

Rogelio and Me: a memoir of transition

by Lance Mason

“We have all lived through the fields, shared that common humiliation. How could we progress as a people while the farm workers were denied self-respect, while this shame, this injustice was permitted to continue? The United Farm Workers has never been dangerous if you believe in the Bill of Rights.” – Cesar Chavez

One of the handful of jobs I had in the summer of ‘63 was picking lemons on the Waters Ranch outside Moorpark, California—ugly work, up the trees on twelve-foot ladders in the flies and the heat, canvas sleeves to the shoulder to ward off the stiletto-like thorns. Balanced against a branch with one hand, rusty clippers in the other, we snipped off lemons one by one, just above the green “button” so they looked special in the shops.

I’d load up fifty pounds in a burlap bag slung around my neck, climb down the ladder, pour the pebbly, yellow fruit into a box, and then hike back up and do it again. It paid the better of a buck-twenty-five an hour or twenty-five cents a box. Work-and-wage—a rugged but decent stopgap for those of us living at home and buying T-shirts and shoe polish, but not so hot for a guy with a wife—or two—and half-a-dozen kids. Trying to beat the hourly wage, those guys didn’t clip, but just “pulled fruit” to fill the boxes as fast as they could. Unless you come from farming, the arithmetic can fool you.

One afternoon in late August, about two hundred in the shade, a dude came striding up after the lunch break as I was strapping on the collection bag.

“My row,” he said.

I just looked at him, not sure how to reply. It was a good stand of trees, lots of hanging fruit, and he wanted it. He was working by the box, trying to beat the wage, probably with a family to feed, or maybe was a smack-head. “I been working this row all morning,” I said, hoping to hold my ground.

He bent down and wrapped his fist around a thick, broken tree branch lying by his foot, and I saw he had *Chino*, the Youth Authority prison out in the desert, tattooed on his arm. "This is *my row, ése*." He wasn't messing around.

I no longer saw picking lemons a fit for my wealth achievement goals, and walked off the job. What are you going to do, fight for your life over \$1.25 an hour?

It had been a hot summer in Oxnard, and my best friend Jerry and I got around in my green '33 Plymouth sedan, a flathead six with suicide doors. With autumn rolling in, humid in the mornings with dew on the grass, the town smelled of the lima bean harvest and the sugar beet mill out on Wooley Road, east of Five Points.

For the next job, Jerry and I got hired on at Fieldland Frozen Foods off East 5th Street. He got on the cleaning crew and I went to the warehouse stacking line, both for the night shift, 8 PM to 5 AM. Not challenging brainwork, but we'd knock off before dawn, hit home for breakfast, then tear away about sunrise to bodysurf down in Zuma or up at California Street in Ventura. We'd grab dinner at home and get back to work about dark.

The "stacking line" meant eight hours loading boxes of frozen lima beans off a chest-high conveyor belt onto shipping pallets on the floor. The belt came out of the packing room, the boxes filled with forty pounds of beans. If the beans ran out, the belt stopped, and we'd pull off and stack the boxes we could reach, waiting for more beans from the main freezer room, maybe two minutes, maybe twenty—nobody came to tell us. When they got more beans, the belt ran again. Like the lemons, it paid a buck-twenty-five an hour.

I worked the belt next to Rogerio, a real smiley guy with no English, as friendly as he could make himself, and it was the first time I felt bad for *no hablo español*. He even had to write down his name so I could learn it—*roh-g-HAIR-ee-ob*. He worked steady, steady, never getting ahead of himself, never behind. The boxes came down that belt, and old Rogerio stacked them on those pallets, lifting and loading like he'd bet his paycheck on the result—a working fool. If he didn't enjoy it, he didn't let on, like he and the job had an agreement: he wouldn't bitch about the work, and it wouldn't get any harder than he could handle. With a crew like that, Fieldland never had to worry about the job getting done.

Between belt runs, we'd stand in our Levis, tennies, and T-shirt, sweating like mules, a stream of arctic air blowing from the packing room down the belt, okay at first because we were hot, but then icy in the wind. Because it was summer, ninety degrees outside, I brought no jacket, but wouldn't wear one anyway for fear I'd stink it up. So I stood around or paced around, cold as a bastard, until something happened and we started stacking boxes again.

We were paid an extra seventy cents a day not to take coffee breaks while the belt was running. The lunch break was half an hour, but we had to hump boxes until the workers inside packing the beans quit loading them on the belt and gave the word to go eat. We had to be back, though, when the belt started up again, or there would be broken boxes and hundreds of pounds of raw lima beans defrosting all over the floor.

This was not colorful, enthralling work—boring, in fact, like the tomato fields and the orchards and the corn boxing-stations. Yet the workers who came up from Mexico never seemed to lose focus or get tired. They did—it was only human—but they came from a culture that knew hard work and how to do it. Not that they enjoyed it any more than I did, but maybe despised it less.

Rogelio kept Spanish newspapers and books in his jeans' back pocket, reading them when the belt stopped. He made the work pleasant enough for both of us until the night a forklift driver came over with his thumb aimed back at the main freezer. "Coupla bins knocked over in there," he said, tossing me a parka and a shovel. "Foreman wants you to clean 'em up."

The forklift driver—the farm owner's son, for all I knew—was lying. He knocked the bins off their pallets himself, onto the freezer floor, and was telling me I had to go in there, in a smelly parka someone had probably puked on last season, and shovel up three tons of frozen beans in zero degrees with no gloves or boots. I did it, and then quit. Well, I didn't quit, but just didn't come back, or even bother to get my pay.

Jerry quit, too. "They got jobs over at a fiberglass factory," he said, "making garbage bins and planter boxes for the county."

That summer, America's modern battles for civil rights—Medgar Evers, Reverend King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the Birmingham bombing—took early shape in my brain,

and I started to change, along with my language, mental and verbal. Though unsteady over it all, I would win a Knights of Columbus speech contest on voting rights the following school year.

Yet, until that chapter of my life, my “book” had been one of contentment, not to say sloth, and I’d seen no reason for people to change, or to change society. It seemed to me that, when everything is going smoothly in the world you know, somebody decides they’re not happy. The work is there, the pay is steady, the weather is good, but they have to find some reason to be agitated. Were folks just being whisked up, being told they needed better cars or better clothes or better schools, until they decided they were being hard done by? It wasn’t enough to live in America? *And so on*, I’d say to myself.

My young logic, my reasoning and point of view, were thin and feeble, and even I began to see through them. Dylan was singing that change was coming in the wind, and if it was coming for the Mexicans and *Chicanos*, it was coming for everyone in Oxnard. Before this, workers moved with the crops—beans and tomatoes around us, lemons and sugar beets, too, lettuce and melons down El Centro way, grapes in the San Joaquin, fruit trees up north, corn other places. After the season, the Mexican nationals went back across the border to their families, where they lived well on American money, and because—there’s no easy way to say this—there wasn’t a permanent place for them in the US. This was called the *bracero* program.

Then the politics changed. With new legislation, Mexican-born laborers could get papers, get out of the migrant camps, and stay in America. They’d be able to have their families, too, their churches, their own houses, gardens, and stores, bringing in pride about living here, a sense they belonged. And they stuck, proving Bob Dylan was right.

That was the politics, but most people, unless they grow up with it, don’t know farm economics, the center of Oxnard’s world at the time. What was going to happen to the farming business when the workers left the migrant camps to live in town? What was going to happen to local housing demand? How about the small Southwestern farms that were dependent on Mexican labor to flourish, and the towns’ businesses and neighborhoods and schools when all these changes came? This was the backdrop for the town’s anxiety over these

changes. Maybe they would be good for everyone, but maybe not. The point was that no one knew, and some white folks were scared and angry about the unknown.

Yet this was the dawn of the true Sixties, and racial tensions were rising across the country. Here in the Southwest, Oxnard included, the “have-have not” friction was between generations of Anglos seen to control the land and a Mexican culture that worked it for desperate wages. In truth, farming wasn’t an easy life for anyone, and the landowners didn’t sit around with their feet on the desk.

Still, things were changing, like Dylan said. After World War II, California started filling up with folks from all over, not just Mexico. Black Americans were moving out from Dixie and some Midwestern cities. Filipinos were getting papers to live in America. White Navy families were leaving the service for West Coast jobs.

Cultural norms, ways of thinking, were moving, too, shifting gears. The Freedom Riders would mount an assault on authority, and rock ‘n’ roll music and Lenny Bruce added to the attack. Down the road, those in power and the police were going to have their hands full with a lot more than fights between kids born on different sides of the tracks. Yet it was a time when Young America thought they were ready to claim their country.

Away from farming politics, the era’s surfers and hipsters were carving out a new world, and Oxnard’s youth took the only option that appealed to teenage boys. We pushed the limits, hanging our bare asses out of car windows on weekend mornings for the fat lady who sold avocados across from the Ventura Marina. In the Plymouth, we’d cruise down the beach road, our sun-kissed honeydews perched on the window frame, and she’d rock back in her camp chair under the eucalyptus trees, slap her thigh, and laugh until her hat fell off. We’d laugh with her.

Boys and young men started letting their hair grow. The barber down near Snooker’s pool hall would trim the sides and leave the rest alone, so it hung in your eyes and over your collar, surfer style, driving the adults nuts. We’d rub in lemon juice to blonde it out, and a mother might look the other way if it wasn’t too messy and you kept it clean.

Cars were changing, too. Jan & Dean and The Beach Boys were making surfing cool, but you couldn't just hang around your hometown beach. No, you had to be on the move, going where the swell was up and the waves breaking. That took wheels, and wheels meant anything that could carry you and your buddy and your boards on Saturday morning to distant lands. Sand and saltwater didn't jive with Sta-prest trousers and clean machines, so worn-out clothes and low-cut tennies came in along with ratty pickups and old station wagons, rides you could sleep in on the weekends, far from home. So was born the West Coast hippie scene, and the Plymouth cut it because it was vintage and funky.

Like lemons and lima beans, the fiberglass work was no IQ test. We were fill-ins, temporary labor until school started back, but we didn't mind. Neither of us saw our future in spraying lung-destroying plastic into garbage can molds. But the permanent guys, the *Latinos*? This was their life—skeleton shift on at six-thirty, the rest on at eight, half an hour for lunch, sandwiches or burritos. They were proud of what they did. I don't mean turning out trash cans, but how hard they worked at doing it. You had to respect them for that.

Later, I wondered what became of Rogerio. Picking lemons, stacking boxes, or working row crops, his kind didn't quit, and we needed them for the planting and the picking and the packing-house labor. Not many are willing to work that hard, or know how to, and this was the reason people were afraid of the coming changes in farmworker civil rights. To many, it looked dark on the horizon.

With summer ending, Jerry and I decided not to pursue the “languid turpitude” of Ensenada, Mexico, as we'd been thinking, nor play football, but to hang at the beach, bodysurf, and check out the babes. To do this, we had to ignore something that had been brewing all summer. Back before the Fourth of July weekend, the two of us had driven out to Fillmore to buy fireworks, mostly kids stuff like sparklers and Roman candles. They didn't sell cherry bombs and M-80s, the ones from Mexico that really exploded. Still, Oxnard fire regulations forbade what we did buy. Therefore, we two indefatigable smugglers hid it all

under the car's back seat and drove it home anyway. That afternoon my father, in a mild panic, knocked on the bathroom door.

"You'd better come out here."

"I'm still in the shower. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"The police are here."

Too big at sixteen to climb out the window and run for the border, I dried off and dressed. My father was waiting in the living room, the front door open. Two uniformed cops, straight out of *Dragnet*, were waiting on the porch, and nosy neighbors were watching from their front lawns. Curious drivers were pulling to the curb. I, of course, was trying to figure out the best lie I could tell about the fireworks. For good or bad, that's not why the police had come.

The officer who talked was one J. D. Phillips. I still picture the black letters on his brass name-tag. "There was a gang fight today in *La Colonia*." This was the *Latino* section of town east of the Union Pacific tracks. "A boy hit with a pipe is in the hospital and pretty critical." Phillips also said my car, the green Plymouth, had been reported at the scene. In my first successful negotiation in life, I was able to convince Phillips this was a mistake, that it was neither me nor my car at the scene. I did this without revealing the Independence Day contraband.

Still, the gang fight had taken place, and the boy died, the first in a series of street battles that summer between young Anglos and *Latinos*, mostly males, but a few girls, too. There were no more deaths, but not for lack of trying. After decades of an uneasy peace, political changes with unknown consequences had tipped the balance from détente to aggression, and then to violence, a pattern to be reflected across the ethnic, social, and economic landscape for years to come.

I don't need to chronicle all of 1963 for you. It came out of an America we knew, imperfect, and soon to face harder times. Along the way, I found my course and Jerry found his, but not before youth's experience tenderized parts of me and toughened others, not before it showed me that there was a "man" in humanity, one to be proud of, to set your compass by,

and to sail with as long as the breeze blew and the lines held and the canvas kept its shape. The Dodgers blanked the Yankees in the '63 Series, and Sandy Koufax was baseball's living comet. It was a time of triumph and turmoil. The history books are full of it and, if Jerry were still around, we could live it again—Rogerio, too, if we could find him.

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