

1. Farmworkers

I Earned That Name

EACH YEAR, over 1.3 million migrant farmworkers and their families labor in America's fields and orchards. They stoop among long rows of vegetables, filling buckets with produce under the stark heat of the summer sun and the bitter cold of late autumn. They climb ladders in orchards, piling fruit into sacks slung across their shoulders. They prune vines, tie plants, remove weeds, sort, pack, spray, clean, and irrigate. They travel across the nation, drifting from one field to another, crossing state lines and international borders. Farmworkers labor in every region of the country, wherever there are fields to be planted, tended, or harvested—in isolated rural communities, within the shadows of great cities, scattered among suburban tracts.

Few Americans know much about the world of farmworkers—their struggles, their travels, the key role they play in our lives. Farmworkers provide the hand labor necessary to produce and harvest the fruits and vegetables we eat, and in this sense, they are bound to every consumer in a direct, almost visceral manner. Every orange, peach, tomato, or watermelon we purchase was handpicked by a farmworker. Every pepper, apple, head of lettuce, or bunch of grapes—pulled from the earth, plucked from a bush, or picked from a tree—was harvested by a farm laborer, a member of the poorest and most disadvantaged class of American workers.

Each year, migrant farmworkers fan out across the nation, traveling the country in a collection of old cars, buses, vans, and trucks. They pass through thousands of communities, finding temporary homes in labor camps, trailers, or cheap motels, sometimes sleeping by the side of the road, under bridges, or in the fields and orchards where they work. Every year, the \$40 billion fruit-and-vegetable

industry spurs the mass movement of workers and their families. They arrive where they're needed, guided to the fields by intermediaries and informal networks, by necessity and, at times, desperation.

James "Shorty" Spencer Jr. ♦ *Angier, North Carolina*

It's Sunday afternoon at the height of the tobacco season. The sky is clear and the sun, though low in the sky, still shines brightly. The air is beginning to cool and there is a lazy, relaxed mood to the labor camp. Workers lounge around, talking, sitting under trees, watching television, sleeping, and drinking.

James "Shorty" Spencer has been up since the early morning. Instead of resting, he went to a nearby pond, returning to the camp with a bucketful of small, silvery fish. Spencer has just finished cleaning and scaling the fish, covering the finger-sized filets with aluminum foil. A dog passes by, snapping up the insides of the fish from the ground by Shorty's chair. There are flies everywhere.

Spencer is a small, dark, wiry man. He has a thin goatee and wears an oversize baseball cap. He gestures wildly while he talks, making picking motions with his hands, pausing dramatically, and grinning. Spencer ran away from home when he was ten years old. Since then, he has spent his whole life working in the fields, spending the winter months in Florida and traveling up the East Coast from early spring through late fall. Spencer moves from one crew to another, living almost exclusively in labor camps. He is now forty-one. Spencer has no mailing address and no set home.

I am a real migrant worker. I earned that name. I been knocked down with the bruise. I been kicked down with the bumps. I fell a lot. I rolled. Yes, I stumbled. I got my little nose scarred up. I got knocked in the head.

But, I didn't steal, see. For a workingman, the money you earn is good money. Just going out and pulling a gun sounds good. You sure can get a Cadillac in one walk. "Let's hit this store." *Boom, bam!* But, it ain't no good. Once you learn that pulling a gun ain't good, there's nothing for you to do but to get your hands in order. Fast hands—quick on pulling leaves, quick on picking oranges, quick on cutting cabbages, quick on picking bell peppers, fast on peaches, superfast when it comes to the potatoes. Just make those hands real slow when it come to stealing. Let your hands be quick on getting it right. Don't let them be quick on getting it wrong. That's all you got to pray to God for. He'll hear you.

You see, I got all the right licks and all the right moves because I am a real migrant worker. Around here, when I'm stripping tobacco, they call me the Bear. I stick my hand in the bush, and *whap*, I got all these leaves. Say you got twenty-seven stalks of tobacco on this bush. Twenty-seven stalks. A little bitty hand like this here won't get it all, will it? Can't hold it. Ain't no way. Well, I go down about eight here—*ktch, ktch*—eight here—*ktch, ktch*—eight here—*ktch, ktch*—get the three out the top; I got twenty-seven. With the move I show, you get all of 'em in one wipe. I got all these leaves in my hand and I am proud to step back from the stalk—because I am a real migrant worker.

Suppose I wasn't no migrant worker? I'd be tired. I'd be bushed out. I'd be blowing out my breath. With the move I showed you—when you hit it rushin'—your arms be full of tobacco. See what I'm saying?

I bet you not an exercise person you know could sand lug all day. Sand lugging is when you get the four leaves off the bottom of the tobacco plant. You don't touch no more leaves, just the four off the bottom. If you can do that there for eight or ten hours, then you's a good one.

Potatoes? If you can run to that truck every fifteen minutes with about seventy-five pounds of potatoes, then you's a good one. Cutting cabbages? If you can pick that cabbage up and sling it at that truck while the wagon's moving, I tell you, you's a good one. Orange picker? You reach out there and snatch your orange, grab the limb and shake it down to the ground, and fill that bag up in fifteen minutes, you's a good one. That's when you could name yourself a real migrant worker.

Now, Bo Jackson can't deal with no migrant worker. Could Bo Jackson crop tobacco in a-hundred-and-five-degree weather? Carl Lewis can't deal with no migrant worker. Tony Atlas? I look at that man. I sit down and analyze him. He got all the muscles in the world, but with all the muscles he got, he can't deal with no watermelon thrower. There's no way. I mean it ain't for him. Arnold Schwarzenegger? I'd like to see him run from six o'clock in the morning till seven o'clock at night with a bucket of potatoes on his back. He can't do it. There's no way. Now, he could probably pick me up with one hand, couldn't he? But he couldn't tote that many buckets of potatoes 'cause he ain't no migrant worker.

See, Jesus Christ work in mysterious ways and once he plant that seed in your head, then you is you. You got that thing. You can't be nobody else. That's why this name, migrant worker, stands tall.

Man, I've been in the migrant stream for thirty years. I done did it all, all kinds of work. I look straight at migrant work. It don't make no difference what situation we in. Sometimes, the sun is too hot—ooh, God is shootin' that heater down on there, ain't he? Well, the heat might beat you

about twelve noon, but then Jack Frost might come out there and hit you in the head with a bat at five. Now, Jack Frost don't play. I've picked potatoes when it's been so cold that I was scared my hand was gonna come off.

You've got to judge yourself. Do you need a pair of shoes this week? Better get you about four or five buckets of potatoes. Do you need something to keep Jack Frost from really knocking you down? Better give me ten, eleven more buckets. It's just a mind game that God's got on this earth. I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe in God, if you don't believe in Jesus, the season ain't friendly. Every night I go in there and lay down on my bed, I pray to God, "Don't let me forget to tell you thanks and tell my father to please remember me." I never forget them words.

If a man want to be a man, he better hurry up and make up his mind. If he wants to live as a migrant, he's got a bucket to carry. And in that bucket, he has his own soul. The bucket that he's totin' holds his soul and it's bad when Jesus Christ look at you and tell you to get out of his line. Good friend I hope you been to all the people in your life—you know that your mama like you, your daddy like you, your sister adore you, your granddaddy wouldn't give you nothin' but a helpin' hand—still, you got to have a honest heart.

You see, I'd rather be on one of these camps than in the city. In the city, you got to seem all cool, calm, and slick. The city is a sink machine, a big machine that just carries you straight down there to the bottom, nonstop. Sink you straight up under that ground. The city—that unendurable monster—don't care nothin' about my heart, your heart, or our neighbor's heart. Now, on a labor camp, you can find peace within you. I'm a honest man. I want a honest day's work.

I've seen a great lot of change in all these years. Now, the boss men will put up with a lot of stuff that boss men in those years would never put up with. You know, back in the time when I first started comin' on the season, people were killing people. Killin' 'em. Beating 'em up, knockin' their eyes out, stompin' down on 'em like a fly. Ooh, Lord, I been on camps where you couldn't even try to go to town. They hit you, kick you, stick dogs on you, scare you. I've seen some bad incidents and bad accidents, and stuff like that is really bad, let me tell you. It's pitiful, man, really pitiful. It creates a pressure on everything. Man, there's a lot of dead that people don't know nothin' about. If you go down and dig deep around these camps, you'll see you some souls still screaming for justice.

Man, I'm telling you the God's heaven truth. I have seen the time it didn't matter if your tongue was hanging out of your mouth, you better not go and get no water. You better not even play like you want some water, 'cause one of them henchmen gonna smack you—"Ain't nobody

tell you to come over here and get no water, nigger.” They kick you, beat you, knock your eyes out of your head.

Now, it’s no problem. Now, I can get some water. Now, if I get tired and don’t feel like I want to work no more, I go in. Now, you can talk to them and they talk to you with kindness. Now, if anything happen to you, all you gotta do is run to the labor board. Labor board is pleasing to a migrant worker. It helps you. Labor board helps to keep your working mentality. Is it better now? Super better.

You can tell a bad crewleader from a gem very quickly. A bad crewleader don’t have time for you. A bad crewleader insults you. He’ll lash out with dumbness. Some of them scare me with their idea of greediness. I wouldn’t want to be no crewleader. It’s dangerous. The crewleader has to think for all the people, see. He can’t have one mind, he got to have all the minds. A migrant worker is nine thousand times freer than a crewleader.

Me? I’m working just to keep living in life. I know that. That’s what migrant work is really about. I ain’t got to worry about no hotel or motel. I know people that won’t even stay in the missions. They’d rather sleep out in a field, or in a cock house, because they don’t like orders—“You do this. You do that. Pick up that shirt. Go there and eat.” They just don’t like it. They too independent.

I like moving around. I like traveling. I plan to keep doing this till the day I die. Right now, I have fun. Oh, man, there ain’t nothin’ to it. But, when a migrant worker get old—forty, forty-five, maybe fifty years old—he have to hope that God give him that little extra burst, you know? There gonna be a day come when I ain’t going to be able to really go get it, you know? That’s why I pray. I pray to Jesus Christ every night that I’ll just keep on livin’ and stay in that migrant stream.

A migrant worker ain’t got no staying place. He’ll move on. You know, if I found a sack of money, I still be trying to go to work today. I’d be doing something, not just standin’ still. It just ain’t me to sit around. Still, I can’t buy my own house. I ain’t got no car. I ain’t got no wife. I ain’t got no children. Wherever I go at, I go for that moment, then it’s gone. Just like with the sea.

Last night, I met a girl. If I had been a stable man with my own house and land, I could have took her and she would have never escaped my eyesight as long as God lived. But knowing I ain’t able to do those things, I got to show my love at that moment, by passing with my heart and letting go. I might see this little girl again before I go, but if I don’t, it’s not going to hurt me that bad, because it passes, like with the sea.

You know, everything come and go like that.

I hate to see the tobacco go.
I hate to see the potato go.
I love the moonlight.

There are currently over 1.8 million seasonal farmworkers in the United States, laborers whose employment shifts with the changing demands of planting, tending, and harvesting our nation's crops. These workers have over 3 million dependents, most of whom are children, bringing the nation's total population of seasonal farmworkers and their families to over 4.8 million. Migrant farmworkers are those seasonal farm laborers who travel from one place to another to earn a living in agriculture. There are 900,000 migrant farmworkers in the United States, who are accompanied by 300,000 children and 150,000 adult dependents, bringing the country's total population of migrant farmworkers and their families to over 1.3 million.

Migrant farmworkers have special needs related to their continual movement, dislocation, and status as outsiders in the communities where they work. When arriving in a new community, migrant workers must find temporary housing, either in labor camps provided by their employers or in short-term rental housing. If they don't have their own vehicles, migrants need to find ways of getting from one place to another, from their temporary homes to the fields, to stores, from one harvest to another. Since migrant farmworkers have limited resources and few contacts in the communities they pass through, they rely upon intermediaries and informal networks in order to survive. In this way, migrant workers are socially invisible; they play a crucial role in the local economies where they labor, yet their struggles are generally hidden from view.

Seasonal farmworkers are the poorest laborers in the United States, earning an average of \$7,500 each year. Farmworkers who migrate are poorer than settled seasonal laborers, with over half of all migrants earning less than \$5,000 per year. The most vulnerable migrant workers, such as those laboring for farm labor contractors in eastern states, earn average annual wages as low as \$3,500. Although migrant families commonly pool the wages of several workers, over two-third of our nation's migrant households and 80 percent of migrant children live below the poverty line.

Farmworkers' life expectancies are lower than that of most Americans and infant mortality among farmworker children is double the national average. Physicians treating farmworkers generally compare their health to that of residents of the developing world. Farm-

workers suffer from chronic infections, advanced untreated diseases, and numerous problems resulting from limited access to medical care. Farmwork is the second most dangerous job in the nation. Workplace accidents, many of which involve children, are common, and farm labor has the nation's highest incidence of workplace fatalities and disabling injuries.

Most farmworkers are men, although many women also labor in the fields. The average age of farmworkers is 31, with over half under 29. Nearly 90,000 farmworkers are between the ages of 14 and 17. Farmworker families often work together, with children laboring beside their parents and eventually becoming key contributors to the family's survival. Forty percent of migrant children work in the fields. Farmworker families often have difficulty balancing the economic demands of farm labor with the children's education. In general, farmworker children do poorly in school. Fifty percent of migrant children fall below national scholastic averages as early as the first grade and the majority never graduate high school.

Seasonal farm labor draws workers from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups. Currently, two out of every ten seasonal farmworkers were born in the United States, a diverse mix of Latinos, African Americans, whites, and Native Americans. The remaining 80 percent of the nation's farmworkers are immigrants, over 90 percent of whom are from Mexico. Other immigrants come from Central America, particularly Guatemala or El Salvador, or Caribbean nations such as Haiti or Jamaica. A small percentage of farmworkers are from Asian countries such as the Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam.

Farmworkers born in the United States generally hold more stable, higher-wage positions, while the less-appealing jobs are filled with recent immigrants, who are virtually all minorities. These immigrants generally have low levels of formal education and often speak little to no English. Nationally, about half of all farmworkers are undocumented. The percentage of farm laborers who lack working papers has been steadily increasing over the last decade.

Over the last thirty years, immigrant farmworkers have steadily displaced domestic laborers, even in regions such as the southeast that have long been dominated by African American crews. Our nation's farm laborers are increasingly young, male, Mexican-born immigrants.

Salvador Moreno ♦ *Clinton, North Carolina*

Salvador Moreno and Miguel Valenzuela sit inside a wooden cabin at a labor camp where they've lived for the last several months. It is

early evening and the sky is dark blue, still too early to see the stars. The camp is quiet except for the steady whine of insects and the soft sounds of norteño music from a neighboring cabin. Moreno and Valenzuela have just finished packing, loading duffel bags of clothes and plastic garbage bags filled with gifts into a used car Moreno bought with money he earned picking cucumbers. Although there are still several weeks left in the season, Moreno and Valenzuela plan to drive south in a few hours, returning home to Mexico.

Moreno has a wide face, a mustache, and dark circles under his eyes. He is slightly overweight and clenches his teeth when he smiles. Valenzuela is rail thin, with a long ponytail and stooped shoulders. He remains silent, listening, staring out through the open door at the cucumber fields on the other side of the road.

I arrived in the United States with dreams, illusions. These dreams came from others, friends in my hometown who returned from the United States with cars and trucks, telling stories about how good things are here—how in America you have lots of fun, travel, and earn plenty of money.

I first came here when I was fifteen. I was in school, but I wanted a better life. I thought, “I’m going to the United States, too. I’m going to go have myself a good time and return home with a nice truck.”

When you’re in Mexico, you can’t imagine what a sacrifice it is to come here. You suffer crossing the border. You suffer looking for work. You suffer while working, because the bosses mistreat you and you don’t understand why. You suffer trying to make something of yourself. When you first arrive, there are so many things you don’t understand. You’re alone. You can’t speak English. You have no papers, no transportation, and no one to help you. You arrive with no idea of what it takes to succeed. There’s nothing in your head but the desire to come to the United States to work.

There’s no security in farmwork. Most jobs are temporary and often you can only find work during the harvest. When the harvest ends, the work stops. As the harvest is ending, you start wondering, “Now, what will I do? How will I find another job? Where should I go?” There are always people telling you about some town where another harvest is about to start. Sometimes there’s someone who knows about a job in another state and they’ll invite you to travel with them. Still, if you go, you never know what you’ll be doing or what it will really be like. It makes you wonder, “Will there really be work there? Or, will I spend a month with no job and nowhere to live?” Many times you’re afraid it might be worse, so you just stay where you are.

The suffering makes a deep impression on you. You really think about life. You remember your friends who told you that the United States was like paradise. You wonder why they never spoke about the pain. Many Mexicans living here start drinking to feel better, so as not to think so much.

For me, what's most difficult is being away from my family. I think about my family all the time, so far away. I wonder how they are. Are they satisfied? Content? Happy? Are they sad because I'm not there with them? I think about how we live back home, with the whole family together—all fifteen of us. Then I think about my life in the United States, wandering around, on the other side of the border, alone. Whenever I receive a letter from home, I'm happy. They tell me they're fine and that I shouldn't worry, and then I feel better. I travel easier knowing my family is well. Sometimes, I think about the letters I write home to my mother and father, telling them everything's fine, even when I have no job and no money. Then I wonder if they tell me that they're well just so I won't worry.

Some people have good fortune and others bad. Not everyone is lucky. The truth is, I can't complain. I've achieved what I wanted. This is the third time I've come north. The first time, it was my dream to save money to buy a truck to take back to my town. I did it. The second time, it was my dream to earn enough money to build myself a house. I did that, too. This time, it's my dream to save money so I can get married.

This season went well, and now I'm leaving, going back to Mexico to see my family. When you go home, you return a bit like a hero. You feel more of a man. When you return, you're one of those people who've been to *el norte*. You know what it's all about. You've lived through it. I'm the oldest in my family and my brothers still haven't come north. I have one brother who's fourteen. He's seen me return home in my truck. He's seen me build my house and bring him presents. Now he writes me letters saying that next time he wants to come north with me. I give my brother advice, telling him it's better to stay in Mexico and study. I don't want him to suffer like me.

Still, it's difficult to tell someone back home the truth, to explain what life is really like here, and why they should stay in school. Until you see the United States, you feel anxious. It's satisfying to know what things are like here. I imagine this is how my brother feels. I've been through it. I've felt the desire to come north. Still, if I could do it all over again, I think it would have been better to keep studying, to choose a profession instead of coming here to suffer in the fields.

Will I return to the United States? Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure. Perhaps the happiness of seeing my family again will touch me so that I'll never be able to leave them again. Or, maybe I could still study, become a teacher or something. It's probably too late for me since I've started living the life of one who travels north. Maybe when I get married I'll find out that it's too hard to find a good job in Mexico. I might need money and not know what to do. Then, I might start thinking, "Well, I can always go back to the United States."

Seasonal farmworkers labor in virtually every region of the country. California, Florida, and Texas employ the largest number of seasonal farmworkers, followed by North Carolina, Washington, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Arizona, and Georgia. Migrant farmworkers generally work in southern states during the winter months and travel north from the spring through the early fall.

Farmworkers' travels are often described as involving three migrant streams—western, central, and eastern. Each of the streams begins in one of three base states—California, Texas, or Florida—where workers spend the winter. Migrants in the eastern stream leave Florida in late spring and follow the fruit and vegetable harvest through Georgia, the Carolinas, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York, continuing as far northeast as Maine and as far west as Michigan. In the central stream, migrants travel north out of Texas to different sites throughout the Midwest and West, working in Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Migrants in the western stream spend the winter months in southern and central California and then travel up through northern California, Oregon, and Washington State. Although the three-stream approach is widely used to describe farmworkers' travels, migratory patterns are rarely as smooth or directed as the term *stream* would imply and often involve circuitous twists and backtracking.

Because of the temporary nature of most jobs, farmworkers are almost always on the lookout for better opportunities. Rumors about different job possibilities circulate constantly through farmworker communities. Workers pass information back and forth and commonly ask their employers to hire family members and friends. Recent immigrants generally rely on social networks to help them find work, and some crews are composed entirely of extended families or immigrants from the same small cluster of Mexican towns. Currently, about 70 percent of the nation's farmworker population finds employment through personal contacts.

