

# Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



## Picking Strawberries

I picked strawberries for nearly five hours the other afternoon out near La Selva Beach.

I wanted to prove to myself that a citizen of this country was physically able to do it. There has been some serious doubt.

Although I feel today like a victim recovering from an auto-pedestrian accident, I did a good job—picked nine crates and earned more than eight dollars.

I proved to myself that if I had no job and some hungry mouths to feed, I could have continued and gutted my way through another five hours, and come back the next day, rather than accept some kind of government relief.

Easy to say after only five hours in the field—granted—but I believe it.

Like my boss said: "If a domestic like you will stick with it for three days, the worst is over. Hard workers can make between \$18 and \$20 a day."

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You've heard it enough: There is a shortage in strawberry pickers since the elimination of Mexican nationals labor.

Farm Adviser Ed Koch of the University of California agriculture extension service recently visited some 22 strawberry ranches from nine acres to 2000 from Santa Cruz to Los Angeles counties.

He says the labor situation in the larger ranches of from 80 to 2000 acres is chaotic.

Santa Cruz county has some 800 or 900 acres of strawberries divided among many ranchers. He says there will be problems here, but believes all the berries will be picked.

There is a standing request now at the Watsonville employment office for 150 pickers.

Last year with the imported labor from Mexico in the field, the pay was \$1.10 an hour.

With the shortage of pickers the wage scale is up, and competition is keen.

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My pay was \$1.40 an hour, which is pretty standard now, and a bonus of 15 cents per crate (each crate contains 12 baskets).

This rancher had 16 acres. Eleven Mexican fellows were picking and they were good. They work a 10-hour day.

The boss thought my com-

ing out was a joke and he greeted me with a smirk. But during the afternoon, when I failed to walk away, I think he felt a little guilty, for he kept saying: "Whattya tryin' to prove?"

Later he told me that he had refused to accept help from the employment office in the city, because they either sent out "winos" or people who would work an hour and give up.

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The strawberry season will run until November or December or whenever the rain or cold knocks them out. The peak will come June through August.

The boss here will have to step up his pickers to 26 or more to keep up with the picking schedule, but he said he is not too worried. He will go find those extra men or women.

"Picking is not an impossible job. It's hard, yes. If a person really wants to work, I'll give him a job. I've had elderly ladies in the field and young boys. Most people have forgotten how to work hard physically."

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The field is neat; cleaned of weeds. Strawberries grow on small leafy individual plants, snug to the ground.

You are given a low miniature wheelbarrow, bracketed to hold a crate. There is a small wooden box which hooks on behind where you put your culls.

Picking is a matter of bending over and running your hand through the plant.

Two or three red berries will immediately hit your eye. You don't pull the berry away, for it is soft and you'll damage it. So what you do is to snip off the stem with your fingers, like you break a string bean. The green strawberries you leave for ripening.

You work the row on each side, pushing your little wheelbarrow along before you. When it's full you take it to the truck.

When your back feels like it is also going to snap like a string bean, you drop to your knees and walk along this way for awhile.

Only one person spoke to me in the field. As he passed me on the row he said: "How you feel?"

I said: "Like someone stuck three knives in my back."

He accepted this as a pretty honest answer and picked on.

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