



CultureWork

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for Arts and Culture Workers

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Institute for Community Arts Studies
Arts & Administration Program, University of Oregon

The Florida Farmworkers' Project: One Story In Photographs and Text

Text by Catalina Delgado-Trunk

Photographs by Faith Amon

**With an Introduction by Kristin G. Congdon
University of Central Florida**

Introduction

In the Summer of 1997, 2,500 Florida farmworkers--Mexican-Americans, Appalachian Whites, Haitians, and African-Americans--were told they would be out of a job in less than a year. Florida's legislature is purchasing the farms they have worked on for forty to fifty years and the land will be flooded in an effort to restore Lake Apopka, one of the most polluted lakes in the state, back to a healthy eco-system. The farm owners are to reap \$91 million dollars from the taxpayers in land buy-outs. In contrast, the farm workers have been granted \$20,000 in retraining funds. Land around the restored Lake Apopka is to be

redeveloped for recreational use and comfortable resort living. Questions have been raised as to the whether these actions are economic rather than an environmental. Certainly the plans to bring Lake Apopka back to health have not included the cultural and occupational health of a large portion of the community's residents.

With the impending loss of a way of life, difficult as it has been, the Farmworkers Association of Florida approached several local organizations asking for help. These groups include the Florida Folklore Society, Seminole Community College, Crealde School of Art, and the Florida Humanities Council. They asked that their occupational and cultural history be documented before it is lost. These four organizations, among others, quickly began fieldwork. As I write this introduction, this documentation continues.

However, the story that is told here is one that we had not anticipated, nor is it one that we sought out. However, it is an experience we feel must be immediately made visible; it cannot wait for the curation of photographs and text panels. While not everyone involved in the Farmworkers' Project agrees that it should be told to mass audiences, Benito Muro Banuelos and Jose Muro Martinez requested that it go on the internet, and it is mostly their story. Catalina Delgado-Trunk, who tells the story, strongly agrees. We believe that Benito and Jose will be safer because of it.

The photographs of Benito and Jose were taken by Faith Amon who has been photographing what we have come to call "The Last Harvest." She teaches photography classes with Peter Schreyer, photographer and Director of Crealde School of Art in Winter Park, Florida. They have weekly meetings in Apopka with youth from farm worker families whom they teach to photograph their communities. This project, along with the following story and photographs of Benito Muro Banuelos and Jose Muro Martinez, relays life experiences that are hidden from many of us. And yet, it is these images and words that we wish to make visible. It is our hope that Benito and Jose, along with all farm workers, will be remembered when people of privilege purchase inexpensive carrots, celery, tomatoes, and lettuce, and savor the pleasure of a well grown orange, grapefruit, or tasty strawberries. Perhaps we need to be reminded that what many of us think of as "our simple pleasures" are not really so simple.

For the most part the farm workers we have been documenting are legal residents of the United States. They earn little more than minimum wage, get few--if any--benefits, and must work when the farm work needs doing, which means long hours some weeks, and no work on others. Rain and drought can mean a bad year for a farm owner; it can mean dire hunger for a farm worker's family. Still, hungry people from other countries illegally cross the borders for a chance to pick our crops. Their experiences are often disastrous. This story documents one such experience. Catalina Delgado-Trunk's story, as relayed to her from Benito Banuelos, is told here in letter to the Wage and Hour Investigators in the United States Department of Labor.

Kristin G. Congdon

Click on the thumbnails to see the photographs full size.



Benito Muro Banuelos and Jose Muro Martínez
after accident.



Benito Muro Banuelos.



Benito Muro Banuelos
and Jose Muro
Martínez.

Date: January 11, 1998

**To: Mercedes Herrera and Butch Kennedy
Wage and Hour Investigators, United States Department of
Labor**

From: Catalina Delgado-Trunk

Re: Benito Muro Banuelos and Jose Muro Martinez

As requested by Mercedes Herrera, I am voluntarily filing a report with the United States Department of Labor as to my nine days (January 1, 1998 to January 9, 1998) with Benito Muro Banuelos and Jose Muro Martinez. I am led by my conscience to do so with the hope that this report helps in making a difference for the thousands of undocumented workers that continuously cross our borders as economic refugees from Mexico.

On December 29, 1997, Jeannie Economos of the Farmworkers Association of Florida made we aware of a need for housing for a father and son who were being released from Leesburg Memorial Hospital to the Border Patrol. I suggested a small cottage on the premises of Orlando Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and was advised on January 1, 1998, that they were, indeed, at the cottage and in need of somebody who spoke Spanish.

I went to the cottage and met Benito Muro Banuelos, age 64, and his son, Jose Muro Martinez, age 17, who subsequently described their journey from Guadalupe, Zacateccas, to Florida. Benito sets the date of his departure as Sunday, the 18th of December. However, the calendar indicates Sunday as the 14th, and in a telephone conversation with his wife, Rebecca, she stated that the departure took place on Sunday, the 14th of December. Benito is an occasional bricklayer and usually manages to get work for three or four days out of the week, usually earning \$180.00 (Mexican currency) or approximately \$24.00 (U.S. currency) per week. On December 14, 1997, Antonio Hernandez Sr., a large landowner in Guadalupe, Zacatecas, went to Benito's neighborhood and informed Benito that his son Antonio Hernandez Jr. a

resident of Immokalee, Florida, had called him and requested that he recruit forty workers for the Immokalee tomato fields. Antonio Hernandez Sr. urged Benito to send his son, Jose, and if the quota was not met, then he would also allow Benito to go with Jose. The reason for this is that the recruiter makes every effort to avoid older men and women and strives to solely recruit 14 to 17 year old boys and girls.

It was at this point that Benito asked about wages, living arrangements, and the cost of transportation. He was informed that he would receive between \$300 to \$350 (U.S. Currency) per day, and that his wages would be withheld until he met the \$1,500 (U.S. currency) "transportation fee." He was also told that Antonio Hernandez Jr. owned the labor camp trailers and that the rental fee for a bed would be \$250 (U.S. currency) per week. Benito then asked about food and was told that he would receive a \$10 (U.S. currency) weekly stipend for food until the rent and "transportation fee" were met.

It was also at this point that it was made very clear to Benito that he was going to be "transported" to the tomato fields of Immokalee, and that he was not to go with anybody else except Sergio Hernandez, his nephew, who would meet them at the border.

Benito went home to discuss the matter with his wife and, as they were in dire straits, it was decided that both Benito and Jose should go for a year to a year and a half. They went to the square in Guadalupe where a group of teenagers had gathered to meet Hernandez Sr. At the last minute five young people backed off and Hernandez decided to take Benito along even though he was "too old" to Hernandez' liking.

Eight young men and women and Benito purchased bus tickets for Guadalajara, Jalisco, with instructions by Hernandez Sr. that they would then purchase tickets for Altar, Sonora, where they were to await the arrival of his nephew, Sergio Hernandez.

When the nine arrived in Altar, Sonora, they were directed to what Benito describes as a decrepit former hotel and where he recalled seeing many potential workers and "coyotes" (smugglers). Throughout the night he states that the "coyotes" would come into the building calling out for specific types of workers and work locations. The two that he remembers are poultry workers in Vermont and timber workers in Oregon. He also mentioned that it was at this point that young girls were gathered in various groups for prostitution to unknown locations in the United States. Sergio Hernandez arrived shortly past dawn and called for workers for the tomato fields in Immokalee. Forty people were loaded by Sergio into a pick-up truck going to the border. Before reaching "the wire" they were detained by "Judiciales" (Mexican police) and told by their driver that he had been given the proper bribe money by Antonio Hernandez Jr., but that they would have to reimburse him (Antonio Jr.) once they started working. Sergio got out of the pick-up and went to the side of the road to "confer" with the "Judiciales."

They moved on to the border, crawled under the "wire" and were met by a "raitero" or a guide. (I have never heard this particular term, but gather that for a fee this person is a relay guide.) Sergio paid the "raitero" and told the group that he would drive on ahead of them and would meet up with them in an orange grove in Texas. He advised them to rest a while before their trek through the desert.

As they rested, Sergio took a young girl from Guadeloupe who Benito refuses to identify, and "la hizo como su mujer y se adueno de ella" (made her as his wife and became her owner). She returned to the group crying, but at that point, they felt helpless and could not help her. Sergio took her with him in his pick-up and Benito never saw her again. The "raitero" gathered them up and they walked across the Arizona desert for one whole day and one night. At dawn, the group of forty arrived at a house of "Indians" where they purchased some bread and soda. Another "raitero" met with the former one and they exchanged money for the group and were loaded into a pickup for a day long ride to an "arroyo" or gully. They were told to wait in the gully while the "raitero" slept in the pick-up truck.

Again at dawn another man in a pick-up showed up, more money was exchanged between the two individuals, and the group was loaded up in a pick-up truck for a day long ride to an orange grove in Texas. Once again the Alter, Sonora, scene is repeated as many people gathered in this grove where various "coyotes" are calling for specific work crews.

It is in the orange grove that Benito met two young brothers from Chiapas who start calling him "tio" (uncle) as they are very frightened. Throughout the night they ask Benito if they should turn themselves in the "migra" (border patrol) as they are cold, hungry, and tired. Benito advises to wait until morning as he is afraid that a "coyote" will see them escape and perhaps shoot them. He felt that they were safer to escape in broad daylight.

Sure enough, Sergio Hernandez reappears shortly after dawn in a van, accompanied by his cousin, Antonio, and a woman from Oaxaca. The group of forty is split up at this point and other people are recruited for the tomato fields of Immokalee among which are the two brothers from Chiapas as well as a man and wife also from Chiapas who speak an Indian dialect.

Antonio, Sergio, and the woman from Oaxaca sit up in the front seat and twelve young men and women and Benito are told to lie flat in the back. With the exception of the front seats, all of the van's seats had been taken out and they are told to lie flat two by two, head to toe with Jose lying parallel against the back door of the van. Benito is lying horizontally on the right side of the van with his head against the back door of the van and against his son's head. It is at this point that he loses track of time, as they are not allowed to raise their heads. They are yelled at if they move, and they are each given a small bag of "tostitos," a bottle of juice to share, and plastic gallon milk jug to urinate in. At gas stops the women are allowed to go to the rest room.

He recalls both Sergio and Antonio sharing the driving duties and claims that Sergio was driving at the time of the accident. From his vantage point, he observed the driver

dozing off, he felt the van swerve, hit the shoulder of the road, and heard the rear right tire blow.

The next thing he recalls is being sprawled out in the highway, being unable to move, and seeing his son, Jose, carried away in a stretcher and calling, "Please leave my son with me. Do not take him away from me." Fortunately, somebody at the scene of the accident heard and understood him, and both Benito and Jose were taken to Leesburg Memorial Hospital where they were treated for multiple limb fractures.

Jose recalls being thrown out of the van, flying through the air, and trying but unable to get up. He also recalls Sergio Hernandez running up to him and telling him not to worry as he would take care of everything and pay all medical costs.

According to the medical report, treatment was initiated at 1 a.m. December 24, 1997 (Jose's birthday took place while he was in the hospital on December 26, 1997). By the time I came in contact with them, they were suffering from serious arm, leg, and hip fractures; they were frightened, suspicious of all, and completely disoriented.

The Farmworkers Association of Florida and Orlando Quakers' first task was to secure housing, food, clothing, and medical treatment for these two men with the exception that the cottage would serve as a gathering point for all other victims of the accident before their trip back to Mexico. This never happened.

Jeannie Economos of the Farmworkers Association of Florida made numerous telephone inquiries and was unable to trace anybody except a man and woman from Chiapas. She relates that the woman died and her body was claimed from a mortuary by a Mr. Perez from Delray Beach. Her brother was released, again to Mr. Perez, with multiple fractures to both legs. I am very troubled that as of January 11, 1998, eleven accident victims have not been located. The Farmworkers Association of Florida as a NGA and with limited resources was able to zero in on the couple from Chiapas and I commend

them for their efforts.

I am further troubled by an incident which occurred during an interview between Benito Muro Banuelos and Mercedes Herrera and Butch Kennedy of the United States Department of Labor. I was invited by Mr. Kennedy to sit in at this interview which took place January 7, 1998, as Benito trusted me, as I had been his major caregiver. It was imperative that he sign his statement in order for the investigation to carry on. Toward the end of the interview, Enrique Romero, Deputy Consul of the Orlando based Consulate of Mexico, walked into the room and told Benito, in Spanish and I quote, "Deje de quejarse Benito porque si sigue quejando lo voy a tirar de la ventana del avion cuando me to lleve a Mexico." "Stop complaining Benito, because if you continue doing so I will throw you out of the airplane window when I take you to Mexico."

I called Mr. Romero's attention to the seriousness of his statement, and he told me that he was "joking." It was no joke to Benito. People rarely forget their history and Benito was disoriented, physically hurt, emotionally traumatized and very frightened by his experience. After Mercedes Herrera and Butch Kennedy's departure he started to cry and told me that he had never been in an airplane and asked me to describe the "window system of an airplane." I spent a long time describing Orlando International Airport with special emphasis that there were always many people there. I then proceeded to describe a commercial airplane.

I was able to calm him down a bit, but it was at this point that he affirmed to me that he would no longer make any further statements, and that henceforth he would deny everything that he had stated before. He did indeed live up to his word. From that point on, he absolutely refused to either speak about the accident or if unable to obfuscate he simply denied previous declarations. I have spoken to Deputy Consul Romero about this tactless faux pas and I hope that he takes my rebuke in the spirit in which it is given and applies it with wisdom.

Benito and Jose left Orlando for Brownsville, Texas, on the morning of January 9, 1998, and were reunited with their

family in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. It must be remembered that the above is my personal accounting of incidents which were either told to me or which I witnessed and is just one piece of the full story. I am troubled that Antonio Hernandez Sr. as a resident of Guadalupe, Zacatecas, might bring further harm to either Benito, Jose, or their family. I am also concerned that Antonio Hernandez Jr. of Immokalee, Florida, will find the other eleven victims and intimidate them into silence or worse yet, call for reprisals on them as well as all who have been involved with this tragic episode.

With this report I ask that a full investigation of the December 23, 1997, traffic accident on I-75 (near Wildwood, Florida) be carried out. Perhaps such an investigation will help in bringing what appears to be a sophisticated and intricate smuggling ring from Mexico into the State of Florida to a halt. The purchase and sale of human beings as a labor force in the United States must stop. However, it is also most important that pressure be brought upon the government of Mexico as to the root causes of the Mexican Diaspora. Benito, Jose, and many thousands of other desperate Mexican men and women are economic refugees and the main responsibility for their situation falls upon the government of Mexico.

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cc: University of Central Florida
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State of Florida Department of Labor
Farmworkers Ministry-Dioceses of Orlando

Sonia Nieves Burton-Attorney at Law
Family members and Friends

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