

Harvest In South Georgia

In 1998, the rich muck farms along Lake Apopka (central Florida) closed due to a State of Florida buy-out and environmental clean-up which drained the lake. 2,500 farmworkers lost their jobs. This exhibit describes the life and work of those farmworkers. Their story is also a larger story about migrant and seasonal farmworkers throughout the Southeast whose labors continue to put food on our tables and whose culture is **changing the face of the region.**

In 1999, Zellwin Farms, which had recently closed its large muck farm near Apopka, Florida, opened a \$2 million vegetable packing house east of Lake Park, Georgia. In July 2001, Coggins Farms and Produce of Lake Park bought the facility. Like most farms in South Georgia, Coggins is staffed by **migrant labor from Mexico and Central America.** Most workers migrate for economic reasons, taking jobs that no one else wants.

"If we didn't have migrant workers we wouldn't be in this business. Mexicans first question is 'How much can we work?' Locals ask, 'What time do we go home?'"

Anthony Coggins, farmer, Echols County

HISPANIC POPULATION BY COUNTY, 2000

Echols	20%
Lowndes	3%
Colquitt	11%



Worker packs peppers at Coggins, Echols County.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, 2002.



A crew from southern Mexico picks cucumbers at the David Corbett farm, Echols County.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, 2002.



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South Georgia: Culture of farm work

Like the farmers of Apopka, South Georgia farmers used German POWs during World War II, but most labor was local. Since the 1970's, agriculture has become **dependent on migrant labor** from various ethnic backgrounds. Most U.S. farmworkers today are **male, foreign born, young, poor, and single** or living separately from spouses and children.

Farmworkers tend to **specialize in particular crops.**

Like any job, there is a culture of work: labor organized by crews, personalized tools, co-worker nicknames, lunch trucks that bring food to the packing houses or fields, fish fries and barbecues put on by crew leaders or farmers at season's end.

"Forty years ago I was doing the same thing they're doing. I went to Canada for seven years starting in the late 1950s picking tobacco, made three to four times what I could here in Georgia. So I can relate to why they do it. To better yourself."

James S. Rogers, farmer, Echols County



This tobacco crew near Tifton was typical of farm labor through the 1970s.

Photo Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Hispanic farmworkers
at Planters Warehouse
in Nashville.

*Photo by
Laurie Kay Sommers,
1997.*



Mexican Customs and Culture



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Most farmworkers in South Georgia are from Mexico. Most speak Spanish but value the importance of learning English. Mexicans and American Southerners share certain traditional values, such as the importance of **family, personal contacts, and respect for elders.** Family celebrations are important. But basic cultural differences sometimes lead to prejudice. For example, Mexicans often choose not to join formal groups. Eye contact is often viewed as a sign of disrespect. For them, a good party is often loud and noisy. In a predominantly Protestant region, the majority are Catholic in culture if not in practice.



A quinceañera is a 15th birthday coming of age celebration for Mexican girls.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, 2000.



The Feast Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, Valdosta, 1997.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, 1997.



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Changing face of South Georgia



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Hispanics are the largest and newest ethnic group in the region. Some leave the migrant stream and settle in local communities, working in construction, food processing, and service jobs. Especially during the past ten years, local businesses and organizations have begun to cater to the needs of this group. Local markets serve as unofficial community centers for Hispanics, providing foodstuffs, lunch counters, bilingual newspapers, music recordings, phone cards, informational flyers, devotional candles, and a gathering place.



Pilar, the Guatemalan-born cook at RJ's Food Mart in Echols County, makes gorditas for sale to local farmworkers.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, 2002

