Fresh Strawberries – Picked Today

Last year in late June, the sun high overhead in a cloudless sky and *Ring Of Fire* playing on the radio, I edged my Prius over to the side of the road and waited for the dust to settle. I had just passed a sign that said *Fresh Strawberries - Picked* Today. It had been many years since I stopped at a roadside stand to buy berries. It was early and the seller's table, shaded by a picnic canopy, presented an array of red berries framed in green baskets. The air was warm and I began to sweat as I scanned the table waiting for the girl to finish with another customer. I chose two boxes that were filled with uniform mid-size berries; one for me and one for my children. Before I walked back to the car, I singled out one bright, but not too ripe, berry and slowly bit into the bottom half. It was all still there - the firm fleshiness of the fruit, the subtle flow of juice to the corners of my mouth and the special tartness in the flavour of an earth grown strawberry that is impossible to duplicate. I looked past the berry seller's table to a green and earthen striped field with its rows all directed toward me. I took a deep breath. The sight of bodies hunched between the rows, the smell of hot dry clay and the tickle of juice running down my fingers transported me back to my childhood and my first paying job. With mixed emotions, I threw what was left of the berry, which I was still holding between my two forefingers and thumb, at the telephone pole next to the car.

My parents, in an effort to jump-start my working life, set me up as a child labourer. The job they found for me was not the child labour of the industrial textile mill or running shoe sweatshop, but the child labour required of immigrant children whose families attempt to instill a work ethic and keep their children busy, while they

themselves focus on obtaining the necessities to survive and even prosper in their new homeland.

It was Vancouver, 1965, and I was ten. School was out, my grades were good and I had hoped to ride my bike, watch *Lucy* reruns and play hockey on the street, when my parents announced that I would start work as a berry picker in the flatland strawberry fields of Richmond, B.C. I was not pleased, but this reality became my summer school for the next few years.

On the first workday, we were given a punch card on which we printed our name. The card listed Mayleigh Farms as our employer and it was signed by the Straw Boss. There were twelve baskets to a flat, each flat we filled earned a punch out on the card and we were paid at the end of the season for the work we had done. Keeping track of the card was our responsibility. The first year was a short, easy introduction to the reality of work. Not too strenuous, not too much pressure, more of lark than a real job. There were ten of us, the plants were new and the berries were few. We picked, maybe seven days over three weeks, and many of those weren't full days.

My reward, when the season was done, was a cheque written out in my name for $5.20. I can still see the farmer printing my name, tearing along the perforation and handing me a light blue-coloured piece of paper. I brought it home to my parents. I knew it had value, but my cash, up to this point, had come from collecting pop bottles and keeping the change when my uncle sent me to buy cigarettes at the corner store. My father wanted to frame it as the first dollar I ever made, but I decided the Fraser Book Bin had a few used MAD magazines and comics that I needed to buy.

The next summer everything changed; I am not sure why. Perhaps there was a good crop or maybe more farmers became aware of the cheap labour available. I was told before school was out that I wouldn't be playing street hockey on the school blacktop for the summer, I would be picking berries Monday to Saturday until mid-July when the family would be heading to Penticton for a holiday. My elementary schoolmates, mostly second-plus generation Canadians, had no idea that berry picking in the summer was more than an afternoon option to satisfy a craving, but unlike Tom Sawyer's friends they didn't offer to join me.

Every summer season for the following four years had me take my freshly packed lunch, walk six blocks to the corner of Fraser and 54th and wait behind the now-gone Wonder Bakery for a ride with nearly thirty other young wage earners - a disorganized group of boys aged ten to fifteen, too young to drive or apply for a job that featured an hourly rate and a decent schedule. The group included K, son of the Straw Boss who picked about my speed; E, who thought he was smart but didn't have a sense of humour; P, the brainiac; the other E who was a preacher's kid and W, W and G who formed their own gang and took off at lunch to smoke cigarettes. We were mainly children of post- WWII Mennonite immigrants, mixed in with a few recently arrived older Paraguayan Mennonites who needed the money and weren't employable elsewhere because of language issues. Like lemmings, we all left our homes in time to make the 6:00 am pickup. Returning home if we missed the bus meant facing some unwanted music - an experience not to be repeated if possible.

The workday began at 5:30 am with my radio alarm set to C-FUN 1410. I got dressed and attempted to pack a perfect lunch that was nutritious, filling and, because of variable weather conditions, able to both stay dry and not wilt in the summer heat. My berry picker lunch, stuffed into a paper bag (with optional plastic if it looked like rain), included a no-name pop called cola, lemon-lime or orange, a peanut butter and/or jam sandwich (meat and cheese only if it looked cloudy or wet - I didn't like warm Lyoner and limp American Jack), an apple and cookies (baked that week) to snack on or for trading. The odd day Mom might have made some Krazy Cake (puffed wheat squares with chocolate) or even left out a Wagon Wheel. In early shades of recycling, my parents expected the paper bags to be returned for re-use as often as possible. The pop, frozen the night before, would usually thaw in time for lunch. The trick being not to put the pop in the freezer too early or the resultant exploded mess in the morning would mean both valuable time wasted cleaning up and a warm pop at lunch.

At the bakery, waiting for the morning sun to lift the chill, we kicked stones down the alley trying for distance, hoping not to hit a parked car or a window. Our main topics of conversation were the weather and The Truck - When will the Truck arrive? Think it'll rain? Maybe the Truck has a flat. Maybe The Truck fell in the river. Maybe we'll get rained out. Maybe we'll finish the field and get to go home early. A short day for any reason was a bonus. After all, this wasn't my choice; I was there because my parents decided I should be.

Our transport, The Truck, was a vintage vehicle that featured a flat wooden deck with plank sides and three metal arches that spanned overhead, each having two

interior stabilizing poles attached to the floor. The arches allowed for a tarp in case of rain. There were two short backless benches offering a side view of the trip. Most of us had to stand. The poles helped but The Truck was usually full enough that bracing your legs would maintain your balance as you bumped against the others. The front cab, with its long stick shift, had room for only the Straw Boss, who had absolute control of the crew. She was also a Mennonite immigrant, but somehow we never felt the kinship. Even her children had to ride in the back. Once loaded, the Straw Boss closed the gate and we began the bumpy ride down Fraser Street, over the wooden through truss swing span bridge built in 1905 and on into Richmond. The inherent danger in this mode of transportation was never obvious to us. We simply hung on, swayed back and forth through a few corners and watched the scenery until The Truck slowed to turn right on an inclined driveway that spanned a ditch, and finally stopped in the field. The gate then opened and we poured off on to the dirt track. I would check the sky for signs of rain and find a place to stash my lunch. On warm days I would put it under my jacket somewhere that might have shade all morning like behind the outhouse. On days that looked like rain, it was better to hide it under a bush or old board that might be lying around.

The Straw Boss watched over everything we did. She had the dual job of recording the berries picked and walking behind the pickers checking for missed berries. Getting called back to pick cleaner led to wasted time and even less money, and money seemed to take on more prominence over the years. Being watched by the Straw Boss was like having all the tough side of your Mom present without any of the warmth or wiggle room. If you got singled out, it was never for praise, only for a

reprimand or comparison to better pickers which was followed by noisy teasing from those who felt safe in their rows. Following a reprimand, I always made a mental note of the most annoying heckler as a potential berry target for later in the day.

At the start of a new field, each row of dirt between the berries was up for grabs. K and P and I always dawdled to get on the truck last because it was first off, first choice - even if the rows had been staked from where they had been left off the day before. I tried hard to choose a row beside a friend or at least someone who picked about the same speed as I did, so I had company. Otherwise the day was long and quiet. I made sure to avoid picking beside someone faster because once they were ahead, they would often lean over to your half of the row and snag whatever big and juicy berries they could easily find. This helped them fill their baskets quicker, and left you the smaller, harder-to-find berries.

Once the rows were set, the other E would pull out his large Bible-sized 14 transistor radio and tune it to Rick Honey on CKLG. I preferred Long John Tanner on C-Fun, but even so the songs and chatter helped to get us through the day. Over the four years I picked berries, we grooved through the bubble gum of *Hanky Panky* and *Pied Piper*, the energy of *Wild Thing*, into the Summer of Love with *White Rabbit* and *Light My Fire* and ended the summer of ‘69 with *Bad Moon Rising* and *A Boy Named Sue*. The only hassling E got was when *Strawberry Fields Forever* came on and we would universally heckle and boo him until he turned it off. The song was fine but we didn’t want to hear it while we were stuck picking.

There were no set breaks during the day. Finishing your flat meant you could take a slow walk to the end of the row to exchange your full baskets for empty ones, record your accomplishment and get a drink of water. This was a welcome break from bending over in the hot sun. The walk to record your basket, depending where the Straw Boss was, made you an easy target for flying berries. Throwing berries wasn't a regular occurrence because the penalty could be getting fired or worse, a call to your parents, but you had to be on guard, especially in the afternoon when the sun was hot and boredom and restlessness set in. Explosive, moist berries, either partially rotted, moldy, overripe or half eaten - the ideal staining variety - were saved in the tray for just such occasions. And they had to be thrown on the sly. My covert throwing techniques varied, but the two most common were a quick sidearm, which gave speed and reasonable accuracy, and an overhead lob, which didn't give away your position as easily or hit as often but the effect of getting someone with a gooey strawberry on the head was worth gloating over, with your comrades if possible or internally at least. We also treated it more as a game amongst friends and peers than a form of aggression. If the direct hit was made anonymously, the trick was to look nonchalant without a hint of smugness.

K and I had a system. We would watch each other's back when we targeted someone. If they looked in our direction we would look behind us to try and see the thrower as well. Or we might point in an alternate direction or shrug. If the throw could be traced back, then one would have to be on guard all day against the target and any of their friends, as berries would be launched anytime no one else was looking. The ride

home would be spent recounting hits and bragging about who got who without being detected. Payback was not generally carried into the next day.

At times the game got out of hand and a sort of tribal justice took over. One time a new picker became a target himself after he ratted out E who had just nailed P coming out of the outhouse. The newbie soon learned to change his behaviour and his shirt. If a berry hit an innocent bystander - someone too serious or too old to appreciate it or too young to handle the action - the thrower would be targeted for subsequent return action or even get their face washed with berries during lunch or before the truck left. Being caught throwing by the Straw Boss, depending on her mood or your previous offences, could result in being fired on the spot. One of the benefits of hanging with K was that he couldn't get fired. My younger brother was not so lucky. He and my fourteen-year-old cousin were caught disturbing some neighbouring cows during lunch hour and were fired on the spot. They were expected to walk home and find their way to Vancouver from the farm. That was his last day of picking; my father decided my brother would be better off accompanying him to the construction site to pick up lumber scraps.

My berry-picking career lasted six years. The best year of picking was my last, when I was invited to live on the Braun farm in Aldergrove. It was 1970, I was fifteen and being away from home for three weeks of the summer was an adventure. Ten of us guys, aged fourteen to seventeen, were housed in a section of the original farmhouse. We were expected to fend for ourselves. We shared a two-burner hot plate on which we made our suppers, usually soup or hotdogs. Lunches were sandwich spread or devilled ham on Wonder Bread and cookies from home. There were also six girls of similar age

staying in the main house and in the evenings we played pool or cards and just hung out. One guy even had an old VW beetle that we used in the evenings to go shopping, get snacks or just cruise around. There was a real sense of freedom this summer. Our soundtrack ranged from Hitchin' A Ride to In The Summertime to Ohio to *Spill The Wine*.

The picking there was civilized - no checkers. We were expected to be responsible on the field as well as the rest of the farm. Flats were tallied on a sheet during the day and added to your account in the evening. The going rate by this time was a dollar a flat. I was an average picker - five flats a day or sometimes, if I pushed, I could do six.

One day, mid season, bright, sunny but not too hot, the berries were huge and I managed to pick seven flats. Everyone hit a personal best that day. I was on a roll; I completed my fourth just before heading in for lunch. At the end of the day as I brought my final flat to the trailer I said to Mrs. Braun, who controlled the tally, "That's seven." Before I had even let go of the flat she said, "That's only six, John." I said no and explained how I had picked four before lunch and another three after. Her total was only six and we went back and forth over my story twice but she didn't budge. I turned, trying to hold in my tears, and shuffled head down toward the old farmhouse. I don't know what was more demoralizing, not getting credit for hitting seven or for being assumed to be a liar. Later that evening, Mrs. Braun, seeing my distress, recounted all the flats and compared it to her totals. She discovered her mistake, came to find me and confirmed that I had indeed picked seven flats. That made my day.

My final year as a strawberry picker lasted three weeks, but the sense of confidence I gained from even the limited autonomy I had on that farm made my previous berry picking experience pale by comparison. I lived without (direct) adult supervision, cooked my own (limited variety of) food, got up on time, did a day's work and made some life long friends. And I earned a full eighty-three dollars that helped pay for my cool Lloyd's LPand- 8-track playing stereo purchased from the Sears catalogue.

As I drove away from the stand with two baskets of BC's best, I recognized that my child labour experience had formed me as a consumer, a worker, an employer and as a parent. Even though it was more than forty years ago, and not an experience I relished at the time or ever wanted to repeat, the intensity of the situations and the camaraderie among us berry pickers was what made the strawberry picking memorable in an 'I'm glad I survived that' kind of way.

Originally the job had not been about the money. What I wanted was paid for with pocket change, but by the final year I knew what I was going to buy if I earned enough. Even though my goals today are not as specific as an LP/8-track player, I still like to be paid fairly for the work I do and know that doing the work allows me to pay for what I want.

As a worker I took three essentials with me to each new job: how to be on time, how to work a full day without getting canned, and how a group of workers can stick together if some are treated unfairly.

Survival in the berry field also helped me realize how I would want to be treated as an employee. As a business owner I don't look over my workers' shoulders every minute of the day, I allow them to have a bit of fun (with a pool table or dart board, not throwing berries), I pay them fairly for the work they do, I usually take their word for things (and if not, I double check my facts), and I provide them with a safe place to keep their lunch.

The overriding element in all of this was the sense of community we derived from shared adversity even if it was minor. Our hardships were few but they loomed large to us at that stage in our lives. Watching each other's backs, sharing food brought from home, spending time together away from parental oversight, absorbing the culture and music of the times, and making our own (limited) way in an unfamiliar world helped me form my approach to life. I have an ever-present sense of fairness and justice that doesn't like to see the odds turned too much in any one person's favour. There was an optimism flowing in those times that if people cared enough about each other, they could live peaceably together and make the world a better place. My final three weeks on the Braun farm imbued that optimism with a ring of truth and I still have the sense that it is possible.

As I bring the baskets of berries from my car to the office, I think maybe next year I'll pick some strawberries myself and spend a bit of time sitting in the field - help me remember a few more things. But the one thing I know and already learned in 1969, was that, like Johnny Cash's *Boy Named Sue*, regardless of whether I think about it now

and then, or the lessons I might have won, berry picking is one experience that I will not impose on my children. Anything but that.