

Reckoning with Racism History in Wisconsin Agriculture

by Anthony Pahnke Family Farm Defender Vice President

Originally Published by CapTimes (Madison, WI) July 31, 2020

Like many farm families, mine speaks in terms of generations. My neighbors do too - stop by their homesteads, and they will tell you how they are the fourth, fifth or perhaps even the sixth generation on the land. With such time comes many stories filled with accidents, sacrifice and hard work.

Now, amid ongoing national conversations on racism, we have the chance to better understand the context of such stories.

What we need to realize is that discussions about our nation's troubled past when it comes to race relations don't make stories of hard work and sacrifice any less meaningful; to the contrary, it complements such histories and shows where allies are possible to improve race relations and even our food system.

My Family History

While one side of my family has farm histories, the other which is Potawatomi, has different stories. It was my father's grandmother, as my cousin tells, who had to choose between marrying an immigrant or moving to Oklahoma to be with relatives. She ended up marrying a German man so she could stay in Wisconsin.

She was presented with this choice because of the 1833 Treaty of Chicago. Such treaties were backed by a clear racist ideal - white Americans of European descent were considered by politicians such as Andrew Jackson to be superior to Native Americans. As a result, European-Americans were to claim the land, while Native Americans were forced of it.



1833 Treaty of Chicago Provided for United States Acquisition and Settlement of the Last Remaining Indian Lands in Illinois.

Sutori.com

1833 Treaty

The 1833 Treaty, was similar to the hundreds of other treaties where Native Leaders made deals under extreme duress, or according to terms that were not clear to them. The Potawatomi, Ojibwe and Ottawa ceded their lands east of the Mississippi River to the U.S. government - including large stretches of territory in Wisconsin in exchange for much smaller areas out West. It wasn't just land that was ceded, the Potawatomi, as well as the Menominee, Oneida, Ho-Chunk and Ojibwe maintained agricultural systems based on growing wild rice, corn, squash and a variety of other vegetables, which were complemented with hunting and fishing.

Native Americans Become Refugees

Once land and agricultural systems were taken, some Native people became refugees in the lands that were once their own. For decades throughout the 19th century, hundreds of Potawatomi stayed

around Wisconsin instead of moving west. My great-grandmother was one of them. Some lived in rural areas away from settlers, others worked in odd professions around the area, while still others married Europeans.

Potawatomi Reservation Returns

The Potawatomi Reservation in Forest County was bought by a few hundred tribal members in the early 20th century after Congress awarded them \$150,000 to purchase land. That there are Potawatomi far from the upper Midwest today, in Kansas and Oklahoma specifically, as well as in Michigan, is due to their forced removal after many in the early 19th century refused to leave ancestral lands in northern Indiana. Militias forced them to migrate - in what became known as the "Trail of Death" - resulting in deaths of dozens. *Continued on pg. 13*

Latin Americans in Wisconsin Fast-forward 100 years or so, and other landless people - this time from Latin America - have also come to play critical roles in Wisconsin agriculture.

Specifically, Mexicans, who were displaced after NAFTA was signed in 1994, have come to work in many of the state's large-scale dairy farms. The Trade Deal allowed cheap agricultural goods from the United States to flow south over the border, driving Mexican farmers into bankruptcy. With few options to make a living, millions went north. Many came to Wisconsin.

Farm workers of Mexican descent have been present in Wisconsin agriculture before NAFTA came into force. In the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of farm workers - many through the Bracero Guest Worker Program- worked in canning factories, as well as, in harvesting fruits and vegetables. They were preceded by thousands of Tejanos (U.S. Citizens of Mexican descent from Mexico) who came to the state in the 1920s to work in the sugar beet fields.

Despite the critical place that farm workers have occupied in Wisconsin agriculture, they have had to deal with racism in many ways. Workers who came to the state in the 1960s had to endure discrimination in public places, while most recent arrivals report regularly being the target of racial slurs. Employers in large-scale dairies, according to one study, have also been shown to use racist stereotypes as a way to justify paying Latino farm workers poorly.

African-Americans Arrive In Wisconsin

Yet one more story of migration and agriculture is found in the arrival of



Mexicans, who were displaced after NAFTA was signed in 1994, have come to work in many of the state's large-scale dairy farms.

African Americans to Wisconsin. It was the great migration of the early 20th century that brought Black people north, particularly to cities such as Milwaukee, out from the south. Many gave up their own farms and fled to escape vigilante violence, poverty and conniving landowners who sought to expand their property.

While we cannot change the past history of agriculture, we can make a better future.

In this regard, as we look to keep people on the land and practice sustainable agriculture, it is imperative to work with farmers in the Oneida Nation who are saving traditional seeds and with Potawatomi People who are growing food to address the existence of food deserts in rural areas.

Black farmers are at the forefront of urban agriculture; establishing rural-urban links with young people of color and can function to get more people interested in agriculture, as well as, potentially establish new markets for small-scale farmers.

Farm workers, who don't have citizenship, should have an option to receive it. This would allow them to raise complaints about wages and work conditions without fear of reprisal from their employers. If this were to happen, the Factory Farm dairies may be less inclined to pay workers poorly which would in part limit their ability to expand their business at the detriment of smaller farms.

Farm families, such as my own, take pride in their histories. Like many family stories, mine is complicated. That some relatives were settlers, while others were Native American, seems to place one group against the other.

The reality is that it doesn't have to be that way: reckoning with racism in agriculture means being honest about our history so that we don't repeat past mistakes. Often, racism has kept people divided. Now is not the time for division, but for unity. This means building coalitions across racial line to keep people on the land and working to make family farming viable for the future.