

LANDSCAPE

Why is 'labor' a dirty word for many U.S. workers now?



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I was 15, and I really wanted that first job. Dad said that when I got my driver's license he would give me his '51 Ford as long as I paid for the gas and insurance.

So I got a job on one of the family truck farms that ringed our one-traffic-light Ohio town. Most of us kids got our first jobs hoeing and then picking vegetables like peppers, cucumbers, egg plants and melons. We were a steady and cheap

source of labor for local farmers. And there were lots of migrant Mexican workers, too.

The migrants came each summer. They came in pickup trucks with Texas license plates. They lived in wooden shanties at the end of a dirt lane on the adjoining farm where they also worked. These were families—dad, mom, kids and all.

I remember a lot about those summers, my school workmates, and the Mexicans who

earned my respect as steady and reliable workers.

But my strongest memories are of the work itself. The afternoon sun baked the loose, sandy soil beneath my feet, and the long rows of half-grown plants seemed to stretch to the horizon. The weeds grew more stubborn as the day wore on. The hoe in my hands made itself heavier.

I remember the chug-chug-chug of the ancient John Deere farm tractor. It said the boss was coming over the top of a sand ridge. The routine was always the same. Mr. Nichols, the farmer, would: (1) slowly climb off his tractor, (2) walk down a row we'd just finished hoeing, (3) bend down to yank out a missed weed or two, and (4) start yelling.

Always he bellowed at one of us school kids rather than at the any of the Mexicans who

worked shoulder-to-shoulder with us. Their rows were cleaner. Always.

I am not making fun of Mr. Nichols, wherever he is. For all his huffing and puffing, he was fair and honest with us. I'm writing this, in part, to explain my bias toward the Mexican worker. You'll notice it in the cover story that I, with help from fellow editors Jerry Roche and Terry McIver, authored in this month's issue.

These Mexican workers—some of whom became friendly, but never friends—taught us students a few things about work: about putting a razor's edge on our hoes so that we could stand straight and flick and slice the weeds from beneath the vegetable plants rather than bending over and pounding them out; about wearing hats, trousers and long-sleeved cotton shirts rather than shorts and going shirtless; about drinking hot coffee—the hotter the better—in the heat of the day rather than cold sodas.

But mostly they taught us by example:

Keep working.

Get the job done cleanly.

These are traits that many of them still possess, and demonstrate as laborers in the United States. That's why the U.S. green industry and the Mexican worker have a lot to give each other. It's not a perfect fit; there are problems; but on balance it works.

Which is more than I can say for too many healthy young people in our country. They seem to think that being a laborer, even as a first step toward a career, is beneath them.

I've got news for them: it's probably not.

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