Observations from the Field: The SAW Program and the Mushroom Industry in Southeastern Pennsylvania

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The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, or IRCA, contributed to the booming mushroom industry of today and the growing Mexican enclaves in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Two programs in particular of this far reaching immigration law—general amnesty and the Special Agricultural Workers Program—played a major role in these processes. Once again, new versions of these programs are being tossed about in heated legislative debates on “illegal” immigration in Washington, D.C. Regularization of illegal workers raises concerns among some members of the House of Representatives and their constituencies. Congressmen/women who represent districts with an agricultural industry do not know whether the best course of action to secure a farm labor supply is to legalize workers or to initiate an H-2A type of guest worker program. Legalization, they worry, may result in an immediate exodus of newly legalized workers creating a labor shortage in agriculture and food production. It is also feared that legalization will result in additional unauthorized border crossings and uncontrolled immigration that will place an economic and social burden on communities.

I address one of these concerns in this paper—the immediate exodus of legalized workers with the potential of creating labor shortage. My objectives are two-fold: (1) to show and explain why a massive labor exodus did not take place in the mushroom industry of Southeastern Pennsylvania after the SAW Program and (2) to propose the need for more than one labor regularization program in pending immigration reform. I will start with a description of the mushroom industry in Southeastern Pennsylvania, focusing on Southern Chester County. The industry, its production, and current labor force employed in the industry will be addressed. It is followed by a discussion of the SAW Program. Its objectives, the number of successful applicants in southern Chester County, and its contribution to the growth of Mexican enclaves will be discussed. I continue by demonstrating that the adjustment of their legal immigration status did not result in their immediate exodus from the mushroom industry. In fact, observations suggest that other factors, such as the human capital of the workers and employment satisfaction, determined if and when a worker leaves the industry. I conclude by calling for the need to move away from proposing a one size fits all type of legalization program for agriculture. A brief research agenda that should be considered in developing more than one program to meet the labor needs of specific crop industries is proposed.

From the outset, I want to inform the reader that I am not an agricultural economist and did not conduct extensive research specifically on the turnover in labor of the mushroom industry as a result of the SAW Program. I am an anthropologist who has studied the mushroom industry in Southern Chester (see García & González, 1995; García, 1997; 1998 a & b; 2006), the raise and growth of Mexican enclaves in local communities in the area (see García, 1997; 2002), and lately substance abuse among transnational workers (see García, 2003a & b; García & Gondolf, 2004; García & González, 2006). Periodically, since 1993, I have gathered information on key informants and case studies and have included them in a qualitative database. These case studies—32 in all—were selected using a combination of sampling techniques to represent residency, employment and migration history, background characteristics, origins in Mexico, and history of substance use and abuse. I have maintained contact with these research subjects over the years and have followed their lives closely. I draw on these case studies to write this paper and make my presentation.
I. The Mushroom Industry in Southeastern Pennsylvania

Most of the nation’s mushrooms are grown in Southeastern Pennsylvania, in a single region, southern Chester County. It covers the lower one-third of Chester County, and is comprised of 20 municipalities divided into four school districts. Mushrooms have been grown in this beautiful and semi-rural region since the early 1900s. Mushroom farms and the smell of mushroom compost that permeates the air, Philips Mushroom Museum, and a number of trucks with their company logos transporting mushrooms to market are daily remainders of this tradition. The growing Mexican origin population in local communities is another indicator of the industry’s presence. Members of this population make up the majority of the production and processing labor force of the industry.

About 80 percent of the 76 mushroom growers in the county are located in Southern Chester County, the heartland of mushroom country. In 2000, according to USDA-NASS figures, local growers produced most of the state’s 442,615,000 mushroom pounds that generated nearly 333 million dollars in sales (Pennsylvania Agricultural Statistic Services, 2000). A growing number of the new growers, about a dozen of them, are ex-Mexican migrants who were once mushroom harvesters. Agaricus mushrooms, the common white button variety sold in grocery stores across the country, account for the majority of the mushrooms grown in the region. However, with each passing year, growers are producing portobellos, shitakes, oysters, and other specialty mushrooms.

About 4,400 Mexican migrants and immigrants make up the majority of the harvesters in the mushroom industry. The vast majority are males. The men are mainly in their twenties, thirties, and forties; and a smaller number in their fifties and sixties. The older migrants are married, and it is not unusual for them to work side by side with their sons who also live in the same housing units. The men, regardless of age, have little or no formal education. And nearly all of the migrants are monolingual Spanish-speakers.

In the past, until about a couple of decades ago, when most doubles, or mushroom production units, were fitted with air-conditioners, mushroom work was seasonal (Brosius, 1987). However, now, mushrooms are grown year-round, and migrant workers visit their homeland only when they or their employers find a temporary replacement. Remuneration is primarily based on the piece rate. Harvesters work any from 40 to 65 hours, sometimes up to 80 hours per week. They are paid anywhere from $1.00 to $1.35 per ten pound box of harvested mushrooms, and they harvest a quote of 5 to 6 boxes per hour. Under optimal harvesting conditions, some workers harvest 9 boxes per hour. Some of the larger companies pay their workers an hourly wage, from $7.00 to $7.50, together with a bonus after 5 or 6 boxes harvested in an hour. Medical and other benefits are also provided.

II. The SAW Program in Southern Chester County

The immigrant workers in the mushroom industry adjusted their legal status through the SAW Program in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This program, as mentioned earlier was
developed to legalize undocumented workers employed in agriculture. In regards to eligibility, the applicants had to perform at least 90 days of agricultural work in the United States in the years preceding the enactment of IRCA. The application period was from June 1, 1987, to November 30, 1988. Workers who successfully met the requirements of the program were granted work authorization visas and were required to adjust their status to permanent resident, or what is commonly known as “green card” status, within a given period. Like other permanent residents, the workers were allowed to sponsor the immigration of their wives and children.

In Chester County, as many illegal workers employed in the mushroom industry as possible legalized their status through the SAW Program. In all, according to estimates by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), 1,560 illegal migrants qualified for the SAW Program in Chester County and granted an authorization to remain and work in the country (Smith, 1992).

Starting in the late 1980s, as they adjusted their legal status through the SAW Program, migrants began to settle with their families in Kennett Square and other communities situated along Routes One and Forty-One. According to Census 2000, the “Hispanic” population (Mexicans and non-Mexicans) in Southern Chester County increased from 3,728 in 1990 to 8,452 individuals in 2000. An example of this increase is evident in two communities: Kennett Square and Toughkenamon. In absolute numbers, as Table 1: Ethnic Population Size in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, 1990 and 2000 shows, the Mexican-origin population rose from 662 (12.6% of the total population) in 1990 to 1,470 (27.9%) residents in 2000, an increase of 120 percent. Located about one mile west of Kennett Square, on Old Baltimore Pike, or Route One, is the unincorporated community of Toughkenamon. As demonstrated in Table 2: Ethnic Population Size in Toughkenamon, Pennsylvania, 1990 and 2000, the Mexican-origin population increased from 500 (39.28% of the total population) in 1990 to 665 inhabitants (48.4%) in 2000, an increase of 33 percent. In this community, the Mexican-origin population is now the ethnic majority. Increasing, the Mexican-origin population is no longer concentrated in specific neighborhoods in these and other communities, but is now spreading out and mortgaging or renting homes where they can afford to do so. Some of the more fortunate are also opening businesses (to date 43 in the region), and about a dozen of them are growing mushrooms.

Table 1: Ethnic Population Size, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, 1990 and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Hispanics</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic Whites</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>600/11.4%</td>
<td>662/12.6%</td>
<td>3,918/75.08%</td>
<td>38/0.92</td>
<td>5,218/100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>507/9.6%</td>
<td>1,470/27.9%</td>
<td>3,183/60.4%</td>
<td>113/2.1%</td>
<td>5,273/100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Ethnic Population Size, Toughkenamon, Pennsylvania, 1990 and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Hispanics</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic Whites</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>43/03.38%</td>
<td>500/39.28%</td>
<td>726/57.03%</td>
<td>4/0.31%</td>
<td>1,273/100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>33/2.4%</td>
<td>665/48.4%</td>
<td>658/47.9%</td>
<td>19/0.01%</td>
<td>1,375/100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


III. The Exodus of Legalized Workers

The turnover among workers who adjusted their status under the SAW Program was gradual in the mushroom industry; and in many cases, as legalized workers left, their kinsmen filled vacancies (Elaine Marnell, Human Resource Office, Kaolin Farms, personal communication, June 1, 2006). In fact, through the sponsorship of family members for permanent residency, the SAW Program added prospective workers into the labor pool, dependents and other kin of SAW residents. This is evident in Kaolin Farms, one of the larger producers in the area. The labor force of this company—750 strong—has moved from one primarily comprised of males to one that now includes families, and grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins (Elaine Marnell, Human Resource Office, Kaolin Farms, personal communication, June 1, 2006). These workers, like their SAW counterparts, harvest, pack, ship, and provide other support services in the production of mushrooms.

Additionally, today, nearly two decades since the SAW Program, as the following two cases show, some workers who adjusted their status remain in the mushroom industry.

Case Number One: Enrique is a 42 years-old, married documented or legal worker with two daughters and three sons. Similar to other migrants, his education is limited. He does not speak English. Enrique is an experienced migrant. He first worked in Reading, Pennsylvania, in the late 1970s and in California in the 1980s. While in California, under the SAW Program, he adjusted his legal status to green card holder. Since 1990, he has worked for the same mushroom company in Kennett Square, and lives in a cottage provided by his employer with eight other men, four of them his brothers. Enrique and his co-workers, who number about 60, work from
60 to 80 hours per week, seven days out of the week, and about every other week, they get a day off.

Case Number Two: Sixty-seven year-old Guillermo, or Memo as his friends call him, is married with three adult daughters in Mexico, each one married and with families. Like many campesinos of his generation, instead of going to school, Don Guillermo tilled the land with his father in Guanajuato. After working as an illegal worker for years, he regularized his status through the SAW Program in the late 1980s, and is now a legal permanent resident. Don Guillermo has worked for only two mushroom employers over the last 22 years, and currently lives with seven others in grower provided housing. On average, he and his 30 crewmates work 60 hours per week. He has also worked in many areas of the United States, among them Texas, Michigan, and Arizona, which is not surprising since he started to migrate as bracero worker in the late 1940s.

The number of workers, legalized through the SAW Program, who left mushroom work for employment in another industry is unknown. The industry and governmental agencies, such as USDA or the U.S. Department of Labor, have not kept a tally. What is known is that large mushroom companies in particular continue to do everything possible to hold on to their laborers and to address the needs of their workers outside of the work place. Some companies established human resource offices with bilingual and bicultural staff to help workers to find housing, obtain a drivers license, and establish credit locally (García, 2002; forthcoming, Neu, 1988). Some claim that mushroom producers look after their employees to keep the Kaolin Mushroom Workers Union from gaining ground in the region; growers argue that it is a good business and improves community relations.

Why did some legalized workers leave the mushroom industry, while others, as the previous two case studies show, remained for years? The reasons are unknown, and will remain unknown until more research on the subject is conducted. Nonetheless, my observations indicate that legalization was not the sole determining factor. A combination of factors, in tandem with legalization, influenced whether a worker left or stayed. These factors, as will be discussed, are the individual background characteristics of the laborer, a worker’s decision to immigrate, the human capital of the laborer, a worker’s satisfaction with his employer, availability of gainful employment outside of the mushroom industry, and the laborer’s social networks in and outside of region. I will discuss each one.

1. Individual Background Characteristics of the Migrant

Individual background characteristics of the migrant are basically age and marital status. Age, as I discovered, was not a major factor that determined if a newly legalized migrant left the mushroom industry after the SAW Program. Marital status, on the other hand, was important. Married migrants with dependents had more of an economic incentive to leave the mushroom industry for another, if wages were higher and work was abundant in order to meet their family’s basic needs.
2. Human Capital

Human capital provides the wherewithal needed to find successfully gainful and high paying employment. Examples of this type of capital are a formal education, vocational training, occupational skills, and English language acquisition. Migrants with a formal education, occupation skills, and English language competency were among those who left and continue to leave the mushroom industry for work in another industry. A formal education, coupled with competence in the English language, facilitated locating employment outside of the mushroom industry.

3. Satisfaction with Employer

Satisfaction with employer basically refers to the migrant’s contentment with his employer and place of employment. This satisfaction is associated with compensation, working conditions, a sense of being appreciated, and familiarity with the company. Harvesters who believed that they are being paid in accordance with current rates, treated fairly, appreciated for their hard work, and had worked for a company for a number of years did not leave the mushroom industry, or for that matter, leave their employer, after the SAW Program, perhaps out of loyalty. Mushroom employers assisted their workers to become legalized under the SAW Program. They provided their employees with letters verifying employment and granted them time off from work to take medical examinations, to get finger printed, and to attend appointments with immigration authorities. Out of appreciation, some workers developed a sense of commitment and loyalty to their employers, in some cases working for them for more than 20 years.

4. Employment History

Employment history refers to the individual’s jobs and positions in the United States and Mexico, positive as well as negative work experiences, and time employed in each job. It played a role in whether workers left the mushroom industry for work in another industry. Workers who had been exposed to employment outside of the mushroom industry—in which they learned other skills, gained other work experiences, and discovered that there are other sources of work—were more likely to leave the mushroom industry for another. However, these workers in many instances only left if employment opportunities were better elsewhere.

5. Decision to Immigrate

The decision to immigrate refers to an individual leaving their homeland in Mexico, if married, with wife and children, and settling down permanently in the United States. Migrants, whose intentions were to immigrate before they started to migrate to Pennsylvania, but did not because they were illegal, or decided to immigrate once in Pennsylvania, left the mushroom industry upon regularizing their legal status. They sought employment elsewhere in order to meet the high cost of living in the region. However, at the same time, immigration did not always result in leaving the industry for another. An undetermined number of migrant workers
decided to immigrate after legalization and sponsored their wives and children, but did not abandon mushroom employment for work in another industry.

Legalization, it must also be noted, does not necessarily result in the desire or decision to immigrate to the United States. Some migrants, as I have found, prefer to work in Pennsylvania for long stretches of time as opposed to staying permanently. They have no intentions to immigrate, especially with their families. Many of them prefer to raise their children in Mexico, away from gang activity and illegal drug use that threaten family values and traditions.

6. Availability of Gainful Employment Outside of Mushroom Industry

Availability of gainful employment outside of the mushroom industry refers to work opportunities that provide employment year round and pays above the minimum hourly wage. This employment opportunity must also be within reach of low-skilled workers with limited proficiency in the English language. In Southeastern Pennsylvania, during the immediate years following the implementation of the SAW Program, there were little opportunities outside of the mushroom industry. Landscaping and horse ranches were two industries that provide near year round work and wages similar to those in the mushroom industry. However, given their small numbers, employment in these industries was limited. Work in the service industry was not an alternative. Employment was not gainful and wages were at the minimal required by law. Moreover, similar to today, these jobs were not always available to low-skilled Mexican workers. The local service industry preferred laborers with a high school education and English proficiency.

7. Social Networks In and Outside of Region

Social networks are basically social relationships with kin and friends who interact on a regular basis and assist each other with job leads, and temporary housing, loans, and mutual support. These social relations are not place or site-specific; that is, they include social contacts outside of southeastern Pennsylvania. Newly legalized migrants, who were members of extensive networks in and outside of the region, had access to information and resources that permitted them to leave the mushroom industry. There workers were in a good position to leave the mushroom industry. They had a greater number of job leads, had kin or friends employed in other industries who may put in a good word for them, and had loans at their disposal that will pay for their relocation costs.

B. Salvador Martinez: A Case Study of a Legalized Worker

The seven factors in different combinations influenced or determined if a legalized worker left the mushroom industry in the post-SAW Program period. No single factor, perhaps with the exception of satisfaction with employer, establishes if a worker will stay in or leave the industry. To demonstrate how a number of these factors come together, I present the case of Salvador Martinez. It shows that he gradually left the industry as he gained more human capital,
including the use of the English language, changed his marital status and started a family, and decided to immigrate and settle in the region.

In the mid-1980s, Salvador Martinez, who is currently 34 years old, first arrived to Southern Chester County on a hot and humid summer day at the young age of thirteen. He did not arrive alone but with his father, Agapito, who had worked in the mushroom industry as an undocumented worker since the early 1970s. Salvador was one of countless young illegal migrants arriving in the region with the hope of working in the mushroom industry. It was his first trip to the United States, and for that matter, it was his first trip outside of his home municipality of Moroleon in Guanajuato, Mexico.

Salvador is one of seven children born to Maria Salvatierra and Agapito Martinez in one of the many economically depressed pueblos in the municipality. Although they had little resources, they were able to reap a living from their meager rain-fed landholdings by growing subsistence crops and raising chickens and goats. Growing up, Salvador assisted his parents in the family’s economic activities while attending school. He did not continue beyond the sixth grade, although the opportunity existed. Like countless other young men who aspire to follow in their father’s footsteps to the United States, Salvador did not see a need to pursue an education beyond learning how to read and write.

Upon arriving in Southern Chester County, young Salvador lived with his father in a labor camp outside of Kennett Square owned by his father’s mushroom employer, Piaza Brothers Mushrooms, Inc., a family-operated mushroom growing enterprise. Salvador was the youngest resident in the camp made up of solo men, some of who were from his hometown. For the first couple of years, his employers did not expect much from him in terms of work. They considered him too young to work as hard and as fast as the older seasoned workers. When he was not playing on his own or with the children of his employers, Salvador learned how to harvest by helping his father. Around the age of 16, when local teenagers were in school, Salvador was a full fledged member of one of the harvest crews, at times, working as many as 60 hours per week. He would start as early as four in the morning and call it a day at six in the evening. In all, Salvador worked for Piaza Brothers Mushrooms, Inc., for nearly ten years.

In the late 1980s, Salvador and over a thousand other undocumented workers in Southern Chester County adjusted and legalized their immigration status through the SAW Program. In order to meet a major requirement for permanent immigration resident status, working knowledge of the English language, Salvador began to attend English as a Secondary Language (ESL) courses, sponsored by La Comunidad Hispana, and learn the language of his adopted country. After receiving his “Permanent Resident” card (commonly known as a “green card” but actually pink in color) in the late 1980s, he returned to his hometown in Mexico, after a five-year absence. In 1994, Salvador became a proud U.S. citizen.

Nearly a decade after arriving to Chester County for the first time, Salvador met, through a mutual friend at church, his wife-to-be Sonia Salvatierra, two years his junior. Sonia and her family had just arrived from a coastal state in southwestern Mexico that, until a decade ago, did
not have a strong migration tradition to the United States. Like many others who arrived after the SAW Program, the Salvatierra family—the parents and all three daughters—did so without proper immigration documents. Early on, Sonia worked as a house cleaner and at other odd jobs, as she took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and studied for her GED. In two years, with only the equivalent of a junior high school education, she learned English and completed her GED. After a two-year friendship, Salvador and Sonia married in 1995, and a few years later she adjusted her immigration status, becoming a permanent resident (a green card holder), and later became an U.S. citizen. During the first years of their marriage, Salvador and Sonia worked, and rented an apartment in Kennett Square until they could save enough money for a down payment on a place of their own. Salvador took a job as delivery person for a mushroom spawn company, after years in the mushroom industry, and Sonia became a teacher’s aide, all the while cleaning houses and carrying out other odd jobs. In 1997, the two of them, together with Sonia’s family, moved into a two bedroom single-family house with a finished basement converted into two additional bedrooms in a nearby community where homes are less expensive than in Kennett Square. Two years later, Salvador quit his delivery job and started growing mushrooms with his father-in-law. The two of them joined the ranks of over a dozen Mexican immigrant mushroom growers in Southern Chester County.

In 2000, Salvador and Sonia were blessed with a healthy and active son. Three years ago, Salvador gave up mushroom growing and found employment in one of the elementary schools in the region as custodian. Working as a custodian provides medical benefits for him and his family.

Salvador, like countless other of his SAW Program peers, did not leave the mushroom industry immediately after regularizing his immigration status. He remained in the industry another six years. Salvador did not have an immediate need to leave mushroom work. As a legal worker, he could work without fear of being identified and deported and travel to Mexico without any problems at the border. He would not abandon the mushroom industry for work elsewhere until he married and started a family.

IV. Conclusion

Although my observations of the SAW Program and the turnover among the workers who adjusted their status is not based on research on the subject matter, an examination of my ethnographic data and the case studies provides some clues. The information shows that legalization alone does not result in newly legalized workers leaving agriculture, in this case, the mushroom industry. The process is more complex. A number of factors, as presented in this paper, came into play, and in unknown combinations determined whether a worker left or stayed in the industry. Which factors and what combinations have the greatest determining value? I do not know with certainty. However, the case of Salvador Martinez gives us a good idea of how some of the factors operated over time and contributed to his decision to leave the industry.

My objective in this paper is not to claim that SAW workers do not leave agriculture in a short period of time. I know that they did. I witnessed it first-hand in California’s fruit and
vegetable industry while conducting my doctoral research in the late 1980s (García, 1992). Instead, drawing on my observations of the mushroom industry, I want to propose moving away from developing a single—one size fits all—legalization program for agriculture. We should consider developing three or more general programs that will meet the labor needs of specific crop industries. For example, it is possible that a SAW-like program (with some adjustments of course) will function properly and meet the needs of crop industries that grow crops year around, as was the case in the mushroom industry, while a guest worker program will be best for highly seasonal vegetable and fruit crops, as found in California and elsewhere. The development of these programs will require research. We need to gather information on the following about the crop industries:

- The general labor needs; that is, are the needs permanent (year round), semi-permanent or semi-seasonal
- Labor use over the course of different phases of production
- Crop values
- Expansion Plans
- Prevailing wages and benefits in a crop industry
- Housing and social service infrastructure in the area of production

We also need to consider and know the following about the prospective workers:

- Individual background characteristics
- Human capital
- Employment and migration history

Considering these and other factors yet to be identified will assist in thinking of what kind of legalization program is best for a crop industry. They will provide a sound understanding of the labor needs of the industry and the characteristics of the illegal or undocumented work force.

V. Bibliography


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Ethnographic observations of alcohol consumption in their homeland. *Contemporary Drug Problems* (under review).


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1 Basically, IRCA was to halt the growing “illegal” immigration problem of the United States by legalizing undocumented workers residing in the country, deterring others from entering illegally by penalizing employers who
hire workers without proper immigration documents or inspection. Specifically, the Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) Program, a major legalization program of IRCA, was to legalize the undocumented labor force employed in agriculture. It would allow illegal, or undocumented, farm workers, to legalize their status in the country, if they met stipulated criteria.

ii Illegal and undocumented migrant or worker will be used interchangeable throughout this paper to refer to individuals who entered and work in the United States without proper immigration authorization.


iv Real names of communities, municipalities, school districts, community organizations, and major roads will be used in this report. However, the identity of migrants, mushroom companies, and small businesses will be protected with pseudonyms.

v A “double” is a cement cylinder block built structure with few windows used to grow mushrooms. It is rectangular shaped and measures 8,000 square feet. The design and construction of the structure is ideal for artificially controlling light, temperature, humidity, air circulation and other environment conditions crucial to growing mushrooms. It is called a double because the building is divided in half—each half is independent from each other in terms of environment conditions which allow one variety of mushrooms to be grown on one side, and another variety on the other side.