

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Memories Of A Former Migrant Worker

By Felix Contreras  
2010

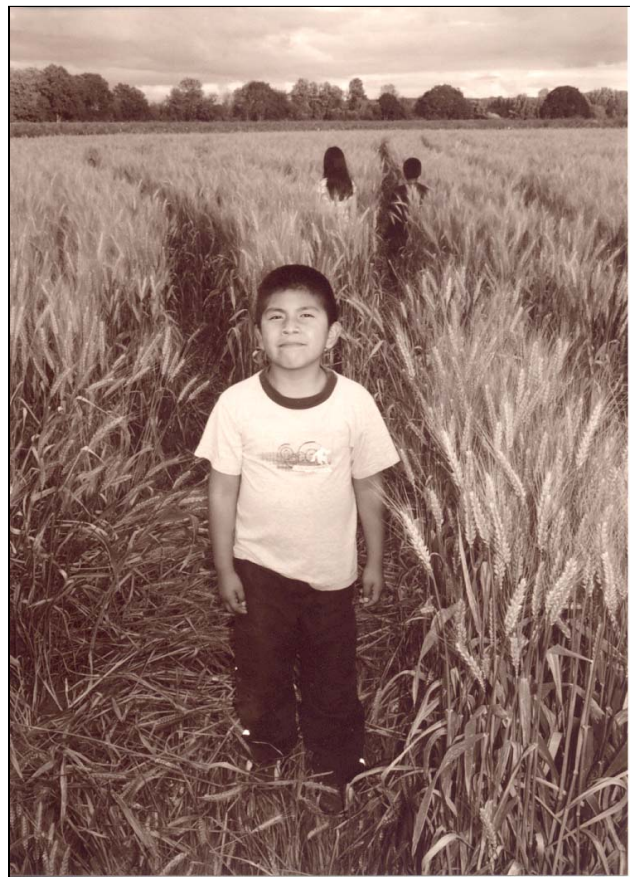
*Migrant workers are people who move from place to place to complete seasonal work, usually difficult labor in the fields. Due to the United States' proximity to Mexico, and Mexico's previous ownership of California, many of these workers are of Mexican descent. In this interview, Felix Contreras asks his father about his experiences as a former migrant worker. As you read, take notes on what Luis Contreras experienced as a child migrant worker, and what eventually improved the conditions of migrant workers.*

- [1] **Felix Contreras: You were raised in a migrant farm worker environment. Can you describe what that was like?**

Luis Contreras: First of all, we didn't have a permanent residence. We traveled in a truck and we lived mostly in a tent on the road between California and Kansas.

Because we were migrants, our schooling was incomplete. We would arrive in a town after school started and leave before the school year was over. We didn't always have the basic necessities of life, like being able to take a bath regularly.

Because we often had to set up our tent in the country, we ate a lot of what we found growing in the wild — fruits, some vegetables. If we were in one place long enough we could plant a garden and eat what we grew. Later, after we stopped moving and settled down in Sacramento (California) my mother would sometimes complain that our diet was better in the country with access to fresh food.



*"migrant boy 3" by jksphotos is licensed under CC BY 2.0.*

- [5] We also worked very long hours, often from sun up until sun down. The entire family, children included. As a child you think it's just normal life, nothing out of the ordinary. We didn't think we were working especially hard. It was just a normal life for us.

## **So things like child labor laws didn't exist back then?**

There were child labor laws, but here's how migrant families worked it: When we were out in the fields you could see a child labor officer driving up along those dirt roads from at least a mile away. Plus they were usually driving a government car, so it was easy to spot them. The kids would leave the fields, gather around the family truck, then go back to work after the child labor officer left the area.

Looking back, I think it was in the interests of the ag.<sup>1</sup> industry to not have the child labor laws enforced because we did a lot of work as children. It was a different time. It was a different way of thinking among people who did agriculture work — meaning, there wasn't much of an interest in the welfare<sup>2</sup> of the field worker.

**Flash forward 40 years or so. How did you first hear of Cesar Chavez's<sup>3</sup> efforts to organize farm workers?**

- [10] I read about in newspapers and also reports on television. News of the UFW [United Farm Workers] march from Salinas to Sacramento in 1966 was carried in the paper and on TV. (Editor's note: The 340 mile march started in Salinas, Calif. and ended on the steps of the state capitol building in Sacramento.)

I thought, "Finally someone is doing something!" I thought it was a very good thing, especially regarding child labor. What he was doing was right. It was about time someone was doing something about that. Before Chavez and the UFW, they didn't show any of that, you know, how migrants lived and worked. I never saw that on TV or in the newspaper.

**What did you think about the UFW's tactic of establishing picket lines<sup>4</sup> at supermarkets in urban areas to raise the awareness of their fight?**

I think those publicity tactics<sup>5</sup> brought out a lot of popular support from people who experienced that kind of life. And even among those who thought it was just wrong.

**Did you feel any emotional connection to their work to organize farm workers?**

- [15] Yes, of course, I felt a very strong emotional connection to that organizing. I felt they were doing a good job. They were right.

**How would your family's life have been different had there been a Cesar Chavez and the UFW when you were a kid?**

I don't know. My father was a person that — I don't know if he cared if we were educated. My mother, on the other hand, had strong feelings about education. She was illiterate and she didn't know how to guide us in that direction, so we went to school no matter what — when we could.

After my father died in 1941 in Sacramento, we stopped moving, settling there. After that, we worked only in the summer and started the next school year on time for the first time. My younger sisters and I had a lot of catching up to do because we missed so much school by working.

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1. short for "agriculture"

2. the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or group

3. **an American labor leader and civil rights activist who co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, later known as the United Farm Workers union**

4. **a boundary made by workers on strike**

5. **Tactic (noun):** an action or method that is planned and used to achieve a particular goal

I think that if my father had been the kind of person who thought we needed an education we could have done well in school. We were not dumb; we could learn things. My younger sisters all graduated from high school. For field workers, graduating from high school was an accomplishment. In my age group you very seldom<sup>6</sup> saw Mexicans graduation from high school.

- [20] For example, in my high school graduating class of 1948 there were 300 students and there were only 5 Mexican boys. So maybe things would have been much different had someone organized farm workers back in the 1930s and '40s.

**In the 1970's, Chavez and the union became identified with a younger generation of Mexican Americans who started calling themselves Chicanos. Did any of that resonate<sup>7</sup> with you?**

I think that happened because they saw what the older generation, their parents or grandparents, went through. I think they thought, "Why, my parents went through this. There has to be a change!"

**Do you think the youngest generation, your grandchildren for example, have any appreciation for what Cesar Chavez tried to do?**

I don't think the grandkids are too much aware of what Cesar Chavez was doing. It would be up to my children, you and your brothers, to tell their kids about Cesar Chavez.

- [25] I don't think most of the offspring of the generation that lived that life — I think they knew about that plight,<sup>8</sup> they knew what was happening, but they didn't take any interest, because we made efforts to avoid having our children live that life. I think most parents didn't tell them unless they were asked. Or it was presented in school as part of history or social studies.

**Any final thoughts or feelings I haven't asked you about?**

I want to add that after reading this some people may say: The parents, my parents, should have been more attentive to the kids to get ahead. I try to tell people who ask about it: Don't put that kind of blame on them. You have to put things into historical and social context.

We, my brothers and sisters and I, were never taken to an orphanage, or foster home and left there. My parents, and so many other migrant families, stuck it out and kept the family unit together. Now that I'm older I can see that that was the only way they could survive those kinds of living conditions.

It was survival, plain survival, they taught their kids how to survive and they did a d--- good job. My siblings and I did not become drug addicts, alcoholics, people who cheat and steal, those kinds of things that some poor people often fall victim to. My mother and father put us on straight and narrow<sup>9</sup> and we stayed that way.

- [30] And besides, I'm 81 years old and I'm still in fairly good physical shape. Maybe all that hard work did some good after all.

**Thanks, Pop.**

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6. rarely

7. **Resonate (verb): to have particular meaning or importance for someone**

8. **Plight (noun): a difficult or unfortunate situation**

9. a phrase referring to the proper, honest, and moral path of behavior

You're welcome, Mijo.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Spanish for "son"

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the interview?
  - A. Luis Contreras believes he would have a better life today, if he had been allowed to go to school rather than forced to work in the fields.
  - B. Luis Contreras understands that he lacked an ordinary childhood, yet he appreciates his parents' efforts to support his family's survival.
  - C. Luis Contreras resents younger generations who don't fully understand or appreciate the experiences of early migrant workers.
  - D. Luis Contreras feels that most people's understandings of migrant workers' conditions are often exaggerated.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "We also worked very long hours, often from sun up until sun down. The entire family, children included. As a child you think it's just normal life, nothing out of the ordinary." (Paragraph 5)
  - B. "I think that if my father had been the kind of person who thought we needed an education we could have done well in school." (Paragraph 19)
  - C. "I don't think the grandkids are too much aware of what Cesar Chavez was doing. It would be up to my children, you and your brothers, to tell their kids about Cesar Chavez." (Paragraph 24)
  - D. "We, my brothers and sisters and I, were never taken to an orphanage, or foster home and left there. My parents, and so many other migrant families, stuck it out and kept the family unit together." (Paragraph 28)
  
3. PART A: How do Luis Contreras' final thoughts contribute to the interview as a whole (Paragraphs 27-30)?
  - A. He reveals that he harbors no ill-feelings towards his parents or how they raised him.
  - B. He shows that his parents taught him valuable skills that most children of migrant workers didn't learn.
  - C. He emphasizes how uncommon it was for families of migrant workers to stay together.
  - D. He explains how his experiences as a child migrant worker differed from the experiences of other young migrant workers.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "I want to add that after reading this some people may say: The parents, my parents, should have been more attentive to the kids to get ahead." (Paragraph 27)
  - B. "Now that I'm older I can see that that was the only way they could survive those kinds of living conditions." (Paragraph 28)
  - C. "My parents, and so many other migrant families, stuck it out and kept the family unit together." (Paragraph 28)
  - D. "My siblings and I did not become drug addicts, alcoholics, people who cheat and steal, those kinds of things that some poor people often fall victim to." (Paragraph 29)

5. How does Luis Contreras address the effect that migrant work may have on a child's education?

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