

Child Labor in Wisconsin Agriculture: Human Rights Violation or Beneficial Experience?

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Abstract

Human rights organizations have attacked child labor in U.S. agriculture. Investigations into the conditions for children working in U.S. agriculture, such as the 2010 Human Rights Watch study *Fields of Peril*, propelled the U.S. Department of Labor's largest attempt in U.S. history to reform child labor laws in agriculture. The Obama administration abandoned the 2009 Children's Act for Responsible Employment (CARE Act) in April 2012 following aggressive opposition by U.S. agricultural interests and farming families.

My study investigates how people who worked as children on farms evaluate their experiences. I interviewed 15 adults who worked on farms in Wisconsin as children and their responses suggest that what some see as violations of children's human rights are often valued and treasured experiences by those who once toiled in the fields. Most of my interviewees saw no problem with children working on farms and often opposed change to the existing child labor laws. Insights from these interviews, as well as secondary research, could provide a better basis for future change that would more effectively aid those who are truly victims.

Introduction

While consumers consider cheap and abundant produce a right, this right comes at a price. That price is a violation of human rights, more specifically the use of child labor. To increase profits and reduce costs, cheap farm labor is necessary, "and what's cheaper than a child?" (execatl 2010). For the documentary *The Harvest (La Cosecha)*, award-winning American filmmaker U. Roberto Romano "spent over a year documenting the lives of three migrant worker families and their children across the United States. He said that while he was aware of child labor from his work in other countries, what he found in the U.S. was shocking" (Spinks 2011). Thousands of children as young as 12 work in the fields alongside their parents harvesting fruits and vegetables (Child Labor Coalition 2011).

My personal interest in and awareness of child labor in the United States was a product of my participation in an advanced human rights class, but my curiosity was further piqued by opposition groups that lobby against legislative reform. There seemed to be a contradiction between the compassionate nature of many farm families and their

opposition to changes that could better the human rights and safety of children across this country.

The primary research of my study involves interviewing people who worked on Wisconsin farms as children. I hoped to reveal how these seemingly good-hearted farm families and operators could seem callous or dismissive toward the conditions of child farm workers, whether hires or members of their own families. While there exists a variety of crops and methods of farming in the United States and around the world, there are commonalities among all agricultural settings, including the concern for the human rights of child laborers. Therefore, a study of these Wisconsin subjects can provide insight into human rights issues in the United States and the world.

The purpose of my secondary research is not to provide a history of U.S. child labor legislation, nor that specifically of Wisconsin, but to provide an abbreviated basis and an understanding of the need for my primary research. The secondary research revealed a broad range of academic literature, but a lack of data necessary for meaningful spatial analysis or maps. Human rights geography can use alternative methodologies that are accepted within the human geography field to look at the processes that affect a particular place or physical space created or altered by human activity (Carmalt 2007). For the purposes of this paper, that place will not be a town, state, or country—that place will be a farm. Traditionally, a *farm* is defined as an area of land and buildings under single ownership. Agricultural settings today can be with or without buildings and homes, and can be permanently owned—by a single family, partnership, or corporation—or temporarily owned, as with leasing or renting. While a strict definition of *agriculture* is the science of cultivating soil, producing crops, and raising livestock, this paper uses the word *agriculture* to represent the farm and/or farm life. The experiences of child laborers occur in a place, a basis for all geographical research. Therefore, considering changes in the characteristics of places, or in this specific case farms or agriculture, can reveal avenues for solutions to the challenges of child labor in the absence of statistical data.

Existing research regarding agricultural child labor has largely focused on four areas: historical development, human rights issues, education, and agromedicine. There is extensive literature on the history of child labor and reform attempts in U.S. agriculture. One of the best-known sectors of that historical research is of child labor in the sugar beet industry from 1890 to 1920 (Lyons-Barrett 2005). Enacted in 1942, the bracero program allowed Mexican nationals to work temporarily in the United States and children continued to labor in the fields (Norris 2009; Mapes 2009). Additional literature addresses state-level attempts to reform child labor law (McLogan 1935), the advent of compulsory school laws, and debates about family versus industrial agriculture (Mapes 2009), which are similar to current issues and debates, more than a century later.

Immigration, migration, and child labor issues are all closely tied to farms, agriculture, and human rights, and therefore a wide range of texts focusing on human rights aspects of child labor are available. Those studies include but are not limited to: the adverse conditions of current child laborers (Human Rights Watch 2010; Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2010; Hess 2007), recent child labor law reform attempts (Grossman-Greene and Bayer 2009), migrant and immigrant specific issues (Bacon 2008; Cholewinski 2009), and more general studies of the overall problem of child labor (Levine 2003). Other scholars address the demographics, educational attainment, immigration raids, and migrant educational centers connected to child labor issues (McLanahan 2011; Capps and Castaneda 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2011).

Studies focusing on injuries and other medical issues of children in agriculture cover a variety of topics: migrant and immigrant children-specific issues (McLaurin and Liebman 2012), injury risk and prevention (Marlenga, Lee, and Pickett 2012; McCurdy and Kwan 2011; Pryor, Carruth, and LaCour 2005; Rivara 1985), and agricultural dangers and solutions (Fisher, Berg, and Marlenga 2009; Lee et al. 2012).

Despite the literature mentioned above, the film and text documentaries that interview current child laborers, and ongoing legislative attempts, there appears to be no research that investigates the recollections and opinions of those who were once child laborers. This void guided my decision to focus my primary research and paper on those who once labored on farms as children.

Contrary to popular belief, child labor is common, and even increasing in agriculture across the United States (Spinks 2011). In December 1999, the United States was one of the first countries to ratify the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182, which prohibits the worst forms of child labor. In 2010, the ILO's Committee of Experts "strongly criticized children's involvement in hazardous agricultural work" in the United States and "urged the U.S. government 'to take immediate and effective measures to comply with the convention'" (Human Rights Watch 2010).

"Children are primarily working in hand-harvest crops," says Zama Coursen-Neff of Human Rights Watch. "They're picking apples, cherries, blueberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini. . . . They're harvesting tobacco. They're doing the work that puts fresh fruit and vegetables Americans enjoy right on our table" (Peters 2010). Children make a significant contribution to the agricultural workforce. They are working in the second most dangerous occupation in the United States, where farm machinery is the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries. Tractors accounted for half of the machinery deaths, followed by farm wagons, combines, and forklifts (Rivara 1985). In 2010, 26 people died in grain elevator accidents; six of the fatalities were children (myFOXla.com 2011). Other hazards on farms include pesticides, large animals, heights, and water hazards, such as troughs and ponds (Fisher, Berg, and Marlenga 2009). Up to 40% of those injured under the age of 19 suffer permanent disabilities (Pryor, Carruth, and LaCour 2005). According to the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, Wisconsin, childhood injury rates fell 59% between 1998 and 2009, but the fatality rate is still "six times the average across all industries" (Kilman 2011). The dangers involved in farm work are a serious problem, but other issues connected to children working on farms are also a concern.

Human Rights Watch published a 95-page study, *Fields of Peril: Child Labor in US Agriculture*, which reports data from more than 140 interviews—including 70 current and former child workers who worked across the United States—and reveals problematic conditions (Human Rights Watch 2010). Beyond the aforementioned physical dangers that children face while working in agriculture, this study highlights issues in education, health and safety, social challenges, and exploitive work conditions. High dropout rates are one of the many educational issues. Health and safety issues include a lack of sanitation and healthcare and overlap with the social issues of sexual harassment and violence. The exploitive work conditions consist of pressure to work for long hours at low wages, even while sick or injured. The interviews are compelling and provide substantial evidence for poor and dangerous work conditions.

The United States does not have a system or plan to track any comprehensive data on youth, such as their occupation, age, where they work, injuries, or deaths (Project Censored 2011). The statistics available in various sources are not comprehensive. For example, the NAWS (National Agricultural Workers Survey), indicates that between

1989 and 2006, 5.5% of the hired crop workers were children ages 14 to 17 (McLaurin and Liebman 2012). While the data available is sufficient to convey high mortality and injury rates for agricultural occupations, negligence exists in the collection of data on child laborers under the age of 16 (Levine 2003). The United States publishes reports documenting goods produced with child labor in countries worldwide, but goods produced by child labor in the United States are not included in that report (Spinks 2011).

Although the United States “spends over \$25 million a year—more than all other countries combined—to eliminate child labor abroad” (Human Rights Watch 2012) and is the “largest donor to the International Labour Organisation’s programme to combat child labor” (Peters 2010), its progress is slow at home. Attempting to remedy the health, safety, and education issues of U.S. child laborers, Rep. Lucille Royal-Allard worked relentlessly to pass the Children’s Act for Responsible Employment (CARE Act) (Child Labor Coalition 2011). The CARE Act sought to bring the age and work hour standards for children working in agriculture up to the standards set under the Fair Labor Standards Act for all other working youth, raise the standards for pesticide exposure, require greater data collection by the Department of Labor on the industries in which minors are employed (specifically agriculture), and preserve the current exemptions for children working on their family farms. On May 20, 2010, the Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division published “a Final Rule designed to protect children from hazards in the workplace while also recognizing the value of safe work to children and their families,” which updated the Child Labor Regulations (U.S. Department of Labor 2011), but still exempted family farms. The rule prohibited hired farm workers under the age of 16 from operating power-driven equipment, but exempted family farm children. These updates did not address issues such as pesticide exposure and long working hours. The proposal was published September 2, 2011, and on October 31, 2011, an extension allowed public comment until December 1, 2011. The comment period brought more than 18,000 responses, largely in opposition, which accused the administration of attempting to wipe out the existence of the family farm (Keifer and Heiberger 2012). Those in opposition were a combination of corporate farm owners, family farm owners, peripheral agricultural businesses, lobby groups, and family and hired laborers—both past and present.

By April 2012, based on the overwhelming opposition, the Obama administration dropped the legislation provided by the CARE Act and promised not to revisit it during his presidency. The case made by proponents of legislation was weakened by migrant workers who may have lacked Internet access or feared losing employment. Furthermore, the administration could not ignore the clout of the farming community—the backbone of the food supply in this country. As a result, the status quo of the FLSA (Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938) still stands:

Minors of any age may hold jobs on farms owned or operated by their parents. . . . Children age 12 and 13 may work at nonhazardous jobs outside school hours at the same farm as the parents . . . or elsewhere with written parental consent. . . . Children age 16 and older may work at any job hazardous or otherwise with no hourly restrictions.

(Pieris 2004)

Standards in the United States for children working in agriculture continue to be similar to those of less-developed countries regarding work conditions, hours, and safety, so solutions to this problem are still needed.

Research Methods

My decision to interview adults who once worked on farms (as opposed to children currently working on farms) is based on three considerations. First, research involving interviews with minor children, as in the documentary *The Harvest* and the study *Fields of Peril*, is well established. Second, there are major hurdles in obtaining IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval and parental permissions for interviewing minors. Last, and perhaps most important, I thought a retrospective view might reveal an explanation for the attitudes of those in power today who are most opposed to reform. Yesterday's child workers are making the decisions for the children of the future.

After obtaining IRB approval for my study, I arranged interviews according to the following criteria: the person had worked on a farm (or farms) as a child (under the age of 18) and the person worked on a farm (or farms) in Wisconsin. Although present in my geographic study area, none of my interviewees were immigrants or migrant workers. All of my interviewees were native-born U.S. citizens, but not by intention or exclusion. Therefore, information reported regarding immigrants is based only on secondary research. My quest to obtain interviews was more difficult than anticipated because of the controversy created over the proposed reformative legislation. There was a sense of mistrust and suspicion with some prospective interviewees when the term *child labor* was mentioned; however, my interviews were with farm laborers who seemed to be honest and forthcoming.

I arranged appointments for each interview in advance; however, two interviews developed spontaneously as a result of an in-progress interview. My interviews took place between June and September 2012, in home or work settings. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes and interviewees spoke as long as they wished, while I used a laptop to write their responses. I repeated several questions in each interview, which allowed for some meaningful quantitative results, but most questions were open-ended and allowed for nonstructured individual discussion. As required by IRB guidelines, I omitted information that could reveal someone's identity and used pseudonyms, but I did provide ages to aid in interpreting the era the interviewee was working in as a child.

Interviewees were not asked identical questions. Numerical results presented in this paper are based on the number of interviewees asked a specific question and not the total number of interviewees. That being said, these numbers, combined with the qualitative results and attitudes conveyed, work together to provide indisputable experiences, perceptions, and realities based on farm environments and experiences.

Of the 15 interviewees, 10 were male and 5 female, with an approximate age range of 25 to 82. Of those asked, 53% currently own their own farm (or their family does). In addition, a little more than half of the 15 receive income from farming. Some income is from ownership, but other interviewees rent land to derive agricultural income. At the time of the interviews, 26% were involved in physical farm labor. This number may seem low compared to the ownership and income percentages; however, this is because some landowners are receiving income by leasing land to a farmer. Another significant factor is what I will call "inheritance potential"; by this, I mean my interviewees are potential heirs to farmland or more farmland than they currently own. Some 60% of my interviewees had inheritance potential. These results indicate the economic interests of people with small family farms, which can have a significant impact on the perceptions of and reactions to any changes affecting farm labor.

The Farm in General

The request, "Please describe the farm you worked on as a child" provided some understanding of the place and setting where these interviewees worked. In various

Wisconsin locations, the farm size of those interviewed ranged from 40 to 320 acres, with an average of 157 acres. Based on the age information gathered of the interviewees, they worked on farms as children between 1935 and 2005. Of the 15 farms, 14 had dairy cows and more than half had cattle for meat. Dairy herds ranged from 20 to 75 milking cows. Other animals included pigs, chickens, horses, geese, ducks, and goats, with chickens and pigs being most popular after milking cows. Crops included hay, corn, oats, barley, soybeans, wheat, vegetables, rye, peas, cabbage, strawberries, and gardens or other minor plantings. All of my 15 interviewees worked on their parents' or grandparents' farms. In addition, 20% worked on another family member's farm and 46% on a neighbor's or friend's farm.

Agricultural Chores

When asked, "What age did you start doing chores?" the answers ranged from five to ten years old, with an average of seven years old. Chores included making bread, feeding chickens, carrying milk, detasseling corn, picking stones, cleaning barns, mending fences, milking, raking hay, unloading bales, cleaning cows, castrating, dehorning, and more. These children did it all. Interestingly, the most hated chore was "pickin' stones." Picking stones entailed a *stone boat*, which was a large sled-type creation that was pulled by horses, or a tractor in later years. All working in the field would follow the boat and fill it with stones. Joe (age 75) shared, "When you hooked on that stone boat, you knew it was gonna be work!" After Gary (age 65) indicated shoveling manure was the job he disliked the most, he remembered picking stones and recanted: "That's the most dreadful job. Worse than manure. It's never done . . . that's the worst [*laughs*]."

Ted (age 65) started working at age five. There was an unloader connected to a Model T transmission and Ted's job was to pull the chain on the electric switch. He reflected, "It was a dusty, dirty job that I didn't particularly care for." Tom (age 62) remembered feeding calves in the barn when he was between four and five years old and milking at the age of ten. Janet (age 70) said with pride, "By the time I was seven, I had to make the bread every Saturday," and Shirley (age 82) recollected, "One of my youngest memories is . . . going out as a youngster on hands and knees and putting strawberries in a basket in maybe first or second grade. Friends helped and I think we got a penny a basket." Asked about the chores he did, Don (age 58) rattled off the list: "Anything from unloading hay or straw, cleaning calf pens, raking hay, pulling weeds in the garden, pulling potatoes, cutting burdocks in the pasture . . . that covers a lot." Later when asked what chores he was doing at eight years old, he rattled off more: "Sweeping the barn, liming the barn, cleaning the chickens, pulling weeds. Oh yeah and when baling hay, go out with a fork and pick up hay." The interviewees conveyed a sense of pride in their work and an understanding of economic value from a young age. Later in the interviews I learned how these early days of labor shaped my interviewees' lives.

When I asked, "When were you expected to do chores?" 57% of interviewees said during the morning, 82% said during the evening, and 30% said both. All of the 15 interviewees had to work in the summer, and most had to work longer hours in the summer than during the school year. However, some worked morning and night regardless of the time of year. Gary (age 65) said, "Yes, milked morning and evening," and Shirley (age 82) replied emphatically with a look of pride and reflection, "I milked EVERY day!" When asked about what age they drove a tractor, the boys' ages ranged from seven to thirteen years old and the girls' from ten to fifteen years old. Not exactly "driving," Ted (age 65) recalled being four when he held the wheel straight on a 1936 John Deere tractor while it was in first gear, so that the adults in the field could husk

corn by hand. Joe (age 75) believed he was seven years old at most when he started driving the tractor, and by age ten he was cultivating corn. Mary (age 65) remembered driving a tractor about the age of ten, while Grace (age 42) didn't drive a tractor until she was fifteen, just before getting her driver's license. Tom (age 62) remembered cultivating at eight years old with a Chalmers model WC tractor and driving down the road for the first time at age eleven. Whether male or female, my interviewees drove tractors at a young age, as was expected and often necessary to complete the daily chores.

I asked my interviewees to categorize their farm labor as work, recreation, or both; 80% responded work and 20% both. For example, Joe (age 75) expounded, "I guess you would consider it work. It was fun while you were doing it growing up. You were able to be involved or functional. You could do adult things." By contrast, Rick (age 34) explained, "I was at that age I hated living on the farm, got to see my friends play all day and wished I lived in town and that it wasn't that way on the farm." However, Rick also said, "I didn't appreciate it until college. . . . It was a good thing—the hard work and values. . . . Nothing else can teach you values like that. It teaches you to work hard. . . . I think you can pick out kids today that worked on farms . . . just the work ethic that they bring to the work table." A consistent pattern emerged among the interviewees in retrospect: working on the farm, although difficult, hard, and with risks and economic challenges, was a treasured memory and a valuable experience that was rewarding in multiple ways.

Injuries

A major concern regarding children working in agriculture today is the propensity for injury. The interviewees conveyed a wide range of responses regarding questions about injuries, from virtually no concern to some frightening situations: 82% experienced at least one injury. Gary (age 65) said, "My older brother broke his wrist a lot cranking the tractor." Another, Janet (age 70), remembered, "My older brother got run over by a milk truck, but it was spring, and really soft, so he wasn't hurt." Janet also remembered a neighbor boy getting killed in a manure spreader, when a boy driver turned it on. Mary (age 65) fell out of a hayloft and wasn't seriously hurt, but Tom (age 62) remembered falling down a silo and tearing his ligaments. He relived the accident: "I was laid up probably two weeks. Any place I had to go, they put me in a wagon and hauled me. I was probably 20 to 30 feet up the silo and slipped and fell onto a concrete floor." Asked how he felt after that, he said, "Didn't bother me. I still climbed." One of Ted's (age 65) cousins was crippled on a hay mower because he fell when the horses jolted. Grace (age 42) was kicked several times by cows and lost her two front teeth by getting bunted by a calf, but Shirley (age 82) had a preventative to getting kicked. She explained, "I had to wash my hair every day because I put my head in the cow's flank to avoid getting kicked. I never got kicked because I learned very young to put my head in the flank and block with my elbow." Injuries were part of farm life and all of the interviewees readily accepted the risks. Jim (age 70) explained with acceptance, "There are always farm accidents. It's part of the trade." Even if these children did not personally experience injuries, they knew someone who did. Interviewee recollections indicate similarities to agriculture today in the sense that injuries are common and varied in nature.

I asked some interviewees to indicate chores that they should not have been doing or children should not be doing on farms today. Don (age 58) said being up in the silo was dangerous because of the gas and lack of fresh air and recalled the most dangerous thing he did "was hooking silage off the back of the wagons into the open blower."

When Butch (age 50) was asked, he replied, “Probably a lot of things, umm, climbing silos, cleaning out plugged machines and total freedom around animals, at a young age before you knew how to respect them.” When asked how she felt about kids operating machinery, Janet (age 70) had this to say:

Ahh, you know, that’s kind of scary. Some kids are very responsible. We did it and I don’t know that we got hurt on farm equipment. We fell off roofs and stuff. We were around all of the farm equipment, especially in the fall when bringing in crops. It took two to drive the tractor—one to sit on the seat and one to jump on the clutch.

Janet realized that although they did not have injuries in their family, they could have, so she seemed to have mixed feelings about making a definitive statement one way or the other. With a more general, but qualified, statement, Rick (age 34) indicated that he wouldn’t want his own children doing the more dangerous things on the farm. But “the skills you learn you don’t learn anywhere else,” he said, emphasizing the life lessons that are learned from working on a farm.

Education

Another issue of concern with children working in agriculture today, most notably for migrant children as opposed to children working on family farms, is deprivation of an education. Surprisingly, all of the 10 interviewees asked indicated that education was important to their families and that they never or rarely missed school for farming. For example, Jean (age 82) said, “[Our parents] wanted kids to get an education beyond eighth grade, because they couldn’t . . . everyone wanted their kids to go to high school.” Janet (age 70) echoed, “To them, education was very important. They were of the age when few finished high school.” Asked if school was often missed, both Tom (age 62) and Don (age 58) said rarely, unless a silo needed to be filled, and Shirley (age 82) said, “No, really didn’t. . . . No, never for hay or anything.” This is different from the experiences of migrant children, as documented in *The Harvest*. Studies indicate that “the children of migrant agricultural workers are among the most educationally disadvantaged children in the United States” (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2010). Different environments, structures, family settings, economics, and availability of schools prevent many migrant children from getting an education, and dropout rates are high.

Opinions on Children Working on Farms Today

All interviewees believed that children should be allowed to work on farms today. As an example, Chuck (age 25) had this to say:

The farming industry wouldn’t be able to stay afloat without kids and high schoolers milking. They [farmers] wouldn’t get everything done in a day. I know there was a proposed law that anyone under 18 couldn’t use certain equipment. It’s grey because there are a bunch of partnerships and stuff.

Chuck shared his concerns about the grey area of the law: if the changes were passed, he knew of someone who would not be able to work on his father’s farm, because the farm entity was not a single family farm, but a partnership. Chuck further elaborated on the farm bill (i.e., the CARE Act) that was recently abandoned:

Personally I thought it was ridiculous. A piece of milking equipment is not a tractor. You are not even getting near a cow and there is no way to get kicked. If we were to hire a kid from town, we’re not going to throw them right on a tractor, and training on a tractor is so much easier today.

This same interviewee, however, was aware of the threats of pesticide exposure. He indicated his concerns about them near children and relayed that his own father was cautious with pesticides. This young man, who had worked on his parents' farm, was aware of the economic impact of his contribution to the family farm and also understood how the law changes might affect young family farm laborers even though the law claimed not to affect family farm members. His insights brought to light the difficulties in blanket legislation that tries to address safety and working conditions.

The interviewees considered cheap labor, in the form of a child working on a family farm, acceptable. On the family farm, ownership of the farm gives incentives to family child laborers to condone the use of child labor in a joint family effort to preserve the farm's existence. This ownership provides both familial and economic motivation in the form of future benefits that are not realized by migrant child laborers. However, Jim (age 70) recognized another benefit: "It's a good opportunity [for kids to work on a farm]. A man told me in town that the reason he hired me was because I worked on a farm." Grace (age 42) replied, "I think it's definitely a good experience. It gives a child an idea of structure with work and life." Ted (age 65) agreed, but thought a child had to grow up on the farm to understand the hazards. When questioned further as to whether children should labor if the country's prosperity does not require their labor, Ted (age 65) responded:

Well, how will they learn things? . . . In this day and age with mechanization, [the farm is a] good opportunity for kids. They learn by doing on the farm. Unfortunately with farms the size they are now, fewer kids have that chance. . . . The family farm is doomed. Because of family economics, the next round of people going into agricultural careers will have no agricultural background.

If legislation allows children to work on large or corporate farms, the agricultural tradition and ethic may not be altogether lost, even in the face of the demise of the small family farm.

Economics

One aspect of economics revealed through the interviews was entrepreneurship related to the ownership of the farm. For example, Mary (age 65) remembered that when her mom wanted to buy something extra for the house, she bought pigs and raised them to sell to the butcher. Shirley (age 82) remembered her father being renowned for the quality of his cream, but when he had to sell his cows he grew vegetables on his farm, which he sold profitably to supermarkets.

I did not ask my interviewees direct questions about money or economics, but they discussed many economic aspects. Many of my interviewees, especially those of the earliest generations, lived a poor or modest life. The success of the family farm—economically, physically, and quintessentially—was dependent on labor that was available, including children. The ideal of family life, hard work, and values was as important as the physical and economic asset of the farm. These aspects existed hand in hand. Family supported immediate family (parents and grandparents) first, then neighbor helped neighbor, and in some cases family helped distant family, if geographically feasible. Jim (age 70) painted the neighborly picture of thrashing in the fall:

One neighbor had a grain thrashing machine. . . . Then he thrashed for the rest of the farmers. When he moved in, it took two or three days. Mom would make the meals and neighbors would come with horses and wagons, and do one farm at a time, and go in a circle. The new guy came last. There must have been ten farms in the group.

Reliance on neighbors was common in agricultural areas. At that time many farms could not afford expensive machinery, such as a thrashing machine. Therefore, sharing machinery and labor with neighbors was common and necessary. Early generations assumed the future existence of the farm. Frank (age 70) shared, “Back then, a son of a farmer, well, it was highly likely what he was going to do. Nobody ever asked me, ‘Now, you’re going to be a farmer?’ And I couldn’t wait to get out of school so I could do that.” As the years went by and some of the younger generations chose not to farm, they often inherited farms and opted to lease them, which still provided a financial asset.

As previously discussed, inheritance potential is a motivating factor on family farms. Beyond the sentimental value of the farm life to my interviewees, the economic benefits of the ownership of physical real estate and land tend to justify sacrifices that may not be reasonable to expect of a hired laborer. Family members were more enticed than a hired laborer to endure years of low wages, knowing that in the end the family is holding a financial asset with equity that can provide rental income. Hired farm workers may not understand the motivation of a family farm worker with a vested interest in family farm ownership and the treasured character-building ideals realized through the commitment to the common goal of the family farm. The research shows that the environment for the migrant or immigrant child laborer is different from that of a child laborer on a family farm.

Comparison of Farms Then and Now

When asked if farming today is similar to what they experienced, 92% of interviewees disagreed. Don (age 58) emphatically responded, “Not even close! No. . . . Might be similarities of work, but rewards are a whole lot different.” Butch (age 50) said, “No, it’s not similar. It is less physical work and more automated now.” Tom (age 62) simply stated, “No, there is very little resemblance at all.” Gary (age 65) compared the work then and now:

Things have changed so much. There isn’t all this manual labor. They have robots that milk cows. As far as cleaning pens and stuff, it’s all mechanized. . . . [There is] none of the manual labor like I was accustomed to with 12 cows and livestock. Everything was wheelbarrowed to a pile and pitched on manure spreaders by hand.

Shirley (age 82) elaborated on this topic as well. However, she addressed the change in overall environment as opposed to strictly changes in machinery and technology:

No I don’t. Not at all. Big, big machinery. Lots of cows. I’m sure some families still own. I just don’t think there is a tight union where you milked, killed your own chickens. We raised a calf every year and it was special food because we knew she was slaughtered for home use. We also did all of our beef, chicken, and pork.

These responses reflect a farming environment in which mechanization and automation has increased in both the fields and barns; however, it is apparent that these interviewees refer to local conditions, not the states where handpicked crops requiring hard physical labor still exist.

Overall Experience

Of the 11 interviewees asked about their overall experience of working on a farm as a child, 82% replied it was good or excellent, 18% had mixed feelings, and none said it was bad. Responses were overwhelmingly sentimental and accepting of the conditions, hard work, and challenges faced. Butch (age 50) said his overall experience was “very rewarding . . . gave me a sense of accomplishment, personal pride, loyalty to family,”

while Rick (age 34) said, “It was a good thing—hard work and values.” Chuck (age 25) offered, “Working on a farm has made me the guy I am today and I’m proud of that,” and Jean (age 82) shared that her experience was “positive. I learned how to work, how to live without, how to be positive.” Don (age 58) echoed this prevailing theme of family values, work ethic, respect, and intangible rewards:

Excellent! It was rewarding, life building or umm let me think . . . life building . . . umm respectful to elders as far as neighbors and things like that. . . . At the time you didn’t think it was rewarding, but now you know it was life molding, learning work ethics and respect.

There was an overall sentiment that working on the farm as a child was rewarding, valuable in building ethics and family values, and, regardless of risks involved, is an experience that the interviewees would find acceptable and desirable for their own children and others. These conclusions may help explain the strong opposition people like my interviewees have to regulation changes.

Conclusions

My interviewees do not have identical answers, but their stories have common threads. Several conclusions can be drawn from their insights, and their sentiments provide comparison and contrast to the farming entities across the country, whether small or large, family or corporation.

First, those who worked on farms as children considered hard physical labor a way of life and not abusive. As a matter of fact, they believed it built character and morals that would not be obtained otherwise. They felt these experiences brought them advantages in life that were lacking for those who did not work on farms as children.

Second, while some might think farm families are ignorant of the dangers present in farming, they are well aware of the threat of injury or death. The interviewees accepted those risks as part of a way of life. But “the data is clear: Agriculture is one of our nation’s most dangerous industries” (Lee et al. 2012). This danger is present for all ages, so it is logical that preventing children from performing such tasks does not make the conditions safer for all ages. Perhaps an approach to make agriculture safer for all workers could help conditions for children without forcing unwanted legislation. One example of this is in the area of pesticides. Safe practices overall would benefit the children working side by side with adults.

Third, those interviewed were comfortable with children working on farms, regardless of which children—their own, a neighbor’s, or legal immigrants. Jeffrey Passel, a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, predicts that “immigrants and their children will provide virtually all of the growth in the U.S. labor force over the next forty years” due to the country’s aging population “combined with low fertility and mortality rates” (Passel 2011). Although my interviewees are not likely aware of the demographic specifics, their history solidifies their belief that low-cost labor and/or “free” family labor is a necessity. Defense of the need for children working on farms will likely be strengthened by the threat of a labor shortage.

Fourth, the interviewees considered education important, but did not have the challenges that migrant farm workers have in maintaining an education. Most of my interviewees either did not move during their childhood or moved within a 10-mile radius, while various studies indicate migrant families move 1.37 to 4.31 times per year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2011). The interviewees recognized, valued, and treasured the support of family and neighbors in their experiences working on the farm, and recognized the lack of this environment for hired child laborers or migrants. However, most did not indicate an understanding that accommodations, for example in education, are needed for hired workers in today’s farming environment.

The perception of interviewees is that migrant child laborers would receive the same intangible benefits that they did; they did not seem to be aware that “a third of child crop workers drop out before graduating from high school” (Human Rights Watch 2012).

Last, a major difference for immigrant or hired child laborers is the lack of inheritance potential and the absence of the family farm experience. The environment for the migrant child laborer is different than that of a child laborer on a family farm, and although migrant workers learn some of the same work ethic, it is not accompanied by the benefits of a stable familial, educational, and neighborly environment.

Standards established by the ILO and other organizations reveal contradictions in U.S. practices regarding child labor. The distinct child worker populations—workers on family farms and migrant workers—show that blanket legislation is not the answer for the agricultural business. Nonetheless, considerations or remedies for either population should consider the needs of the child, and perhaps the scope of what a child needs should be broadened. Most of my interviewees felt that their child labor experiences were vital to their rewarding lives. Lessons learned from these interviewees are applicable not only to the United States, but to other countries around the world.

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