Milkin' It

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Submitted to the Department of Journalism

School of Humanities

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 2020

Captured from Birth

In a wooden pen on the right side of an upstate New York barn lies a pregnant cow, she doesn't have a name, but the tags on each of her ears read 3424. This isn't her first time in this pen, and it won't be her last. A few newborn calves lay nearby, all fenced off to make sure they don't try to milk from her teats. The needs of a farm constantly control the entirety of a newborn calf's first moments in life. The bull calves are usually sold off, and the heifer calves are raised to then impregnate and be used for milk. But the cows aren't the only ones on the farm with no freedom. Undocumented immigrants are facing limiting-controlled lives while stuck working on dairy farms, out of fear of what the rest of the United States holds against them.

Walter, one of the farm's six immigrant workers from Guatemala, notified the rest of the workers of 3424's condition. The birthing pen sticks out like a sore thumb compared to the rest of the farm, but for all the wrong reasons. There is plenty of hay covering the ground, with no open cement or a layer of cow feces covering the pen, unlike the rest of the farm. Since this pen is specific to delivering cows 3424 only shares it with one other cow, unlike her normal overfilled pens. With the contractions increasing 3424 paces her pen, until she finally becomes too uncomfortable to move, and lays down.

Different workers check on her periodically, but with no change in her condition, Walter continues his other tasks. As the delivery sits at a standstill 3424 continues crying out, switching positions from lying down to standing once again. Her amniotic sac rips open and there is a splat,

as blood and other amniotic fluids hit the ground. Ralph, a documented worker in his late 60's, comes rushing into the pen from a nearby barn.

With a lifetime full of experience, Ralph knows how what a normal cow delivery should look, and sound. Trouble was near as 3424's calf still hadn't begun to peak out, while her cries only worsened. Without a second thought he reached into 3424 from her behind, going in as deep as his shoulder.

"Quick, go grab some twine, damn calf is coming out the wrong way, we're gonna have to pull," he said.

Moments later he had two hooves of the calf sticking out the back of 3424 and was tying the twine around its ankles. "Pull! Pull!" He yelled to another farm worker, as he kept his arm inside 3424, guiding her calf out, making sure its head didn't get pushed backwards, breaking its neck during delivery.

"Get ready to catch," Ralph said, grinning widely.

With one more pull the calf flew out, like a giant slippery football. With some help from the other workers, the calf was quickly breathing on its own and adjusting to its new

surroundings. In only hours the newborn was trying to stand on its wobbly knees that buckled under the pressure.

Five Years Alone

Walter is the only immigrant worker on this upstate farm that is admittedly undocumented and willing to talk about his experiences. For his safety, and that of his family, the exact location and name of the farm will remain unspecified. Some immigrant workers are documented, or are in the midst of the citizenship process, others have purchased illegal papers and identification to get by but wish to not be identified in any manner.

All six immigrant workers and their families live together in a house across the street from the farm. The house's small and square nature prevents any of its residents from ever truly being alone, ensuring they are always on top of each other. The houses close proximity to the farm's driveway allows the undocumented workers the ability to come and go at all hours of the day.This is common practice within the dairy farming community, and even some of the legal citizens on this farm receive free housing.

While most of the immigrant workers are single, there are two families living in the immigrant house as well. Walter's girlfriend, Magali, and their seven-year-old son, both live with Walter in the farm provided housing. Walter has been in New York working on the farm for six years, but Magali and their son just arrived on the farm only a year ago. Magali began

working at a nearby gas station shortly after her entrance into the United States, but now works alongside Walter on the farm.

Walter found his way to the upstate New York farm through his uncle, who was already working there. All the current immigrant workers also got their jobs through family. Some were hired from other nearby farms, and the others all due to familial relations. Before Walter's family arrived here, he was sending as much money as possible back home to Guatemala. However, working a minimum wage job ensured Walter's family would go years before they could even fathom being together again.

With over 50 percent of Guatemala's population living below the poverty line, Walter pushed through the years of loneliness without seeing them and saved for his family. The money he sent home helped cover his family's day-to-day expenses, such as food and housing as well as saving for the eventual expense of traveling to New York. Now they are saving for legal fees for Magali, whom is in the process of trying to become a citizen. This process is costly for his family, and has resulted in multiple trips to New York City for necessary paperwork and interviews. With each trip the couple must request days off work, and go without pay when they need it most.

The Little Brown Boy

Walter and the other immigrant workers on the farm are commonly referred to as 'the Guads," and while there is a collective name for all the immigrant workers, only Walter typically interacts with the non-immigrant workers due to language barriers. Walter's interactions and overall standing with the other workers has changed over the years. In the first few years, as Walter was eagerly saving and missing his family, Walter kept a timid, head-down sort of attitude. Now that he has his family back, things have changed.

One of the non-immigrant workers, Robbie a 22-year-old born into the family business of dairy farming, said, "He's just damn cocky, it's in his personality now. Walter wasn't like that in the beginning, but he's cocky as hell now though."

Walter blames the staffing, calling his boss "loco, always yelling this and that. He's loud, and I'm no good being yelled at."

He continued his complaints of work and said, "The work is so boring. Every day I milk the cows, I feed the cows. I think I want to do something else, but I have to stay for Magali."

Robbie laughingly talked about how he refers to Walter as "the little brown boy," but tried further explaining that, "it's fine because he'll call me the dumb white boy right back."

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, "despite the clearly established principle that discrimination and abuse based on immigration status are violations of human rights, U.S. government policies continue to sanction human rights violations against migrants and im-migrants… Immigrant workers are often abused, exploited, and have become scapegoats and victims of racism and stereotyping."

Ralph also joins in on the harassing with Walter. During the filming of a short documentary on the farm Ralph laughingly told Walter, "the camera is going to take one look at ya, and boom, crack."

Walter retorts, "Now that, that's not funny Ralph," as he tried continuing his work.

Laughing even harder at himself knowing that commenting on Magali was a soft spot for Walter, Ralph said, "Don't worry it will look at lovely Magali and smile," as he winked.

Walter quickly finished his business in that area and yelled goodbye to Ralph. Teasing each other while on the job is a way of life for some of the non-immigrant workers, helping to alleviate the pressures of a mundane labor-intensive job. The immigrant workers do not have this privilege, as one insult landing wrong could lead to the end of their stay in the United States.

Cutting Walter, or any of the other immigrant workers wouldn't be a surprising event on the farm, as one of the bosses threatens exactly that at least once a week. Across the entire agricultural sector, farmers have felt the squeeze of trying to cut costs, especially labor costs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey, only about 33 percent of farmers are documented U.S. citizens. This 33 percent includes all of the smaller family farms, which are defined as grossing less than $250,000 annually. This leaves just under 70 percent of farm workers as either work-visa immigrants, or undocumented immigrants.

Using the Lower Class

A common misconception amongst naturally born citizens is that there are mandatory legal background checks with immigrant work placement agencies. Especially when President Trump has made statements such as, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have a lot of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." This misapprehension carries through to the farming industry, especially since 70 percent of these workers are immigrants and nearly no agencies require having their background checked.

When Brandon Mallory, founder of Agri-Placement Services Inc., a farmworkers placement agency that works with over 100 farms across the nation, talked about how his company navigates through what workers to work with and place on farms he said, "Yah know that's a very good question, and probably a bit of an embarrassing question to answer. We don't

do any police background checking of the workers. A lot of them come from people that we know or are relatives of people that we've already worked with, and it's kind of word of mouth."

Using lower-class members of society as laborers within the farming industry dates back centuries. Indentured servants were used for farm labor in exchange for passage to the New World, and quickly after Americans were paying for people of color to be kidnapped, abused, and then enslaved for work. Americans stole the rights from these people, ensuring they could maintain their high class by making the slaves do hard and grueling tasks such as farm work.

The first notable migration of Hispanic workers to the United States occurred after the end of the Mexican American War in 1848. Tens of thousands of workers emigrated to America for work. This Hispanic migration didn't greatly affect the ratio of laborers of the time though, as Chinese immigrants were migrating in larger scales.

From 1860 to 1890 the Chinese immigration population jumped from 35,000 to 100,000. These immigrants were working first in the gold mines and railroads, and then settling into agricultural and factory work. The increase in Chinese immigrants across various sectors of industry allowed for more Chinese immigrants to become successful and start their own businesses.

By starting their own businesses these laborers were moving up the class system and infringing on the white man's power. This brought about an increase of anti-Chinese sentiment and resulted in The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It wasn't until 1943, that Chinese immigrants and their families became eligible for U.S. citizenship again.

According to the Department of State Office of the Historian this reinstatement was not out of reflection and admittance of previous wrongdoing, but as "only in the interests of aiding the morale of a wartime ally during World War II."

World War I pushed farm owners to a new high as "poor weather, crop disease, and reduced acreages restricted," harvests and, "at the same time British, French and Italian governments expanded," their imports from the U.S, according to the Agricultural History Society.

Production costs soared as farm wage rates increased 103.5 percent from $25.13 a month in 1914 to $51.13 a month in 1919, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The farmers turned to Congress as the pressure to keep the military strong and the civilians fed piled on. Under this pressure Congress enacted the First Bracero Program, allowing for a new migration of Mexican workers into the United States. This program, allowing unskilled Mexican workers onto U.S. farms only lasted the length of the war.

During the Great Depression produce prices dropped significantly, and farmers faced a new extreme debt from expanding so rapidly during World War I. The cost of corn was so low, at 8 to 10 cents a bushel, families would use corn as fuel in their stoves rather than costly coal. All across the U.S. farmers were going bankrupt, with a total of 37,814 farmer bankruptcies from 1930 to 1939. According to the USDA, "Foreclosed farms and their assets were auctioned to the highest bidder at numerous sheriff's sales under the auspices of the courts." This left farm owners, and workers lost economically.

President Herbert Hoover started the Mexican Repatriation, further intensifying the displacement of migrant workers. From 1929 to 1936 this mass deportation of Mexican-Americans displaced between half a million to two million people into Mexico, including birth-right citizens of Mexican heritage. President Hoover's efforts to rid the Unites States of Mexican's were reversed as the U.S. needed to readjust its way of life, as it entered World War II.

The United States needed supplies to support the war, which meant more laborers. This need led to the Mexican Labor Program, of 1942 to 1947, which brought Mexican workers into the agricultural field, and directly onto farms again. In 1952 the Immigration and Nationality Act replaced this program, and was enacted to ensure work visas were no longer racially discriminate, creating the ground work for visas today.

Legalities? Who Can Afford Them?

Nowadays a popular work visa route is the H-2A program. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, the H-2A allows "agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the United States to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature."

Most dairy farms need to find workers outside of H-2A, due to the seasonal qualification, as dairy farming is year-round. To fill this gap there are placement agencies throughout the country, specifically handling and helping farms to find workers.

Agri-Placement Services, Inc. (APS), of Rochester New York, is one of these placement agencies. Mallory, of APS, defines his workers as, "human resource consultants," adding that, "we have a huge recruiting component…The idea is to make sure that the worker we sourced is having everything that they were promised, wage wise, benefits wise, and that they're delivering the level of work the farm expected from us, because the farm is the one that is paying us."

APS handles when there are conflicts with some of their placed workers on farms. Whether that be worker with worker conflict, in and out of the farm, or worker with employer conflict. When conflict arises, APS will move a worker to another farm, so long as they are meeting the performance standard of the employers.

Mallory said this is, “Because workers are on such short supply, they don’t struggle with finding work, not anymore. I mean, it’s a worker’s market. They dictate the terms a lot of the times because there’s not many of them. They buy for the best places to work where they’re going to earn the most money and have the best housing and are treated well… It’s not like they’re going to struggle to find work, not on dairy farms.”

Walter’s farm does not hire its workers through an agency such as APS, as it cannot afford the fees associated with such placement agencies. This leaves Walter with no one to stand up for him and inform him of his rights in the workplace. The government mandates posters of farm workers rights be posted within all farm workplaces. However, in Walter’s farm these posters are placed directly in his employer’s office, in small fine print, covered in hay and dust from years of being untouched.

In 2018, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, estimated there were 876,300 agriculture jobs waiting to be filled, and according to the American Farm Bureau Federation less than 4 percent are being filled by H-2A participants. The number of agricultural work visas simply have not been able to keep up with the amount of laborers needed. The number of U.S. agricultural visas grew drastically from 165,000 to 242,000 in 2016, but this still leaves roughly 800,000 agricultural jobs open, desperately needing to be filled.

Despite the lack of background checks within placement agencies, I-9 documentation is necessary, as with all United States jobs to verify the identity and legal authorization to work.

Documentation such as a driver's license, passport, and temporary resident card, can be used to fulfill this requirement.

Mallory, of Agri-Placement Services Inc., said, "The I-9 requirement requires, and this is what we stick to, we do not deviate from it, the document has to appear to be genuine and it has to represent the person that's giving it to you… For a reasonable person, if it simply appears to be genuine, you accept it."

For a business such as Mallory's to continue it's important to stick as strictly to this legality as possible. However, these I-9 guidelines become fuzzy for many smaller farms. They don't receive workers through agencies and aren't being checked regularly by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Many dairy farms across upstate New York simply require documentation for their workers.

Whether the paperwork accurately matches the worker can often be overlooked. Walter was hired using these practices. His name on the farm, versus his name on his Facebook page, versus his name on his pay stub are all different. While Walter is the only admittedly falsely documented worker on this farm, other undocumented immigrants here also use this multiple name scenario. These unruly hiring practices are becoming more of the norm across regions as the need of more laborers is continually unmet.

When it comes to goods such as dairy, the price has remained stable for decades with prices bouncing between two to three dollars since 1985. Meanwhile the cost to produce the goods has drastically increased.

According to the Cornell University program on Dairy Markets and Policy in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, “The United States federal and state governments regulate many agricultural products, but none is more regulated than milk.”

Smaller farms simply cannot offset the large upfront costs of upgrading a farm to meet new regulations and standards while producing goods in small batches. This allows the larger farms, who can continually produce large batches of goods to offset costs, to survive, while mechanization and regulations rise. As a result many farms are going under. According to the USDA, the number of farmworkers has declined from nearly 10 million in the 1950s to just over three million in the 2000s.

Americans Have Gone Soft on Fact Checking

Workers such as Walter, who due to limited choice, work the grueling and unappealing hours of dairy work are sometimes all that can help keep small farms afloat. The USDA states, “Hired farmworkers make up less than 1 percent of all U.S. wage and salary workers, but they play an essential role in U.S. agriculture.”

This issue touches on the broader implications of the ideals of Americans as whole. There is a common fear that undocumented workers are stealing jobs out from under Americans who are struggling in the current economic climate. However, the facts do not back this idea, but instead show a shift in what work Americans are willing to do.

Some natural born citizens, who work on and own dairy farms hold these ideals as well, despite their firsthand knowledge of the economic hardship dairy farms are facing. Both Ralph and Robbie, documented and non-immigrant co-workers of Walter, said they would vote for Trump during the oncoming election cycle, despite his stance against immigrants.

"I only care about one thing, guns. I can't vote for anyone on limiting guns. Trump doesn't matter, I won't vote for any of the democrats," said Ralph. "I believe every American should have the right to military grade weapons. Guns aren't the problem, people are, just look at Chicago."

In 2019 Chicago recorded 490 murders, down nearly 35 percent from it's all time high in two decades during 2016. While Chicago was recorded as the highest amount of actual deaths in one city in 2016, it wasn't recorded to even be in the top ten of murders per capita during the time. This easy misinterpretation of information has spread throughout the U.S. as political leaders such as Trump call out Chicago to attempt backing their ideals on less gun control.

Robbie said, “I don’t know, I don’t think Trump is really doing that bad. Things have kinda gotten better for us farmers. Plus, guns are pretty cool, and the dems do whine quite a bit.”

The reality is that Chapter 12 family farm bankruptcies increased another 20 percent during 2019. According to the U.S. Courts, this is the reported Chapter 12 bankruptcies within family farms that has occurred since 2011.

Both Robbie and Ralph said they would not be voting in any political manner with immigration matters in mind, despite how closely they work with immigrants or their understanding of how necessary immigrants are for farm work.

Actions Tend to Speak Louder than Words

The hypocrisy associated with immigrant workers stems so deep within American ideals it is embedded into how our politicians run for roles in government. Often the same people running our politics who are vowing to help the farmers, are those who are against immigration. President Donald Trump has time and time again been proudly outward towards his support of the working farmers, who “are great patriots,” which he claims will “be much stronger than they are right now,” with his coming policies in 2018.

Yet in August of 2019, President Donald Trump announced a tariff on Chinese imports of 10 percent of 300 billion dollars’ worth of goods. In quick retaliation China halted all imports of American agricultural goods. This led to nearly a year and a half long trade war, which has only

just begun to mend. During this time farms took serious hits in revenue and is why the bankruptcies were at a high once again.

Kristin Duncanson, who raises soybeans, corn and hogs in south central Minnesota, recently spoke to NPR and said, "We can weather the weather. We know how to do that. It's weathering the politics that's the tough part."

Small farms typically run using a small work force, but these farms still rely on relations overseas to ensure their trade of grains, meats, dairy, or produce are still steady. During the mending process with China Trump boasted of his work for farmers, sending out a tweet on November 17, 2019 that read:

“Our great Farmers will receive another major round of “cash,” compliments of China Tariffs, prior to Thanksgiving. The smaller farms and farmers will be big beneficiaries. In the meantime, and as you may have noticed, China is starting to buy big again. Japan deal DONE. Enjoy!”

Just shortly after this tweet the reality of who was getting payouts became clear in an article from AgMag from Environmental Working Group. The article states;

"Of the payments since August, the top 10 percent of recipients – the largest, most profitable industrial-scale farms in the country – got half… Three of these farming fat cats got more than $1 million each. Forty-five got more than $500,000 each, and 514 got more than $250,000, which under the program's rules is supposed to be the limit any single recipient can get… Even Trump 2016 campaign advisors and billionaires are cashing in."

Agriculture being tied to politics within the U.S. goes as far back as 1862, when Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act to ensure cheaper land, so long as the West was free of slavery. Now in present day, Trump is constantly bringing immigration into his politics. Trump promised that his, "Trump administration will stop illegal immigration, deport all criminal aliens, and save American lives."

Walter refuses to talk about politics with Robbie and Ralph around, but later while alone admitted he hates Trump and said, "he's a big idiot. Hurting my family and my people." He continued, "Trump is loud, gets people excited, and then me and my family are in danger. We can't go back to Guatemala. We love America. The winter here is bad, but New York City is beautiful."

Phrases from Trump's speeches such as "save American lives," whilst speaking of limiting immigration from Hispanic countries specifically makes it sound as if all illegal immigrants are putting legal citizens in danger. Wording such as this is consistently used through

the president's speech, yet his policies themselves don't always follow through with this degrading and nationalist sentiment.

In his first year in office Trump said he wanted to, "Establish new immigration controls to boost wages and to ensure that open jobs are offered to American workers first." Then in April of 2017 he made the executive order to "Buy American and Hire American." Yet with unemployment rates soaring high, from 1.35 million unemployed to 7.14 million, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, President Trump is looking to hire more foreign workers.

The Trump administration said they would allow another 35,000 foreign workers into the United States. The Executive Director of Immigration Policy, Jon Baselice of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said, "Many immigrant workers are currently helping our nation…Their contributions to our national well-being are critically important to our safety and security until we flatten the curve on this pandemic."

At an unprecedented high of unemployment, the U.S. is still relying on immigrant workers for the country to successfully run, and not crumble into another 2008 economic crash. President Donald Trump's actions and words have effected farmers beyond immigrations laws. The present very real need for more immigrant workers for our agricultural sector to survive compared to the constant fight 'to stick to the old American ideals' is an out of touch narrative that is doing nothing but harm for the nation and its citizens.

"I don't want to work here forever," Walter said. "Hopefully, we leave after Magali gets her papers. But I want to stay in America. Maybe somewhere warm. Maybe California with the nice beaches."

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analysis, Full Bio Follow Linkedin Follow Twitter Kimberly Amadeo has 20 years of experience in economic, and business strategy She writes about the U. S. Economy for The Balance Read The Balance's editorial policies Kimberly Amadeo. "5 Causes of High Food Prices." *The Balance*, https://www.thebalance.com/why-are-food-prices-rising-causes-of-food-price-inflation-3306099. Accessed 7 Apr. 2020.

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3. Josh Hillman
4. Jennifer Lindsley
5. Shawn Lindsley
6. F. Brandon Mallory
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7. Jim McDonald
8. Julie (Breeder)
9. Magali (Girlfriend)
10. Tara Prior
11. “Walter” Geovani Ramos
12. Robbie Scholten
13. Wayne Scholten
14. Delaney Sherwood
15. Paula Sherwood