

Fieldwork in the Sugar Beet Fields of Northern Colorado

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Abstract:

The employment of narrative in research is not a new methodology. In anthropology, personal narrative has been used as an important source of information for more than a century. What is new is the acceptance of narrative as a valid information source. In traditional anthropological and educational methodologies, data obtained through interviews was generally considered “massaged and manipulated” by the researcher (Yow 1994). Currently, in both anthropology and education, narratives have emerged as significant and powerful sources of information. According to Reissman (1993), researchers “do not have direct access to another’s experience. We deal with ambiguous representations of it – talk, text, interaction, and interpretation.” Narratives tell how a storyteller remembers, perceives, and interprets an event, thought, or feeling. In this way, narrative stories are an attempt to convey simply and seriously the most important experiences of an individual’s life (Lovov 1997). It is obvious that in using ethnography as an approach for obtaining data and an understanding of cultural meaning, the use of personal oral narratives is significant and authoritative.

This paper includes short narrative stories about working in the sugar beet fields of northern Colorado and the potato fields of southeastern Nebraska between the 1940s and the 1960s. The storytellers are four members of a second-generation immigrant family whose parents came to northern Colorado in search of better opportunities for their family. For them, field work was physically demanding; days were long and weeks even longer, with no days off from planting to harvest. Temperatures in the fields often soared past 100 degrees. Living conditions in the fields were despicable. Although work in the fields was so physically and emotionally demanding, remarkably, when each informant was asked what “sugar beet” and “field work” meant to them, answers were generally of a positive overtone. Marta explained, “Sugar beets is the meaning for my stomach. It’s like survival, like a ‘surviving kit.’ We depended on the sugar beets to survive.” To Marta and Abelardo, the sugar beet meant “survival,” but they also emphasized that work in the sugar beet fields provided a need for the family as well as the country. “It was useful and respectful work,” Maria explained. “I enjoyed migrant work because it taught me that life isn’t easy, you have to struggle, but it’s up to you.”

Introduction

One of the first things I remember as a child is being in the back seat of my dad’s bright, cherry-red 1955 DeSoto. Towering above the clusters of 35-foot elm trees, scattered randomly from north of Denver to 40 miles south of the northern Colorado border, were the “sugar beet chimneys”—tall and slender, vividly white, yet stained with soot at the tops, launching swollen clouds of sweet and pungent aromas into the deep blue skies that hover over the prairie fields of sugar beets, potatoes, corn, and hay, and seeping through the seams of the car’s exterior joints, permeating our eyes, nostrils, and our clothes and skin.

About 30 miles north of Denver, my brother and I reluctantly awaited the changing scenery, the diminished urban cacophony, and the pungent bouquets of the prevailing beet-sugar industry. I looked forward to this trek north to stay with my grandparents, who lived on 5th Street in Windsor, Colorado. I was 8 years old. My feet barely extended beyond the DeSoto’s broad vinyl seats; my

eyes were just level with the bottom edge of the back four-door roll-down windows. Between Berthoud and Milliken, my brother and I would look at each other, pinch our noses shut, and jump on the floor in hopes of avoiding the overpowering odors of the sugar beet stacks.

Thirty-five years later I returned to Windsor to conduct research after residing in Seattle, Washington, for 20 years. My last 7 years have been devoted to studying sugar beet agriculture, specifically the beet-sugar industry in northern Colorado. It was not the smoke chimneys or the sharp smells that brought me back for this enduring adventure, however; it was the people. What I remembered were the people working in the fields from dawn until dusk in striking heat and blowing dust. It was these memories that lured me back to Colorado. I wanted to hear their stories.

From 1996 until 2004 I have been privileged to hear the stories of the members of one immigrant family’s daily experiences in the sugar beet, potato, and onion

fields that are located around and between the towns of Fort Collins and Greeley, Colorado. Eight family members, children of Hinojos and Carmelita Montoya, first-generation immigrants from Mexico to Colorado in the early 1920s, told their stories about working in the fields. Their narratives are important to both the historical and cultural profile of this particular geographical area. They are an essential part of who we are today and who we will be tomorrow.

The Mexican-American people who live in the South Platte River Valley of Larimer and Weld counties in northeastern Colorado are relatively recent immigrants. It was not until 1900 that northern Colorado experienced an influx of Spanish-speaking peoples. Recruited by immigration agencies of the Great Western Sugar Company, the Spanish and Mexican individuals and their families came from southern Colorado, northern New Mexico, and Mexico to work in the sugar beet fields and the beet-sugar factories (Galarza, Gallegos, and Samora 1970).

In 1888 the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station developed a sugar beet culture which evolved into a "very successful" new prospect for Colorado agriculture (Steinel 1926). Continuous attempts were made to establish a beet-sugar industry along the eastern slope of Colorado. The first factory began operation in 1901 in Loveland, followed by a factory in Fort Collins in 1904, owned by the Great Western Sugar Company. Among the first Mexican-American workers in the South Platte River valley were Hinojos and Carmelita. These first-generation immigrants from northern Mexico arrived separately in the valley around 1920, seeking work and opportunities in the fields and factories around Fort Collins and Greeley. Hinojos and Carmelita met and were married in Fort Collins in 1933. Carmelita had been married in Fort Collins previously; however, her husband, Manuel, had died in a truck accident in Wyoming soon after they were married. They had two children, Erlinda and Paula. She later married Hinojos and together they had 8 children, including Marta (1942), Abelardo (1943), Maria (1949), and Pepe (1948), who share their experiences about working in the fields in the following narratives.

Narratives

Marta

"Me and Abelardo and Maria, we were the oldest and we were like poverty-stricken, so we had to make ends meet. In order for us to make ends meet, we had to go and work in the fields. We worked

tomatoes, beans, beets, and chilies. We also used to go to Nebraska for about a month to pick potatoes, and we would come home every weekend. We worked beans, beets, tomatoes, and chilies in the Fort Collins area. We would get up early in the morning. It was beautiful in the morning. It was nice and cool. We would start picking beans. Then it would start getting so hot in the daytime, and we had to go get water. We had to go to the bathroom in the cornfields. It was just miserable. It was so hot and we had to wear a big hat just to cover us from the sun. Maria, she used to fall asleep because she couldn't handle this work. She would pass out because it was too hot. My dad said, "Let her sleep." My father used to carry one hundred pound sacks of beans. Abelardo and Pepe couldn't do it. It was so hot, I could see Abelardo trying to carry big sacks of beans. Two dollars for a big sack of beans.

"We started eating lunch about one and then we would take about an hour off just to rest. Then we would continue working the whole day until about 4:00, and that is when everybody would get ready to come home. We would do that every day all three months of the summer. We would get up at 6:00 and friends would pick us up at 7. It was just miserable. I mean it is hard working in the fields. My brother Abelardo used to say, 'You know, Mom, we come home so tired.' We were so tired we wouldn't even eat or feel like eating. My mom would say, 'Eat now.' We can't, we're too tired.

"My father was a wage laborer. He would hear of field jobs through the word of mouth of his friends, 'Hinojos, let's go find a job. There's tomatoes. Let's go to Fort Lupton.' And my father used to get me up real early in the morning and his friends would pick us up. They got together maybe three or four people to work the tomatoes and the beans. It was these friends that got together to look for jobs in order for them to survive. There was a truck that used to pick us up, Ernesto's. We used to go with him to go pick beans. His children, Roberta, Cora, and Salazar, were with him. We would pay him about a dollar a day for gas, which at that time we didn't make much money and so he was nice enough to say, 'OK, one dollar a day, that's fine.'

"In late summer and early fall our family would work as contract laborers in Nebraska. We would leave on a Friday night to go to Nebraska. Eduardo Rodriguez would pick us up. It was a long way. We used to get there by noon or sometimes about 1:00 in the afternoon. Eduardo Rodriguez already had a

contract with the farmer and so he would take us to this house and he would say that the farmer is going to let you stay here while we work the fields.

“We lived in houses that the farmer had in the back of his house. They [the farmers] used to have these little houses for the migrant people. We never stayed in the farmer’s house. The house we stayed in was an old house. We had to take our own dishes, our blankets, pillows, frying pans and utensils. We had to stop at the store and get groceries. The house, it didn’t have no windows and it had an old wood stove that we used for cooking. We had no electricity so we had to light ourselves with lamps. The house was small. I think it had a kitchen, a front room and two bedrooms. It was a light yellow in color but the paint was peeling. The whole thing was coming down. When it rained, the rain would come through the holes. It was cold at night and we had to go to bed early because we were all tired and we had to get up early to work in the fields. But first, we had to get rid of all the spiders and sweep the house out. Then my dad would get a can of water and we would wash the dirt floors. There was no water in the house or indoor plumbing. They had those old fashioned pumps, a central pump outside. I remember that we would pump the water out and we would take our bucket and just clean around the floors where we were going to lie down. We slept on the floor. They had old fashioned toilets, outhouses, that’s what they had and we shared them with other field workers.

“I remember we were by a river. I could hear the water running at night. All night we used to hear this water flowing from the river. I asked the farmer if there was a river outside. He said there isn’t a river there. But I heard water every night. It was real weird.

“The thing that really astonished me was that there were shots in the wall. I still remember this. I don’t know why I remember that, but I think that they killed somebody there because there were these big holes in the wall.

“We got up at 6:00 in the morning and then we would go and pick potatoes. The rows were about one mile long. I can still picture that in my mind. I’d see these fields that were about a mile long, way on the other end. By noon we only went to the middle of the mile. We stopped to eat lunch and I’d say by about 4:00 we’d finish the row. It was an all day thing. Together, we would do about two rows of potatoes, maybe three in one day. Then we’d come home and I would cook fried potatoes. It was hard work.

“We had a big belt and we had to drag the sacks of potatoes with this belt around us. We couldn’t fill them up too much because they were too heavy. They were big potatoes, about six to eight inches long. We would fill up the sacks and leave them in the fields. The farmer would come with a truck and pick up all the potato sacks. That was an experience. We were just tired, every day. We would come home and get ready for the next day. In the mornings you couldn’t get up, you hurt so bad, you were just sore. We couldn’t even get up from bed.

“It was already getting towards September. It was already getting cold. You have to pick potatoes before the winter sets in. It was already cold in the mornings, so we’d get up and we’d be freezing before we’d start working so we had to take long shirts and put the T-shirts on the bottom and take our little jackets. Once you started working, your body warms up and then you just take off your jackets.

“Mr. Rodriguez used to take his wife there. They had their own place. The farmer had given him a better house than we had because they were the contractors. He used to feel sorry for us and so he and his wife would have us, me and my dad, Maria and Abelardo, just the oldest ones, over to eat. We had potatoes, chili and beans. That was a luxury that we used to look forward to.

“We worked side by side with the Rodriguezes but there were other groups of workers there also. We didn’t know the other migrant workers. We just said, ‘Good morning,’ and that was it. People were private more. They would work but there was no communication. Most of the people were from Mexico and Texas. They were whole families with children. There were kids in the fields that would take care of their little brothers and sisters while their parents worked in the fields. They didn’t have no baby sitters. They were poor. They would help their parents work in the fields. They would also take the elderly people who would take care of the children. They would be under a tree taking care of the kids.

“In the fields we wouldn’t go to church. We worked instead. My dad would say, ‘We can’t go to church, and there’s nobody to take us there. God will forgive us.’ The farmer would not provide priests or anything like that for us. So, a priest would never come down (to the fields). They were always too busy like taking care of souls, hearing confessions, visiting the sick and going to the hospitals. At that time the priests would not leave their churches.

“And so the last day came and I was so happy to finally come home. My mother insisted that we go home so the kids can go to school” (1998).

Abelardo

“I remember my father in the fields. I can tell you, nobody ever topped beets like my dad. He was the best that there was. He tried to teach me how to do this, but I was never very good at it. I remember one day that we were doing that (topping and thinning); it was 100 degrees in town and we were out in the field, and it was about 104 degrees. I just couldn't go any further. I was sweating so hard that my face was red.

“The one thing that I loved to do was to pick beans because we used to pack those sacks full of beans and then you'd have to carry them over to where they were weighed and then they'd pay you for them. What I did, I tried to be strong and carry those beans because we used to get paid four bucks for that sack of beans. I loved it. It also proved that I was macho and I was strong and I could do this sort of thing. That was my favorite field work, the beans. Cherries, I picked. I didn't like cherries much because I couldn't make much money out of it. Beets with my dad. Picked apples. Pickles, we went to Longmont to do the pickles. Didn't like them because they were real thorny unless you had gloves on. Tomatoes, picked tomatoes. Went to Nebraska in late September, October and November to pick potatoes. That was OK, but my dad had to take us out of school. That part I didn't like. Went to Greeley to pick onions. I hated that part because what you do is get the stems of the onions, and you cut the stems off with a little sharp knife. But in the process you'd also cut your fingers and all that onion would get into your cut fingers, and boy did that hurt. Then your hands would smell like onions all day long. One time I worked with my dad on hay. We stacked some hay out west of town. But after that, I wanted to get out of the fields.

“I don't remember how old I was when I started working in the fields. We might have been 8, 9, or 10. It was expected of the boy, the oldest boy, to work with his dad in the fields, and that was me. Marta, the oldest sister, was also working in the fields because she was older than I was. My other sisters weren't asked as much to work in the fields, because they were younger.

“The field work we did was wage labor, it wasn't contract. They paid you so much to do that per

hour. My dad would look for work everyday. You'd hear somebody say, 'Hey, you know that farmer over there wants to do over here?' Other people in town that had come up from Texas would contract people working for them. They would come and they would drive big trucks. One of the big names was Cordona. They would have these big Texan trucks that would pick up people from Fort Collins and drive them out to the fields. They had a contract with the farmers to bring so many people into the area to do the crops. We would have to pay them for transporting us. It was found out later that was costing us a lot of money so there were other people that went out to the fields with us that had a pickup truck. They'd say, 'Hey, we're going to do our own transporting. Would you like to come with us?' So we hooked a ride with them.

“We always came home each day from the fields except when we worked in Nebraska. It was contracted by somebody else that we went with. The farmer had houses on his property that we stayed in. Of course, we would have to clean the whole thing out. It was rat infested. We brought in our own towels, our own mattresses and made our own food there. I think we had a wood stove and there might have been a refrigerator. There was no sink. There might have been a pump out there where you had to pump water. I do remember that. There was no furniture. I remember you'd have to go out and get some bricks or something to set the mattresses on. It was bare essentials, just survival, was what it was. We weren't really looking to live high on the hog either. It was just something to pass the nights away.

“They harvested with the big tractors. They'd come by with a plow. They plowed the potatoes up off the field. We'd go back behind that and we'd get the potatoes, the stems, you'd have a gunny sack on, between your legs, on this big belt that you tied around you; you'd bend over and you'd grab a bunch of potatoes and you'd just shake them, and the potatoes would fall off the stems. Then you would go and do the same thing, and then you would just start picking those that fell down. You were on your back all day long. When the sack got heavy enough, you lifted them off the hooks, set that sack to the side, put another sack on and continued. There was a truck right behind with other guys in it, and they would pick up these sacks and put them on the truck.

“We also were in the harvesting of onions. Onions the same way. You'd have your sack and

you'd get the onions, only this time you wouldn't shake, the stem wouldn't break, you'd cut them. You'd have a real sharp knife. You'd always have to be careful how you cut those things, because you were always in a hurry. Cut those things off, and the onions would fall in the sack. If you weren't careful, you'd cut yourself. Sometimes we were paid by the hour, but I think mostly by the sack because we were always trying to hurry up to maintain a certain level. I think they always paid you by the weight of the sack.

"We were in the harvesting of tomatoes in Longmont for the Japanese farmers out there, Masuma's [Matsuma's]. They owned a lot of acres out there that we worked for. Tomatoes and pickles, cucumbers. Of course, you carried your basket with you. Tomatoes you put in a basket; you'd pick and you'd put them into this basket. I don't remember what happened after that. I think they just came by, like the pickles and put them on a tractor and carried them away. The pickles, they were in sacks. We'd pick them and put them in sacks, put them to the side, and someone would come by and pick them up.

"Thinning is what we did with sugar beets. In other words, there would be rows of stems, vegetation, around the rows, and you'd have to go by and thin them. By thinning, you'd have this hole that is about six inches wide, and you would leave one stem standing up and you would cut everything in between that stem for a foot and leave the other stem up. You'd do the same thing and continue down the row. Those rows are, I can't imagine how far they were down; that's what I was saying, my dad was so good on two of those rows. The thing is you'd always have to leave one stem there, you can't leave two. That's why you call it thinning, because if you leave one stem it will grow a lot faster and produce a lot more fruit. If you leave two, they will be two fighting each other. So he'd always come back and see what I was doing. He'd say, 'Take this, take this one.' Hard to learn. I don't remember how often we had to thin beets during the season. I guess it was just second nature. When one job finished we went into something else. I don't know the seasons. I don't know what came first.

"All I remember is I loved picking beans. I just couldn't wait for that harvest to begin. That was a fun time for me. We picked beans in the Fort Collins area, where Harmony is. Remember the school that is over there, Harmony School? This area all used to be bean fields. And that little school used to be there.

They tore down some barns down to the west of that building I used to stand by working the bean fields.

We picked cherries out towards Wellington at Terry Shores. My mom used to send us there, just to keep us out of trouble. She'd say, 'I don't care if you make a lot of money, it will keep you out of the streets.' That's one of the things I missed growing up, and I told my mom this. I said to my mom, 'One of these days, I'm going to be able to do what I want. One summer why can I not just spend the summer like these other kids do? I'd like to stay home and play like they do.' Mom said, 'Well, you can't do that. You don't have the means. You're the man of the family. You need to make money so the rest of us can live.' That's life. I remember regretting that part, that I used to come home and see other kids having fun, going to the movies, playing baseball. That's one of the reasons I said to myself that my family is going to be able to do what they want to do when I grow up" (1998).

Maria

"He [her father] went to the fields and he worked in the Sugar Factory, beets, all that type of thing. Abelardo, Marta, and me, us three, we used to get up at 3:00 in the morning, and dad used to take us to do beets, sugar beets. I'd say the rows were like a mile long. It would take all day just to maybe finish one row, but we'd get up early and we'd come home, I'd say around 5:00. We did that up until I was ready to go to high school. We'd work around Fort Collins and we'd go to Nebraska to work potatoes, wherever dad found work. I know we were young because I remember the farmers asking my dad how old we were. I think he had to lie, because you couldn't work unless you were 14 and up. You had to have a social security number. So anyway, we worked until, I don't know.

"We stayed over in Nebraska for how many months? I can't remember. We used to go over there, stay there, do our acres, and come home. I'd say three months. We'd live there. We'd have an old vacant house, empty house we used to sleep in, condemned, I mean nobody was there, hidden out there. The farmers used to pick us up, take us to the fields, bring us home and that's how we lived for three months. We'd bring all the supplies that we needed and cook out there. I remember sleeping on the floor. It was an old beat up, empty house surrounded by trees – you know, a condemned house. There was nothing there. We didn't have no luxuries of home or anything like that. The house

was big, big rooms, but we slept in one area. It had no utilities. You pumped water outside. I'm pretty sure we had an outhouse. We worked the fields from dawn to dusk. You put a belt around your waist, with sacks and hooks right there, you know. Just fill up the sacks and leave them there all day, and then the tractor would come and just pick them up. But our job was just to load those sacks, fill them up.

"And for the beets, we never went to Nebraska for the beets as far as I can remember, just worked around this area. I think near Harmony. The farmer was so nice to us. He used to leave money on the rows, give us ice cream, things like that. We'd just get up in the morning and then just maybe about five go home" (1998).

Pepe

"At seven years old, it's very hard and it's physical. The sun's hot all the time, but we didn't think about it because all your family and friends were there. At that time it was just a matter of surviving. We never made any money because the money went to the family, to father and mother because they had to buy food and clothes for everybody. If we got a nickel or a dollar we'd be lucky, we'd buy ice cream and stuff like that but we were never into money" (1998).

Conclusion

All four siblings, Marta, Abelardo, Maria, and Pepe agreed that field work was physically demanding: days were long, weeks were even longer with no days off from planting to harvest, and with temperatures in the fields often went past 100 degrees. Abelardo and Maria specifically mentioned how young they were when they began working in the fields. Abelardo said, "I don't remember how old I was when I started working in the fields. We might have been 8, 9, or 10." Maria said, "I know we were young [when we worked in the fields], because I remember the farmer asking my dad how old we were. I think he had to lie, because you couldn't work unless you were 14 and up."

Marta emphasized the need for her family to work the fields. She stated, "We were like poverty-stricken, so we had to make ends meet. In order for us to make ends meet, we had to go and work in the fields." Because of the low economic status of the families who worked in the fields, they lacked opportunities for upwardly social or job-related mobility. Except for the contract labor in Nebraska

each fall, Hinojos and his family had to rely on word-of-mouth from friends for daily job opportunities as wage earners. This situation, searching for unskilled labor from day to day, contributed to the family's ongoing insecurity, intermittent unemployment, and underemployment.

As contract laborers in Nebraska, the family was assured a particular job opportunity and wage for a certain amount of time. Living conditions, however, were despicable, as described by Marta, Abelardo, and Maria. The house they were provided by the farmer was dilapidated, located in an open field with few windows, no indoor utilities, water, or sewage facilities, and insect and rat infested. Roofs did not offer protection from the elements and structures were often unsafe and insecure. Before they were able to move in, they had to clean and furnish furniture and supplies.

Work in the fields continuously interfered with school attendance. The children unanimously contributed their educational achievements to the strength and will of their mother, Carmelita, who persistently resisted her husband's demands that the children needed to work in the fields in order to help support the family. In this sense, field work indirectly magnified the need for education in order to escape the entrapment of poverty. Carmelita understood the value of education and encouraged her children to complete high school. She stated, "Open your eyes! Get you a job, get educated!"

Although work in the fields was so physically and emotionally demanding, remarkably, when each informant was asked what "sugar beet" and "field work" meant to them, answers were generally of a positive connotation. Marta explained, "Sugar beets is the meaning for my stomach. It's like survival, like a 'surviving kit.' We depended on the sugar beets to survive. Migrant [field work] means somebody that's going to come and put food on people's tables." Abelardo responded, "The one thing that comes to mind when you say 'sugar beets' is it was hard work, but it was also a living. That was one of my dad's major things, the sugar beets. When you say that to me, I say, 'That's where he got his money to provide for us.' And if that was all there was out there at the time for laborers, then that's what he did, that's what he knew how to do."

To Marta and Abelardo, the sugar beet meant "survival," but they also emphasized that work in the sugar beet fields provided a need for the family as well as the country. It was useful and respectful

work. Maria explained, "I enjoyed migrant work because it taught me that life isn't easy, you have to struggle, but it's up to you. So mom gave us this work thing that we had to do to survive. So, I mean, I like it. It was hard, but I like it, I enjoyed it, but I also knew that I'm not going to do this for the rest of my life. It's too hard. I want to get paid for my work. I want to get an education, and I want to show what I can do, you know, get a trade. But I'm not going to condemn migrant work. It's a useful thing. If it wasn't for us, who's going to do all this? So, I respect my migrant work."

Hinojos and his children were seasonal wage earners; however, they did contract work in Nebraska in the late summer and fall of each year. They did not migrate from farm to farm living in the fields or in government labor camps but had a permanent residence in Fort Collins, Colorado. They were not recruited into the Valley by the Great Western Sugar Company even though Hinojos worked at the factory in between field jobs. After Hinojos married Carmelita in 1933, they rented a home in Buckingham, a *barrio* on the northeast margins of Fort Collins. They lived there for close to 10 years, after which time they moved to the Holy Family neighborhood, west of Buckingham. They were members of one of the first Mexican families to settle in Fort Collins and were typical of immigrant families in northeastern Colorado between 1920 and 1960. It was because of the hard work performed by these first- and second-generation people from Mexico that the agricultural industry evolved and was remarkably profitable in the South Platte River Valley during this period of time.

Notes

1. Barbara L. Hawthorne received her Ph.D. from the Department of Education, Colorado State University

at Fort Collins, in 2004. She combined anthropology and education in an interdisciplinary focus of study. She can be reached at blhawth@lamar.colostate.edu. The narratives included in this paper were part of the data included in a Master's thesis (2000) based on research associated with a first- and second-generation family residing in Fort Collins, Colorado. Research on the third generation of this extended family is currently being studied and narratives from 10 third-generation members will be included in a dissertation for 2004.

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