

# Farm workers

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Symbolizing the low regard for welfare of farm workers in various ethnic groups by the agricultural industry was el cortito, the short-handled hoe, known too as el brazo del diablo or “ the devil’s arm”. In conjunction with hand weeding, it was useful in singling out lettuce, celery and beet starts, which were planted in heavy rows to guarantee that sprouts would survive the ravages of birds, bugs and weather. Use of the hoe required the worker to fold over at the waist, constantly raising and lowering the hoe while walking sideways down the row of plants.

Abundant medical evidence established that the hoe led to severe back injuries when used over a substantial period (Bender, 2003). In medical terms, the hoe caused abnormal degeneration of the spine, resulting in permanent disability and chronic back pain. Symptoms of short-handled hoe use included not only crippling injuries to the back but also nosebleeds, kidney malfunction, headaches, runny eyes from dirt, fever, acid urine, kidney pains, arthritis, exhaustion, wrist swelling and poisoning from inhaling pesticides.

A 1970 study found that the short-handled hoe caused health problems in 87 percent of respondents, and of workers age thirty-one or older, 91 percent complained back pain. Despite these figures, however, 50 percent of injured farm workers never saw a doctor due to intimidation, bureaucracy, inaccessibility of medical services and language barriers (Jain, 2006). Although replaced in most farming states by the long-handled hoe, growers in California continued to insist that their workers use the short-handled hoe in their lettuce fields (Bender, 2003).

For decades the growers had required field workers to use this tool that demanded its user bend over while working. Thousands of farm workers damaged their backs and spent the rest of their lives in disabling pain (del Castillo and Garcia, 1995). The short hoe is generally thought to have been introduced to California agriculture late in the nineteenth century as intensive crop farming took hold. When Japanese workers first came to California, they organized their own farms and thus had the freedom to use tools on a rotating basis and regularly change body position.

A change in appellation from what was then known as “squat labor” to “stoop labor” reflects the change in farm work itself. If at one time workers could kneel or squat while intensely cultivating an area, a stooped position allowed a worker to make his or her way hurriedly down crop rows. This change in working postures was one indicator of the loss of control over working conditions more generally, as the economic and political persecution of the newly organized Chinese and Japanese immigrants was supervised by Mexican immigrants (Jain, 2003).

Unlike their predecessors, the new immigrants were typically not from farming backgrounds. However, controllable labor was more attractive than skilled labor during those times. Consequently agricultural production underwent a reorganization. The reorganization of labor established a labor contractor or “crew pusher”, who made sure that farm workers were working as productively as possible. An increasing division labor established which was known as “factories in the field”.

The short-handled hoe was an instrument of mass production and due to the needs of agricultural mass production, it was used for hours and days

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without recess. In addition to this, it allowed crew pushers to watch over large fields to see “malingerers” who stood up to rest their backs. A stream of labor was available to compensate for workers who left the job due to injury or fatigue (daily turnover in short-handled hoe gangs was as much as 85 percent). The short hoe remained a standard tool of agriculture in California through most of the twentieth century (Jain, 2006).

El cortito, although barely mentioned in the literature on California agriculture, became a story that matters precisely for the ways that the suit both framed and forced articulations (articulations that are astonishingly frank in their racist underpinnings) about how sociohistoric events such as imported labor racialized bodies and how dangerous tools would be acted on and remembered (Jain, 2006). In “Abolition of El Cortito”, an exploration of “how social problems are solved within the state arena and how state policy affects the sources of social conflict” was made (Murray, 1982).

In 1887 to 1893 or during the time of incipient landholding consolidations, Chinese immigrants formed the bulk of farm labor and they virtually taught crop farming to the large farm owners. With increasing Chinese immigration, exclusion became the foremost issue of California politics. The white laborers saw the Chinese as stealing jobs and assisting large farm holders in monopolizing agriculture by helping them make the transition to crop farming. When the Chinese began to organize themselves by opening small businesses, employers’ interests allied with labor and attempts to restrict immigration began (Jain, 2006).

In 1882, 1892 and 1902, exclusion laws were passed in addition to the Nationality Act. The Nationality Act specified that only “free whites” and “  
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African Aliens” could apply for naturalization in a country that was, by design, to be one of “Nordic fiber”. Thereafter, the Chinese who were excluded from farm and public works labor, land ownership, access to business licenses, testifying in court for or against a white man, public education, citizenship and naturalization, were confined in urban ghettos and faced vicious racism, violence, murder and expulsion.

In addition to this, they were given extra financial burdens in the form of taxation and specifically anti-Chinese laws and ordinances (Jain, 2006). Unfortunately, this cycle of using cheap labor and then maliciously dispossessing groups when they organized themselves was typical in California agriculture. South Asians, Japanese, Filipinos and Armenians had similar experiences to those of the Chinese. “My ancestors or great grandfathers were farmers in California, and they suffered the same treatment”.

Growers’ strategies ensured ethnic factions and a chronic oversupply of labor in a market that was already only seasonal. These tactics have been supported by the state government. One author notes that “confronted with an increasingly organized and militant agricultural work force, the state response typically has been to help promote the migration or immigration of a replacement supply” (Jain, 2006). As the Chinese tried to find better employment away from the fields, the growers looked elsewhere for workers to tend fields and harvest crops.

During the early 1990s, immigration laws were changed to make it easier for Mexican workers to enter the United States. Between 1917 and 1921, more than 23, 000 Mexicans legally entered the United States. By the end of the

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1920s, more than 70, 000 Mexicans were living in California at least part of the year. The new migrant workers also suffered racism. Even though the farming industry could not exist without the migrants' labor, many growers looked at the workers as lesser beings.

A California sheriff said, “ The Mexicans are trash (and) they have no standard of living (so) we herd them like pigs” (Davis, 2007). Each day that the minority groups worked continued working, they noticed how they, the poor farmers, were mistreated. Day by day, they become willing to stand up to the injustices that they saw (Davis, 2007). They made protests and boycotts against the growers. After noticing Latino farm workers walking with a rigid gait, a California Rural Legal Assistance lawyer began a seven-year struggle in the late 1960s to bury the short-handled hoe.

The legal battle, on behalf of several ethnic groups, particularly the Latino farm workers, to outlaw the short-handled hoe eventually reached the California Supreme Court, which ruled the division had misinterpreted its regulation. Consequently, the use of el cortito or the short-handled hoe was abolished and somehow, social discriminations or racism towards ethnic groups decreased (Bender, 2003).

## References

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