

**Agriculture:
Powered by an Illegal Labor Force**



2014

In the midst of the busy New York Harbor, The Lady stands still. Her hand lifts a torch like a beacon to guide the way. With silent lips she cries through the morning fog: “... Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ...” (Lazarus, 1883).

On April 21, 2003, I heard and answered The Lady’s call. It was a hot and humid morning, and the air smelled of a dirty city. I climbed out of the car and nervously took the hands of an unfamiliar man and woman. They walked quickly, pulling me down the block, past a long line of people. The crowd was pointing at me, whispering, and then calling out to me as we climbed the stairs towards a large, gray building. Our small group was motioned forward by an armed guard to the front of the line. The couple showed the guard some paperwork, and then we were escorted past all of the others, into the building. As the glass doors swung shut, I knew my life was about to change.

That day is one of the most intense memories of my childhood. I was almost seven years old when my parents traveled to Guatemala City to adopt me as their new son. I remember that day at the U.S. Embassy so clearly because it was so unlike my tedious days in the orphanage. The crowds, the noise, and my anxiety were overwhelming. The people in line were fellow Guatemalans all waiting to get into the embassy. Every day, hundreds of Guatemalans stand outside our U.S. Embassy hoping to get a visa to enter this country. I was one of the fortunate ones. Two Americans brought me to the front of the line.

The United States was largely built by foreign-born people, like me, who desired a better life. This country has always offered its citizens a degree of prosperity and freedom that is unequaled in human history. From America’s first immigrants to those

who seek entry today, this country beckons the huddled masses with the hope of fulfilling their dreams. So they come. Some come with a visa in hand, some come smuggled in cargo, and some are led by “coyotes” across the desert. Most will tell you they are seeking opportunity.

Many who have crossed our borders, with or without documentation, have an agrarian background. Their search for a job here often leads them to agricultural work because it is familiar to them. The odds are pretty good that if you farm or ranch in the United States, you may have unknowingly hired a worker who has entered this country illegally. There’s a good chance that you, or someone you know, has had an employee on the payroll who milks the cows, picks the produce, or works in the processing plant that is here without valid U.S. documentation. My dad has done that. For the last eleven years, I have lived on my family’s apple, pumpkin, and Christmas- tree farm. My family has unknowingly hired laborers who do not possess genuine, authentic documentation required by U.S. law. It is a common dilemma for many agriculturalists.

According to the Pew Research Center, there are over 11 million illegal immigrants residing among us (Pew Research Center, 2013). Every year, more than 300,000 people successfully cross our borders without authorization, the majority of them from the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Rotella, 2012; Plumer, 2013a). “Roughly 70% of the 1.2 million people employed by the agriculture industry are undocumented” (Serreno, 2012). Over one-half of our farm laborers are believed to have false documentation (González, 2013). This signifies that agriculture is the number one industry in the United States that has built its businesses and established its farming practices on a fluctuating, illegal labor force (Hershberger, 2012).

In short, American farmers are continually struggling with the moral dilemma of hiring undocumented workers, while facing the economic pressure of feeding this country.

We, undoubtedly, have an immigration and labor problem because of the absence of a sustainable, comprehensive federal immigration plan. Individual states have begun to create their own immigration laws, causing confusion across the country. Undocumented farm workers are leaving states with anti-immigration laws for more hospitable states, triggering labor shortages in many intensive crop areas by twenty to fifty percent (Smith, 2011; Gasperini, 2014). Desperate farmers are trying to entice domestic workers to their fields (Plumer, 2013b). Unfortunately, most domestic workers leave farm jobs within days because of the rigorous, and demanding work (Knothe, 2014). The federal H-2A guest worker program has been developed as a way for agriculturalists to hire foreign workers to help with the labor shortage situation. While some farmers have had success with the program, many more have expressed frustration with the costs, extensive regulations, and substantial paperwork (Semuels, 2013). Over the last few years, the shortage of workers that power the agricultural industry has resulted in thousands of acres of fruits and vegetables being left to rot in the fields. Many farms have lost up to 10% of their yields (Serreno, 2012). Our U.S. economy, food supply, and security are reliant on our ability to plant, grow, and harvest our agricultural products, but we are dependent on labor to make it all work. American Farm Bureau President, Bob Stallman, recently stated: "Immigration reform is critical for the agricultural industry ... Simply put, either we import our labor, or we import our food" (American Farm Bureau, 2014).

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, set in place by President Reagan, was the last piece of comprehensive legislation to address undocumented aliens and workers in this country. We, in the agricultural industry, recognize that the 1986 law is no longer effective or enforced (Tumulty, 2013). We are at a time in America's history where immigration reform must be a priority. Our future agricultural pursuits are dependent on legislation that will protect and provide resources so farmers can continue to produce for both this country and the global market.

For over two hundred years, America has been the Golden Door, the City on the Hill, and the Promised Land for the world, beckoning the oppressed, the poor, and the hopeless. During his farewell address, President Reagan stated about America: "... She's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home" (Reagan, 1988).

I firmly believe the answers to our immigration problems lie in "leadership from ourselves" (Tiffany, 1930) and in the ability to find a resolution. I believe in fixing that which is broken, so the generations to come won't have to. I believe that solutions to obstacles are usually challenging, but also attainable if we are willing to bargain and seek a compromise. "American agriculture can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life" (Tiffany, 1930), and we as agriculturalists must be the compass towards unity. We stand at the threshold of possibilities, with a choice of immobility or progression. As responsible citizens, let's attend to our disputes and recommence as caretakers of this great nation.

I understand the desire for a new beginning because I too arrived poor, hopeless, and from a lost place. America is where I found home. Eleven years ago, I walked past a long line of Guatemalans who were hoping and waiting for the opportunity that I was being given. I now understand what they were calling out to me. As I walked by, they said, “Niño pequeño, acabas de ganar la lotería.” Little boy, you just won the lottery.

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