

*The following description is based on recollections by Delano grape striker Maria Saluado Magana (from the Farmworker Documentation Project) and Frank Bardacke's Trampling Out the Vintage (2011).*

## **A Season of Work**

“Behind every fruit and vegetable for sale in the supermarket lies an unknown world of toil and skill.”  
Frank Bardacke, author of *Trampling Out the Vintage*

The cultivation of table grapes requires a large number of workers, many of which must be skilled to achieve their work during various points in the growing cycle. In Delano, pruning vines occurs from December to March. Pruning affects the quantity and quality of the grapes that will grow on the vine; if a vine is pruned poorly, nothing can be done to make it produce enough fruit for the coming season. After pruning, vines are sprayed with herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers and irrigated; these jobs are not labor-intensive.

Then the spurs must be tied to the trellises, a job that requires stamina and patience. In the spring, workers cut through the hard bark of the vine all the way around the stalk to increase the sweetness of the grapes; this process, called girdling, is difficult, delicate and must be done with a special knife while bent over. Girdlers are the most skilled of the grape workers, and when they learn to do it quickly, they are the best paid. As girdlers do their work, other laborers shape the bunches of grapes through “thinning and tipping”. The last job before the harvest is pulling leaves to expose the bunches to the sun.

Once the table grapes were ready for harvest, crews were organized with five people per group: four to pick and one to pack. The four workers went into rows that were a distance of about 45 vines, cut the best bunches, then brought the loaded boxes to the front of the row where the packer was stationed. The packer placed the grapes stem up into the packing crate, then nailed wooden slats to close the crate once it was full. Packed table grape boxes would be stacked 10 boxes high in rows of 50 or 60. Then men called swampers came by and loaded the packed boxes into a truck for transportation.

In the 1960s, this work paid \$1.10 an hour and \$0.10 per box. At the end of each day, each work group's packed boxes were counted and the money was divided into equal shares among the five crew workers. In some places, different wages were paid based on the workers' race. Different racial and ethnic groups often lived in separate camps, worked in separate crews, and specialized in different jobs; this separation was frequently maintained and encouraged by growers to put different groups in competition and to prevent alliances. The labor camps that farm workers retired to in the evenings were often substandard housing with no toilets or bathing facilities. Workers often had to relieve themselves in filthy ditches and some did not even have running water available.

The Delano grape strikers wanted a wage increase of \$1.40 an hour and \$0.25 per box.