Jan 1st, 4:00 AM - 5:00 AM

Agricultural Labor History: An Assessment of the Works of Ernesto Galarza.

Alex Saragoza
University of California - Berkeley

AGRICULTURAL LABOR HISTORY:

AN ASSESSMENT OF

THE WORKS OF ERNESTO GALARZA

ALEX ZARAGOZA

I

The figure of Ernesto Galarza appears prominently in the history of farm labor. Galarza's experience as a union organizer, particularly in California in the 1940s and 1950s, forms the foundation of his works on farmworkers. With *Merchants of Labor* (1964), and most recently in *Farmworkers and Agribusiness in California, 1947-1960* (1977), Galarza remains instrumental to the study of farmworkers and their struggle for justice and dignity. Moveover, given the preponderance of Mexicans in the agricultural labor force, Galarza's publications hold a special significance for Chicano studies.

In light of his other books, articles and essays Galarza occupies a central place among students of the Chicano experience. Thus, an assessment of Galarza's work on agricultural labor entails much more than a descriptive review or examination. To a large extend, a complete evaluation must encompass a critique of the perspective, methodology and analysis that Galarza brings to his history of farm labor.

II

It is oddly coincidental that Galarza's graduate training occurred at the university perhaps most identified with "institutional" history. Institutionalists emphasized the legislative and administrative powers of institutions, their uses, potency and perpetuation. In *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field* (1970) particularly, Galarza stressed the manipulation of laws, regulations and codes of local, state and federal agencies in order to thwart the unionization of farmworkers.

Spiders in the House and Workers in the Fiels fo-

cused on the two-decade confrontation between the DiGiorgio Corporation and the National Farm Workers Union from 1947 to 1968. At the center of the struggle lay an "Extension of Remarks" by Congressman Thomas H. Werdel in the Appendix of the Congressional Record (March 9, 1950). The "extension" was given the semblance of congressional approval and legitimacy as a report from the subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor. Moreover, the Werdel estension was utilized by the Digiorgio Corporation to undermine the NFLU through a suit against the union for the showing of a "libelous" film, *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*. In exhaustive detail, Galarza described the labyrinth of legalisms, distortions, innuendoes and myths that the corporation used against the union. In this regard, the Werdel remarks played a key role in legitimizing DiGiorgio's case against the union. With the collaboration of biased courts, hostile congressmen and a gullible media, the DiGiorgio corporation spun a web of lethal intrigue. In addition, DiGiorgic used previous court victories at every opportunity to weaken the NFLU and to discredit its leaders, including Ernesto Galarza.

The Werdel "report" composed the core of the DiGiorgio case. As Galarza pointed out, each legal skirmish increasingly exposed the corporation's direct participation and culpability in the writing of the Werdel document. The unraveling of the DiGiorgio case thus came to a damning conclusion: the ability of a corporation to manipulate courts, congress and laws to destroy a union.

Despite its symbolic "victory" at the end, the lengthy battle with DiGiorgio drained the union of its financial and political resources. The money expended on legal fees devastated the nascent funds of the NFLU. Union leaders also encountered vacillating political support, particularly from "big labor." And as the protracted court maneuvering continued, aid for the union waned among its backers. Finally, understandably, union members abandoned the effort. Unable to sustain a strike fund, beleaguered on all sides, the NFLU inspired little

confidence among its membership who had to confront the realities of providing for a family, paying bills and living at the margin of decency.

For Galarza, the DiGiorgio case represented a microcosm of the problems that beset the unionizing of farmworkers. In his scenario, the complicity of agribusiness (e.g. Digiorgio) and governmental institutions (e.g. congress, courts, judges, police), produced the failure of the NFLU. Farmworkers faced an array of institutions intent upon blocking any effort at unionization. Yet, these institutions did not exist in a vacuum and were clearly influenced by the political economy in which they operated.

Unfortunately, in *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field* the connection between the DiGiorgio corporation and the political climate it exploited was only vaguely, sporadically explored. Nevertheless, this connection was crucial to the DiGiorgio cause, fatal to the NFLU, and essential to our understanding of the underlying powers of agribusiness.

Post-war conservatism contributed critically to the effectiveness of DiGiorgio's machinations against the NFLU, an era that found particular expression in the figure of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anti-communist crusade with which he was identified. "For a period of nearly five years McCarthyism besmirched American politics, and the issue of subversion left its mark," as William Leuchtenburg has written, "because McCarthyism created an atmosphere which suffocated serious consideration of critical public issues." (1) The fear of "radicals," "subversives," and "communists" had been used against farmworkers before; but the credibility of such charges were tied to political conditions and economic circumstances.

At the time of the DiGiorgio strike, the conjunction of events worked to erode union support and to lend credence to its enemies: Chiang Kai-shek fell to the "Reds" in 1949, the announcement of Russian access to A-bomb secrets in the same year, the confession of physicist Klaus Fuchs to passing secrets to the Soviet Union in 1950, the Rosenberg case and

the conviction of Alger Hiss in January, 1950. In such a context, the fledgling union faced an apprehensive public, opportunistic politicians, fearful officials, and timid judges: all haunted by the specter of communist conspiracies, and, more importantly, all concerned with accusations of being "soft" on "commies."

Organized labor was also cognizant of prevailing political winds. Predictably, "big labor" found it prudent at times to avoid controversy, to evade the appeals of farm labor organizers labeled as "communists." As the AFL (later AFL-CIO in 1956) developed into its own form of big business, financial concerns and public image became paramount. Given the economic conditions of farm labor and the liabilities of supporting a "radical' union, the slim dividends of organizing agricultural laborers sapped big labor's commitment to a farmworkers' union.

Equally important, throughout this era, the weakness of liberals intensified the impact of McCarthyism. As Barton Bernstein has noted,

> Liberalism in practice was defective, and its defects contributed to the temporary success of McCarthyism... (M)ost liberals failed to understand their own responsibility for the assault upon civil liberties or to respond to the needs of an "other America" which they but dimly perceived. (2)

In such circumstances, the local influence of growers was magnified, their charges unchallenged, and their tactics sanctioned by an aura of patriotism in which striking farmworkers were painted as harbingers of communist totalitarianism.

Agricultural laborers, however, faced conditions remotely tied to obscure reports in the *Congressional Record* or to a libel suit over a movie. The failure of workers to participate in a union involved a complex process. The manipulation of institutions by large growers constituted only a partial answer. Caught for so many years in the web of in-

stitutional adversaries, Galarza in *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field* seemingly lost sight of the daily battles between farmworkers and institutions. For too few pages, Galarza provided only a glimpse of this crucial connection.

III

Farmworkers toil in a context conditioned by political currents as well as economic trends, technological innovation and social change. The impact of mechanization, farm technology, biocides and the loss of farmland to suburbs and industry increasingly worsen the economic situation of agricultural labor. Unemployment underemployment, and migrancy inevitably result. Yet, the institutions that produce these conditions rarely appear in the fields. In this respect, university researchers, corporate heads, and real estate developers remain largely invisible to workers. The enemies are much more concrete in the fields; the various machines that erase important sources of income during the seasonal labor cycle; the herbicides that greatly diminish "el desaije" (weeding of crops); water distribution systems that displace numerous irrigators; the growth of large farms that find it more profitable to buy machines, chemicals, and automatic sprinklers. Furthermore, these developments occur throughout the nation and uproot farmworkers from southern Texas to the Yakima Valley of Washington.

The economic context of farm labor frames their social interaction. Mexican immigrants arrive desperately poor, fearful of apprehension, and easily intimidated. More importantly, they join the ranks of resident and migrant farmworkers in the scramble for the jobs of longest duration, the better wages and low-rent housing. Growers, of course, are not blind to the profits available through the manipulation of competition among farmworkers. Thus, understandably, divisions arise among "Tejanos," "locales," and "mojados" - divisions that are reinforced by the nuances of regional and cultural differences.

The situation in Fresno County illustrates the worsening position of farmworkers. The subsequent graphs indicate the following:

(1) A leveling-off of the land use pattern devoted to agriculture.

(2) In the specific case of cotton, a long period of growth in which cotton production not only declines but is punctuated by the increased use of cotton picking machines.

(3) In grape vines, a clear trend toward a leveling-off of planting with obvious implications for the labor cycle that grapes generate.

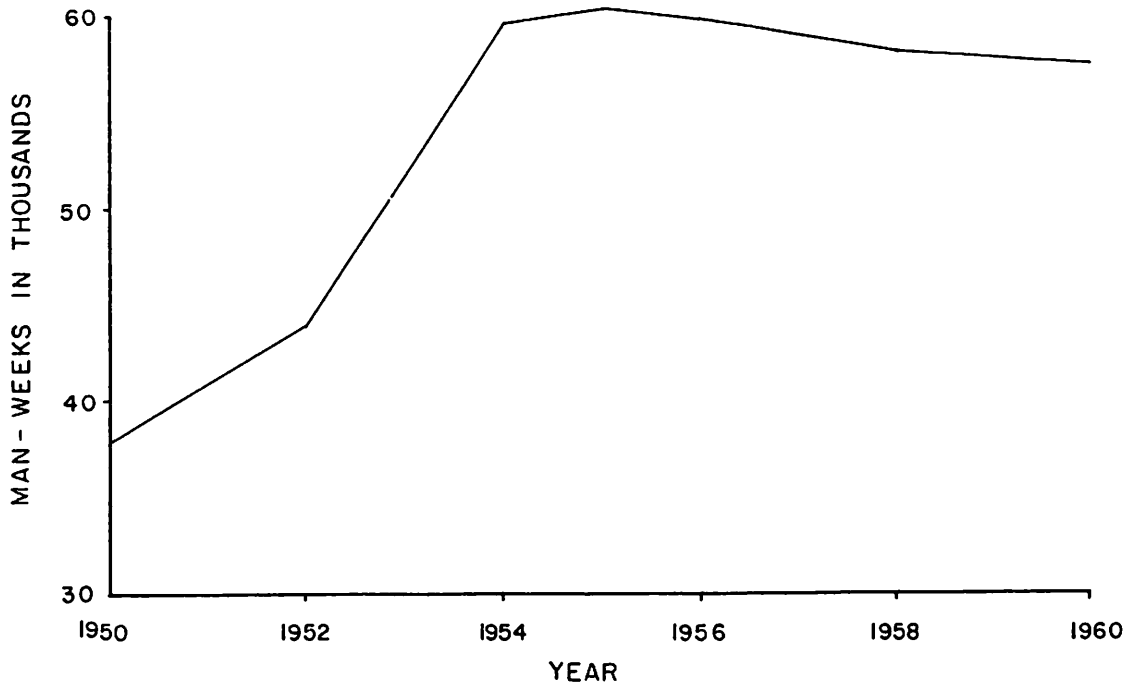
Given the lag in the absorption of farm labor into non-agricultural sectors of the economy, the continuation of Mexican immigrant labor, and the influx of displaced farmworkers from other areas, farm labor union organizers face a very difficult task in a situation where divisiveness prevails and unity suffers.

In the everyday struggle to find work, *campesinos* perceive and conceive their problems in their own terms. *Los mugrosos rancheros* (damn ranchers) are apt to be condemned in the same breath along with *los tejanos* (workers from Texas) and *mojados condenados* (damned wetbacks). In the early morning light on a contractor's front yard, a farmworker thinks about who will and who will not get a job on a tomato picker that day, for example. The monies poured into the development of the machine at the University of California at Davis and elsewhere are completely secondary, if contemplated at all. As the door opens, the hearbeat quickens; moments of tension, names called out, then despair, anger, resentment. Crestfallen, the worker returns to a car with balding tires and perhaps the eyes of a disappointed spouse. This is the daily drama of the battle between farmworkers and capitalist agricul-

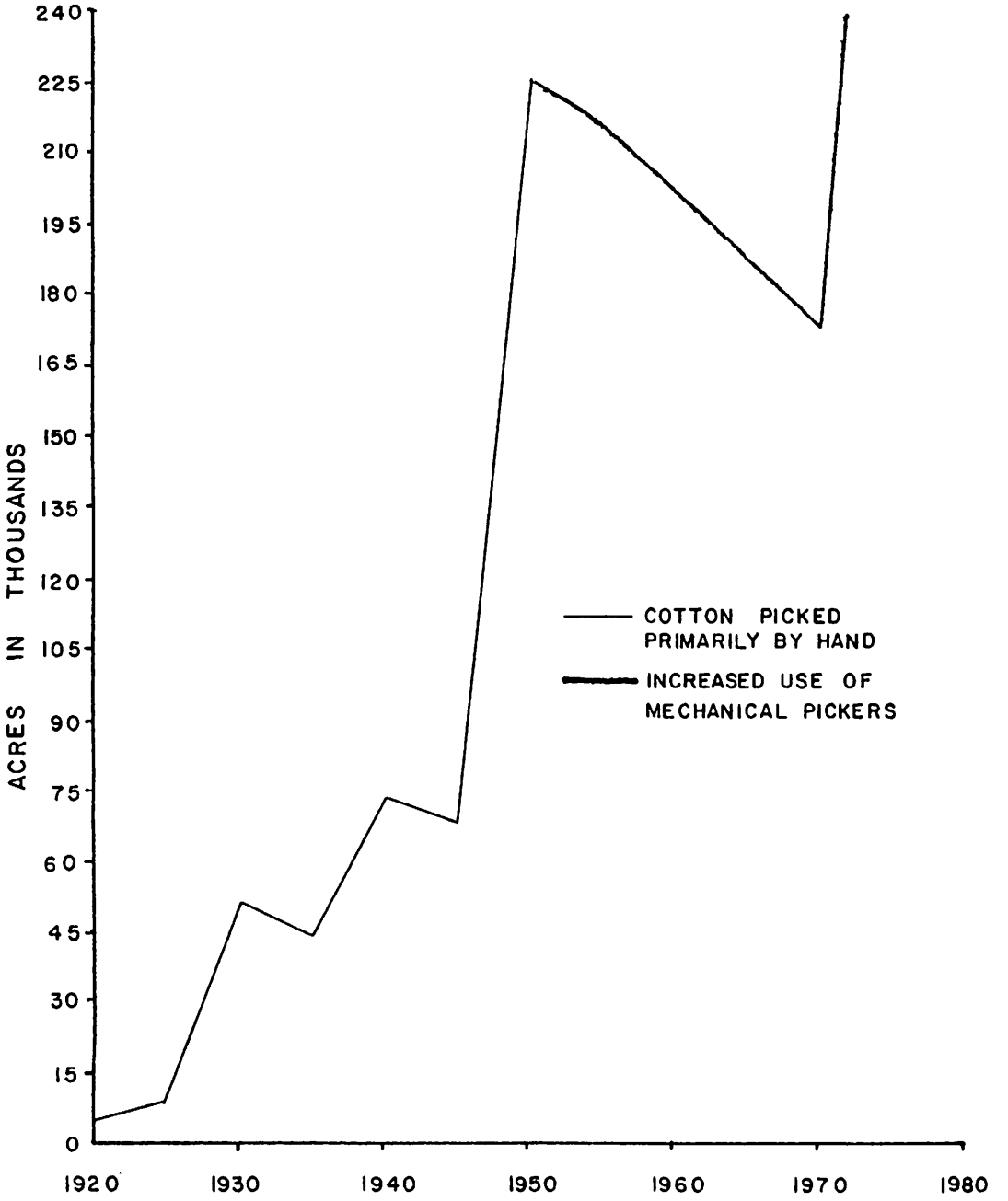
NUMBER OF GRAPE VINES IN FRESNO COUNTY, 1900 - 1975

ACREAGE IN FARMS IN FRESNO COUNTY, 1900-1975

ANNUAL AVERAGE MAN-WEEKS OF FARM EMPLOYMENT
IN FRESNO COUNTY, 1950 - 1960



COTTON ACREAGE IN FRESNO COUNTY, 1920-1975
AND USE OF HAND LABOR



ture, a drama often lost in Galarza's preoccupation with institutional "webs." If we are to understand the destruction of the NFLU at the hands of DiGiorgio *et. al.*, we must also understand the way that agribusiness penetrates the lives of farmworkers and withstands the impact of union organizers.

IV

Perhaps in recognition of the flaws in his earlier works, Galarza's recent book, *Farmworkers and Agribusiness* attempts to provide the context in which the NFLU tried, but failed, to organize a successful union. To a large extent, this publication seems to be a capstone to a trilogy of previous efforts. More importantly, as Galarza points out in his introduction, *Farmworkers and Agribusiness* fills a key gap in the history of agricultural labor. And if only implicitly, Galarza establishes a set of questions that farm labor historians must answer in the future.

In Galarza's analysis, the NFLU fell to three key forces. First, the development of corporate farming established a formidable and deadly "web" that managed an arsenal of well-coordinated weapons against the union, a theme noted in his *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field*. Second, the institutionalization of the *Bracero* system, Public Law 78, devastated the union's efforts as Mexican nationals were used to glut the labor market and to destroy strikes, a point Galarza demonstrated in *Merchants of Labor*. Third, the feeble responses or organized labor represented a serious loss of strength for the union - a weakness the NFLU could ill afford. On all three points, however, Galarza disappoints the reader. In general, the work is uneven, fragmented.

In the chapter on "Agribusinessland," particularly, the author jumps from one topic to the next (land, water, labor wages, housing, growers association and others) without a conceptual framework to indicate their interrelationships. This is indeed sadly significant. The section on agribusiness est-

ablishes a key question for the farm labor historian. A clear understanding of the dynamics of agribulture remains essential to the history of agricultural labor. Too often, agricultural labor history has focused on strikes, on episodes, and particular events. As it turns out, farm labor history remains basically a chronicle of failures, failures explained by the repression of workers by growers and their allies (police, judges, politicians, etc).

Galarza, on the other hand, begins appropriately with a description of agribusiness. Unfortunately, factors that impinge upon farmworkers and their unionization efforts. While "Agribusinessland" serves to discredit the Jeffersonian myths that surround farming in the United States, the chapter also demonstrates the need for farm labor history to comprehend the complexity of American agriculture.

The general decline in agricultural prices, for example, in the 1950s spurred the move to cut expenditures by farmers. Simultaneously, costs of production increased as chemicals and machinery went up in price. Farmers, large and small, turned toward labor to decrease the costs of production. Workers were most accessible to the influence and power of growers in contrast to chain stores, chemical companies or large manufacturing firms. Chain stores, for instance, greatly accelerated in the 1950s and paralleled the growth of suburbs, particularly in the West. As a result, Safeway *et. al.* expanded their influence in the pricing of agricultural commodities, a development that contained adverse consequences for farmworkers.

In this context, the *bracero* system was a godsend to small capitalist farmers of American agriculture. Farmers tenaciously held on to the program, particularly those who could not affort mechanical pickers, new irrigation works or expensive herbicides. Corporate farmers won either way. The end of the *bracero* system would squeeze still more farmers to "sell out" with large growers as probable buyers. The continuation of the program would represent a tool to kill unions and to maximize profits.

In short, while Galarza presents the pieces of a complicated puzzle, their convergence and coordination remain unclear. Nonetheless, Galarza's examination of agribusiness marks a key precondition to further studies of farm labor.

The enemies of farmworkers, as Galarza demonstrates included their "brothers" in organized labor. Again, Galarza breaks new ground in his analysis of the relationship between "big labor" and farmworker unions. Yet, the importance of this point suffers from certain shortcomings. Labor, through the 50s, was losing membership at worst, and holding on at best. The conservatism of the era was reflected in union leadership. Democrats in the West were consistently beaten by Republicans in a period overshadowed by the repercussions of McCarthyism. Given labor's political ties, the California Federation of Labor was not blind to the fact that Republicans dominated state offices, for Pat Brown's election in 1958 was the first democratic gubernatorial success since 1893. Thus, nationally as well as at the state level, labor was on the political defensive. The craven opportunism of organized labor dictated a conservative policy that undermined any support for a farmworkers union. As noted earlier, the political climate of the 1950s held little promise for the organizing of farm labor unions.

Galarza's treatment of organized labor adds to our understanding of the NFLU's failure. Galarza focuses on the "business unionism" and its concerns over the profitability of farm labor unions. In addition, Galarza outlines the internecine maneuvering between the AFL and CIO (Meany and Ruether, respectively) to gain control over any farm labor union. Yet, the relationship between local labor politics, national organizations and the decade's political climate remain vague despite the significance of Galarza's observations.

If *Farmworkers and Agribusiness* contains certain flaws, the sections on farm labor organizing bristle with insights that can come only from first-hand exerience. For Galarza, the unionization underwent three stages; first, an initial battle that ult-

imately failed, but that produced important lessons; second, an effort to end the *bracero* system; and third, the sad climax of the union's effort to survive. In his observations, Galarza offers a number of points that illuminate the practical problems of organizing. In this regard, these sections will undoubtedly become benchmarks for further studies. The chapters on farmworkers strikes prove to be the most valuable of the book, but they also point to a basic problem with *Farmworkers and Agribusiness.*

As throughout his farm labor works, Galarza relies essentially on his own experiences. In his most recent effort, it reveals the merits, and defects, of memoirs or autobiography. On those issues in thich he was personally involved, the pages manifest an energy and immediacy missing in much of the rest of the book. In this respect, the perspective of the author reflects his role as an organizer of farmworkers. Clearly, an important value of Galarza's work stems from a vantage point that very few, if any, historians can claim.

If only implicitly, Galarza provides a framework to understand the success (however limited) of the United Farm Workers Union in the 1960s. First, in his section on organizing, Galarza explains the strategy of targeting large growers for unionization efforts - a lesson well learned by the UFW in later years. Second, the NAUW's efforts to end the *bracero* system in 1964 will give the UFW a significant advantage over its immediate predecessors. Third, the political climate of the 1960s will change to an extend that agribusiness will acquire a negative image in contrast to the saintly portrayal of striking farmworkers. Fourth, the shift in the image of farmworkers will be made possible by the generally positive position maintained by the national news media, particularly in urban centers. Fifth, as a result, liberals, politicians, and labor leaders will find it acceptable, if not desirable, to be associated with farmworkers. Sixth, with such sanctions, the UFW will utilize the resultant support to legitimize and to implement tactics practically inconceivable to Galarza's NFLU, such as the secondary

boycotts in large cities. Seventh, aside from newly found "Anglo" aid, the UFW will carefully cultivate the benefits of the Chicano movement and its attendant nationalism to mobilize a virtual army of supporters - again, a resource unavailable to the NFLU and its organizational offspring.

V

On the other hand, the views of workers, their perceptions of their reality, of their enemies, of their decisions, rarely appear in Galarza's work. Agricultural laborers eventually decide to join, or not to join, a union. Some workers challenged the "web" Galarza so eloquently describes, others did not, whilt still others fluctuated between support and indifference. This dimension of farm labor history remains largely unexplored by historians.

As a work of scholarship, a close reading of Galarza's farm labor studies, especially *Spiders in the House* and *Farmworkers and Agribusiness* indicates a reliance on the author's recollections and personal records accumulated during his years as a farm labor organizer. In this respect, the section on "Agribusinessland," for instance, suffers from the lack of research on the development of agribusiness in California. The wealth of material of California agriculture, even secondary works, are absent in the footnotes. In other parts of the book, as well, the research seems deficient, particularly in supplying the political context of the unionization efforts of the 1950s.

In summary, in his latest work, Galarza has established two important questions that must be addressed by farm labor historians. The first concerns the interplay of the developments in capitalist agriculture and their effects on farmworkers, and second, the role of the organized labor in the unionization of agricultural laborers. Still, the analysis remains incomplete. A full examination of agribusiness must take into account the diversity and

their ability to organize effectively. In addition, if an institutional approach continues to be used, the context of such institutions must be carefully described and understood. Indeed, farm labor historians must perhaps consider a different analytical framework, one in which workers rather than just farmers are studied, consciousness rather than just strikes, "tejanos," "mojados," and "locales" rather than just contractors and placement services. Thus, the concrete struggle of workers, the *vida cotidiana* of their confrontation with machines, chemicals, border patrolmen, growers, and the underlying forces that bind them, still awaits an author -- one who, nevertheless, will most certainly have to rely on the knowledge and wisdom of Ernesto Galarza.

NOTES

1. William Leuchtenburg, *The Unfinished Century*, p. 705

2. Barton Bernstein, *Towards a New Past*, p.312