

Introduction

The Documentation Project asked Maria Salgado Magana to write down her recollections about how table grapes in Delano were cultivated in the 1960's. In 1965, Maria was one of the first Delano Grape Strikers – she was nineteen years old. Today, 40-years later, she and her husband, Ralph, continue to work for the United Farm Workers at the union's La Paz headquarters in the Tehachapi Mountains east of Bakersfield. Besides her regularly assigned work, Maria tends to the gardens that form the burial site of Cesar Chavez.

Working the Table Grapes in the 1960's

The work of irrigating, fertilizing, disking the weeds in the rows between the vines was done throughout the grape growing season when needed or required

About two weeks before December, farmworkers (men) began to prune the grape vines. This work lasted until February. After the Thompson Seedless vines were pruned, farmworkers (women) tied the canes around the guide wires.

After a vine was pruned, a total of six (6) canes remained, three (3) canes on either side of the main vine. If only five (5) canes were left, two (2) would be on one side of the vine, and three (3) on the other side. The tying lasted until the first week of March.

By the first of April, farmworkers began to cut grass and leaves from around the base of the vines.

In May, the vines began to flower into small grape bunches. Farmworkers pulled the leaves from around the bunches and untangled the bunches from around the guide wires, if that was necessary. Each bunch was left hanging down.

By the last week in May, the grape bunches had formed into a cluster of small grapes but each bunch needed to be trimmed down to leave only the bunches that would form into the highest quality grapes, called #1's. Secondary quality bunches are called #2's.

Another cultivation technique was called tipping, which ensures that each bunch was loosely formed. If the bunch was too tight, the bottom tip was cut off with a pair of grape clippers. Normally, the tipping was finished by the end of June.

During the growing season as the grapes were being formed, tractors periodically drove through the vine rows applying sulfur, which deposited a heavy yellow powder on the vines. Late in the growing season, the tractors sprayed a growth hormone on the maturing grape bunches to accelerate the rate of growth and the sizes of the grapes.

In August we picked cannery grapes first, and put them into boxes that weighed more than 36 pounds. Later in the month, the harvest foremen formed the table grape harvesting crews of 5 persons per group, 4 to pick and a 1 to pack. The four workers went into the rows a distance of about 45 vines, picked table grape bunches, and then brought the loaded

boxes to the front of the row where the packer was stationed. The packer placed the grape bunches stem up into the shipping crate on top of thin paper mattresses, then covered the grapes with a paper curtain and nailed the wooden slats to the crate to form the box top. Sometimes the packer used pieces of tissue wrapping paper to wrap each bunch in the box and packed it to look very pretty. The care taken at this point would depend on where the grape was being shipped and how it was marketed.

The picker's responsibility was to cut the better grapes, the #1 grape that was more attractive and demanded a better price. The pickers helped the packer move to the next packing station when they had finished with the previous one.

The packed table grape boxes would be stacked 10 boxes high in rows of 50 or 60. The swampers (men) came by with trucks and swamped the boxes onto the truck.

In the 1960's, this harvest work paid \$.90 per hour and \$.10 per box. The number of boxes was counted at the end of the day for each work group and the money was divided into equal shares among the 5 persons in the harvest crew.