found this to be the case through several encounters with people that I met from Mexico. One young woman told me that she and her husband plan on returning to Mexico within the next few years, while one of the older gentlemen that I spoke with told me that he hopes to return to Mexico when he retires.

There are strong ties to family among Mexican people. This is often why they plan to return to Mexico. These strong family ties are also what bring individuals to the United States. The majority of people who came to the U.S. to work have had a relative or close family friend who has come here to work before. These people create employment contacts, as well as alleviate some of the anxiety of coming to a foreign country, especially when they do not speak the language. While farm labor does not pay a great deal of money, the wages here are more than individuals would make in Mexico. By saving their money, migrants are able to bring substantial amounts of savings with them when they go home, or those who live in the U.S. on a permanent basis may send money to family in Mexico on a regular basis. Money that is sent or brought home may be used to pay for schooling or for their own agricultural supplies, since most of these men are farmers in Mexico, as I learned from a migrant worker named Carlos.

The ethnic changes in the agricultural work force have been in a state of change since the turn of the century. These changes have stemmed from factors in the United States, such as economic prosperity and depression and involvement in foreign wars. But these changes have not been affected only by

factors in the United States. Changes in the migrant labor force have also been determined by the conditions in the home countries of agricultural workers. These areas include mainly Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Central America. When Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory, Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens, which positively affected the labor market here. Political and economic unrest in Mexico and Central America served as reasons for citizens there to come to the United States, for both economic gain and freedom from political conflict. It does not seem to me that there will be a significant decrease in the foreign labor force in the United States, even with the implementation of certain programs to keep Mexicans out, such as Operation Gatekeeper. There are more Mexicans working in the United States today than there ever were before, even though there have been several attempts over the years to stop immigration from Mexico.

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