

In Calif., more Latinos among strawberry growers

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Saturday, July 14, 2012



SALINAS, Calif. (AP) — Alejandro Ramirez was 15 when he crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to work alongside his father and brother in California's strawberry fields.

He spent 12 years toiling for a large grower, living with his wife and child in a garage, learning everything from pulling weeds to planting to driving a tractor. Now, Ramirez is a U.S. citizen who employs about 80 workers — all of them fellow Latinos — and grows his own strawberries on more than 100 acres in Salinas, one of California's key berry growing regions.

"This is my pride," Ramirez said on a recent afternoon, gazing

over the rolling fields filled with neat rows of plants. "Twenty years ago, I had nothing. The strawberry is my life."

And not just his. Strawberries have given Latinos more ownership opportunities than any other major crop. Latinos now comprise two-thirds of strawberry growers in California, where 90 percent of the nation's strawberries are grown. Most growers of other major crops are white.

For the \$2.3 billion strawberry industry, it's the second time a minority group has emerged from the fields in such a profound way. Japanese immigrants took over the industry as they grew in numbers after the turn of the 20th century.

Like the Japanese, many Latino growers are former pickers or the children of field workers who worked their way up to rent or own land.

Because strawberries can be grown on small plots nearly year-round and can yield more fruit and revenue per acre than most other agricultural crops, it's easier for immigrants to get into the business, said Hal Johnson, who has developed varieties of strawberries since 1955 for California's largest berry shipper-growers.

"There's hardly ever been a crop where an average picker who is aggressive and works hard can become a grower," Johnson said. "If he (a strawberry picker) is a hustler and brings along other pickers, he can develop his own little empire."

Before World War II, Japanese immigrants grew more than 90 percent of California's strawberries. But plant and soil diseases depleted their profits and the war brought the industry to a near-halt when Japanese growers were forced into internment camps by the U.S. government.

After the war, as pesticides helped eliminate diseases and researchers like Johnson came up with improved varieties, California's strawberry industry boomed. More recently, increased consumer demand for fresh fruit and organics led to farmers expanding the berry acreage.

Many of the post-war growers were Hispanic braceros, agricultural laborers who arrived under government contract, and other migrant Mexican workers, Johnson said.

"They saw the potential and grabbed on as hard as they could," he said.

Francisco Ponce migrated to California from Mexico in the 1950s to harvest grapes and vegetables. He soon began growing strawberries as a sharecropper on four acres in Watsonville.

His son, Rogelio Ponce Sr., grew up among the berries and later worked for a large grower, climbing the ranks to manager. Twenty years ago, he sold the family home and with a partner started growing strawberries on 25 acres.

Now his two sons, Rogelio Ponce Jr. and Steven Ponce — both

college-educated — work alongside their father. The family farms 80 acres of conventional and 20 acres of organic strawberries, as well as 50 acres of raspberries on land where their mother's father, a bracero, once worked as a supervisor in an apple orchard.

The sons also head a strawberry partnership, where they grow an additional 90 acres of berries. Between the two companies, the Ponces employ over 300 workers. The family sells its berries to one of California's largest shipper-growers.

"The first thing our father taught us is that strawberries can be a good business," Steven Ponce said. "He hasn't made a ton of money, but he's been consistent all these years. He chipped at it little by little, and that's where we get our work ethic from. We look back on what our father established and realize we're very fortunate. It was a huge risk."

Not all Latino strawberry growers prosper. Some actually are sharecroppers, ensnared in financial relationships that plunge them deep into debt, said Mike Meuter, an attorney at California Rural Legal Assistance in Salinas.

And despite the influx of Latino growers, he said, Latino farmworkers — most of them illegal immigrants from Mexico — continue to pick strawberries just as they had decades ago, many of them overworked and underpaid.

Some are attracted to becoming growers by strawberry

companies that traditionally cool, market, sell and ship the strawberries. Some of these companies also lease land to farmworkers or lend them money for operating costs, often at very high interest rates. In return, the farmworkers-turned-growers must sell their berries to the companies that sponsored them, often at below-market prices.

Many of the growers do not speak English and don't understand their contracts until it's too late.

Ramirez, who farms berries in Salinas, nearly lost his business after being financed by one such company.

His father grew strawberries in Mexico, but fell on hard times and smuggled Ramirez over the border so his son could help pay off the family's debts.

In 1986 Ramirez qualified for amnesty as an agricultural worker. Employed by a large strawberry grower for over 12 years, he amassed different skills.

"I never settled for an easy job," Ramirez said. "When I cut weeds, I dreamed of harvesting strawberries. When I harvested, I dreamed of driving a tractor. I constantly asked my supervisors for new opportunities. I had the ambition to do something better."

With help from two brothers, who also worked in California, Ramirez started growing strawberries on a few acres in 1995. He

was financed by a strawberry company, obligated to make payments and hand over his entire crop. He quickly fell into debt and had to borrow money from family, friends and the banks to stay afloat.

"The first few years were extremely difficult," he said. "I was fighting just to pay my rent."

Eventually he quit the company, started to grow berries for a large cooperative and paid off debts. His son, Alejandro Jr., is in college studying agriculture and plans to join his father in the berry business.

Latino growers say having roots in the same country and speaking the same language as their field workers helps.

"It's a lot easier to relate to my workers," said Peter Navarro, whose father migrated from Mexico in the 1950's and started growing berries on 10 acres. Navarro now grows on 140 acres in Watsonville.

"I know their living conditions in Mexico," Navarro said. "My father was also very poor. His humble beginnings always remind me to treat the workers well." #