

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 2, EPISODE 8 : Bernie Piña, Fresh Produce Salesman. Nogales, Arizona

TRANSCRIPTION

ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to *America Works*, excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is staff folklorist Nancy Groce and this *America Works* podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with Bernardo or “Bernie” Piña, the sales manager at Ciruli Brothers produce in Nogales, Arizona. For generations, the city of Nogales, which is located directly on the US-Mexican border, has been a major port-of-entry for the buying, selling, and shipping of fresh fruits and vegetables imported into the United States from growers throughout Mexico and Latin America.

If you, like most Americans, enjoy eating fresh produce from Mexico, it probably came through Nogales. In this *America Works* episode, Mr. Pina, a third-generation produce worker, tells folklorist Nic Hartmann what it’s like to be a salesman in Nogales’ vibrant produce industry.

INTERVIEW

Bernie Piña: So my dad – by the time I started working for him, he had already worked for a few small companies here in Nogales. And then, at some point, you know, when I was probably a boy, he decided to open up his own small brokerage company. So when I was working for my dad, he was self-employed. It was a small company and the main employees were him and myself and maybe a secretary or something like that. It was extremely small. My father’s father, my grandfather, had a company here in Nogales – and I guess that would be back in the ‘40s or something.

Like my dad used to say: we’re dealing in the business of cadavers, he would say. Because once it’s picked off the plant or once...anything: any fruit vegetable that’s picked off the vine or picked off the tree...I mean, after that it’s only in a state of deterioration. It’s only going to get worse. And that’s another thing that I learned early on is that things might look good here in Nogales at the shipping point. But once it gets to Chicago or Detroit or Los Angeles or wherever, it’s 3 or 4 or 5 days down the road. You know, you’re going to really have to try to anticipate what it’s going to look like in 3 or 4 days.

And again, we’re the conduit between growers in Mexico and customers all over this country. Customers of all different types. Customers in Canada; customers all over the United States – every corner of the United States. And could be retailers, like, you know, whoever, Kogers or Safeways or Walmart or whoever – Sam’s Club, Costco – or they can be, you know, wholesales on internal markets in big cities.

So as a sales manager and my sales team, we have to make sure things are moving the way

things should be moving. And, you know, our goal is to try to get the best price for the grower, so he can make some money so he can grow again next year and meet his obligations – because he has obligations to pay his workers, and pay for fertilizer, and pay for cartons, you know – things that we can't even think of that are involved in growing. So we try to get him the best price possible, and at the same time, while developing and maintaining very good relationships with our customers.

Of course, there's going to be problems along the way and we resolve problems in an equitable way between both parties. You know, you step back and think, "Alright, we're going – we're planting cucumbers and we expect 300,000 cucumbers for this year" – I'm just throw out some random numbers – and, say, we're planting tomatoes and we expect 1,000,000 boxes of tomatoes for this year, we're planting all this stuff... So we obviously have a big picture of suppliers the entire season; what to expect. And then we have to come up with a strategy as a team and a company. You know, how are we going to responsibly move all this product?

Sometimes we can work long hours. We're here from 6 in the morning to 4 or 5 pm during the season. So sometimes, most of the time we see each other more than we see our families.... We have such a great team and a great crew that you know, 99% of the time it goes well. But once in a while, people get a little frustrated or cranky or whatever. But that's not, obviously, a problem for the produce industry; that's a problem for any industry across the board.

Nic Hartmann: What does it take to be good at what you do, I guess – working as a sales manager, working in produce sales? What are the things that people have to be good at?

Bernie Piña: One of my old bosses used to say this and he was like a mentor – But he said, he would say: "You know what I figured out about this business is it doesn't matter how smart you are or how well you can read markets or how well you get along with customers, it's how much aggravation you can deal with. That's what makes a good salesperson. I think sales in produce is like sales in almost anything. And being a good salesperson is like an art. But I think it's all about relationships.

I'll tell you what, Nic, I really appreciate the work that I do and I enjoy it do enjoy it. And again, there are days where I get frustrated and go home a little crabby, I'm sure, but day in and day out, I have the privilege of talking to people from all over the country. And it is a privilege, because you have relationships – or in my case, I'll have relationships with people in Chicago or in Portland or Vancouver or somewhere in California or Texas or in the Midwest – you know, Michigan, Ohio... And it's interesting to make all these acquaintances and then you get to know them over the years. And then that level of trust gets higher. So it's gratifying; it's fulfilling – I think that's one of the most fulfilling aspects of sales in produce is that. I think it's cool. I like that.

Another interesting – I'm just going off on a little bit of a tangent, I again, but I would like for people to emphasize with any grower. Any grower – whether it's from Mexico or a grower in Indiana or whatever. A grower or a farmer can really do everything that he's doing. I mean, he can really try to do everything right: he can buy the best seed available; and he can buy the best carton available; he can hire the absolutely best labor available. And he can fertilize it religiously – fertilize his farms religiously. And he can be blessed with good luck – and the weather's absolutely perfect. So then he has a great crop, right? This Indiana farmer or this Mexican farmer. A great crop; beautiful product. And then the market is absolutely terrible. The market's like \$3 a bunch or \$2. So the farmer did everything he could right. And even Mother Nature cooperated and he had beautiful weather. But then you always have the market is going to dictate to you whether you going to get good return or not. So I would like for people to appreciate how much risk is involved for the farmer.

So it's definitely a risky venture, and to me – I don't have the kind of fiber to be somebody like that. I'm not that risky myself, you know. And I'm amazed at people who do that. And these guys do that – farmers across the United States, farmers from Mexico. So, I would say that most people, most consumers in the United States—even me, even you, I would bet – but most, almost all, a large, large percentage –we're used to going into our supermarket and we have just a huge selection of fruits and vegetable, right? Any given day, any given time; and everything looks pretty darn good. It's fair prices; and the quality's good. But we just take all

that for granted so much. And nobody realizes the effort and the investment and the time and the work that was put in to get that produce to your grocery store shelves.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): You’ve been listening to an interview with Bernie Piña, the sales manager at Ciruli Brothers produce in the border city of Nogales, Arizona. He was interviewed by folklorist Nic Hartmann as part of Hartmann’s Archie Green Fellowship research project on “Fresh Produce Workers in Arizona.”

To hear the complete interview with Bernie Piña, as well as interviews with hundreds of other contemporary American workers, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife -- or just search online for the “Occupational Folklife Project.”

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to *America Works*.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.