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# Review of *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769-1913*, by R.S. Street

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***Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769–1913.*** By Richard Steven Street. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. Pp. xxv, 904. Illustrations. Paper, \$29.95.)

Farmworkers in California play a prominent role in some of the more noteworthy literature of the twentieth century. *The Grapes of Wrath's* Tom Joad and his family, for instance, remind us of the painful, seemingly endless suffering of migrant workers. But Joad's story also demonstrates that he was part of a broader community of migrant workers who lived in the Hoovervilles, shantytowns, and drainage ditches that characterized rural California at the time. In *Beasts of the Field*, the first of his three-volume history of farmworkers, Richard Steven Street describes the story of agricultural migrant workers in California from roughly the 1760s through 1913 to uncover how California farmworkers became a class before the Joads took to the road.

Street divides his narrative into six roughly chronological categories. He begins by explaining the colonial and preindustrial infancy of the Spanish missions throughout the region that became California to demonstrate how Spanish officials relied on Indians' labor to make the land productive. By the early nineteenth century, officials had virtually enslaved these laborers by shackling and imprisoning them to keep them in line. To gain greater control of native field hands in the 1840s, farm owners and legislators resorted to passing oppressive laws that turned free, native workers into indentured servants. Growers exploited these workers horribly, fed them little, and provided insufficient housing. Not

surprisingly, native workers died at astonishingly high rates, forcing growers to search for new laborers. Bindlemen, who carried their belongings in a bundle strapped to their backs, filled that void. For roughly twenty years, bindlemen choked on dust and dodged hazardous machines nearly continuously from late spring through late fall to bring in crops such as wheat, a job that grew more dangerous as growers began mechanizing production. Bindlemen eventually sought higher wages and safer working conditions, and Chinese immigrants began taking their place.

Chinese workers soon dominated the labor pool, particularly after completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 when now-unemployed Chinese workers flooded the agricultural labor market. But the influx of these workers sparked intense racism among white Californians. While lower-sort whites attacked Chinese workers for taking low pay, state and national officials codified anti-Chinese animosity by passing a series of laws designed to restrict workers' movements and to reduce immigration. Despite these racist attacks, Chinese laborers continued to carve out a place for themselves in the fields of California. They did so in part because bosses and growers defended Chinese workers for working hard and accepting low wages, lower in fact than most whites. That said, growers tried to replace Chinese workers with school-aged children. The plan backfired, and Chinese immigrants dominated agricultural labor until the early twentieth century, when their population declined as a result of immigration restrictions and low replacement by natural increase.

As the number of Chinese declined, Japanese immigrants filled the open jobs. In many respects, Japanese workers faced the same hardships faced by their Chinese and Indian predecessors—poor pay, unscrupulous employers, bad food, inadequate housing, long hours, dangerous work, and racism. But Japanese workers were the first group of farm laborers in California to succeed at controlling some of the conditions of their employment, and they did it by organizing farmworker unions. The turning point for organization came in Oxnard in 1903, when a union of roughly 1,500 Japanese and Mexican sugar beet workers shut down the industry by walking off their jobs. The strike forced employers to raise wages to previous highs and to eliminate growers' attempts to strong-arm workers into working longer hours for lower pay. The strike was successful despite the fact that the workers acted without the support of

the American Federation of Labor, then headed by Samuel Gompers, which refused to admit Japanese into its ranks.

In the first ten years of the twentieth century, collective bargaining enabled many Japanese laborers to earn enough money to obtain land for themselves and their families. When they left the fields, bindlemen, who now moved around by hopping trains, reappeared to take their place. The mobility of living on the road helped them avoid the rigors and dangers of the hardest agricultural labor, but it also inhibited their ability to organize and to force growers to improve working conditions and pay higher wages. Street demonstrates how these workers nevertheless developed their own nascent working-class radicalism, which emerged clearly when workers tried to organize local unions in Fresno from roughly 1909 to 1911. When workers tried to expand on that success in San Diego, however, union organizers were beaten badly, compelling activists to reevaluate their strategies before moving to the next effort to secure workers a decent wage and humane working conditions. Their new strategies, devised initially in Fresno and revised thereafter, continued to shape the farmworker movement through the end of the twentieth century, a topic Street will take up in another volume.

A relatively short review can hardly do this book justice. It is a deeply detailed, subtly told narrative history of California farmworkers. Street clearly sympathizes with his subjects, a perspective that leads him to portray farmworkers rightly as active and powerful people, rather than as oppressed laborers who endure their fate. In exquisite detail, Street describes their strengths and shortcomings with clarity and precision, and recounts the lives of workers and how they contributed to agricultural production in California. Workers were, in fact, the basis of that production. More broadly, Street argues that class existed in California as a result of the group he studies, farmworkers. Their story illustrates that class “provides a unifying meaning to the disparate experiences of the many races and nationalities who toiled in California’s fertile valleys from the days of Spanish missions to the second decade of the twentieth century” (xix). And Street takes that broad view justifiably. His topic is complex and changes dramatically over the course of the study, but that broader view also allows Street to sift through, as Frank Norris wrote in *The Octopus* (1986[1901]), all the “shams” and “wickednesses” of specific stories to make a point “that will, in the end, prevail,” and to show

that all things and people must “surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.”

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