

WORK IN THE PINEAPPLE FIELDS, Hawaii, World War II
Mary St. John Zemach



Soon after the war began, school children were encouraged to work in the pineapple fields, as many of the regular laborers were shifted into work more suited to the war effort. Many, probably most, of the agricultural workers were Japanese (or other Asian) aliens, so wouldn't be put into certain sensitive jobs. But they could be used to replace workers in all sorts of civilian jobs, when those people were drafted or volunteered for active military duty. Some were needed to take care of the huge influx of military units on their way to battle stations in the Pacific. Others were needed to work in the hospitals, airfields, barracks, and at the docks which handled food for local use, and war supplies for naval vessels and military aircraft.

But the pineapple fields still needed care. On the mainland, school children were used to harvest crops, as food production of any sort was vital to the economy. Much food was shipped out to the armed forces, and the local people still needed to eat. By the time I entered Robert Louis Stevenson Junior High School, (grades 7, 8, and 9), students were already asked to volunteer, but I had to wait until I turned 12 in early December 1942. The first year we went once a week, but later it was once a month. Those who didn't go stayed at school for a full day of study hall, for no instruction could take place while we were in the fields.

On our appointed day, we would be met early in the morning at school by large flatbed trucks. The backs had wooden floors, with stake sides and canvas tops that dripped dust on us as we rattled along. We sat on wooden benches and entertained ourselves by singing on the way to (and from) the fields. We'd begin with all the patriotic songs we knew, then folk and popular songs, and finally Christmas carols All verses. The all-time favorite of 7th and 8th grade girls was "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," recently introduced by Bing Crosby. This from girls who would probably never see a snow flake in their lives.

When we reached the field, we would place our lunches, water bottles, and gas masks in a row along the side of the road, and report to the supervisor, called a luna, for the day's instructions. We were always issued screen goggles so, we would not poke our eyes out if we stumbled against the pineapple plants. Also heavy gloves. Despite this, and the long sleeved shirts we wore, we always came home covered with minor pokes and scratches, as the leaves had thorns along the edges, and sharp points at the tips. A pineapple plant looks like a giant version of the spiky top to a pineapple. They were planted in double rows, and the path between the double rows was narrow, and the plants grew waist to chest height on us. We were always amused by visitors to Hawaii who thought pineapples must grow on trees, as papayas, avocados, and coconuts do.

School girls wearing gas masks



Workers wearing screen goggles and masks

I participated in six different activities in the years I worked:

(1) In the beginning, we picked pineapples. We wore large cloth slings, and twisted off the ripe fruit and put them in the slings. When they were full, we'd stagger out to the road and dump them into large flats, which were later lifted onto trucks which drove them to the cannery. Soon, however, this heavy task was left for the older, and stronger, boys.



Worker with a sling-load of pineapples



Ripe pineapples

(2) A rather unpleasant task was to carry tanks slung over our shoulders, and pump insecticide onto the plants. I think we were spraying for mealy bugs. For this, we also wore masks over our noses.



The modern way of spraying



A pineapple flower

(3) Other times, we carried large cans of carbide stones, and would drop a spoonful of the stones into the top of each plant. The carbide stones would hiss as they hit the rain water held in the top of the plants. This was to promote early flowering in the plant. At the time, I thought it was the heat produced by the chemical reaction that did the trick. Recently I learned that commercial growers of bromeliads promote early flowering by spraying with ethylene gas. Pineapples are members of the Bromeliad family, so now I think it was the gas produced that did the job.

We had a carbide headlamp at home, such as coal miners used before battery-powered headlamps. Why Father had it I'm not sure, as he never worked in any mines, but perhaps it was part of his war mementos from WW I which he kept. It could have been useful in the trench warfare he was part of in France, whether or not it was army issue. He kept his service revolver and sleeping bag, among other things. After WW II broke out, he showed my older brothers how to use the gun, and all of us how to use the headlamp. A small amount of water dripped onto the stones and the gas produced could be lit, and was focused by a reflector behind it.

(4) Another chore was to twist slips (new sprouts) from the base of mature plants, and carry sling-loads of them out to the road. These would be spread out to dry and to seal off the twisted end to prevent rot. Later, these would be used to start new fields.

(5) Often, they got several pickings from a field. But when it had passed peak production, the plants would be removed, shredded into bits, and plowed into the dirt. The soil was then carefully leveled, and machines would lay out rows of a heavy mulch paper with two rows of slits punched into it. Our job was then to carry sling-loads of slips and poke a slip into each slit, pushing it down to make contact with soil, so roots would grow from the base. This was done either by stooping over, or crawling along--not one of our favorite jobs. The mulch paper kept moisture in the soil, and prevented weeds from competing for nutrients with the growing slips.



A newly planted field

(6) Mostly, though, we did weeding in the paths between the rows. We carried hoes and chopped the weeds just below soil level, and left them to rot where they fell. A few larger ones could be pulled out by hand. Doing physical labor all day in the hot sun was exhausting, but at least with weeding we could stand upright, and were not exposed to carbide dust or insecticide.

Lunchtime was a welcome break,, and the lunas would usually have brought in ripe pineapples, which they would skin with deft whacks from a machete. Then they would carve vertical sections, called spears, poke machetes into them, one by one, and hand them to us. Each of us then would eat the entire spear, starting at the top and working down to the sweet bottom. (It was a source a great amusement to Hawaiian residents that one of the pineapple companies advertised "only the middle slices" for their canned pineapple. We all wondered who got the sweetest bottom slices.)

We were paid very little---12 year old girls got 21 cents per hour---I got paid more for babysitting. But, we were doing our patriotic duty and helping the war effort.

Nowadays, very few pineapples are grown in the islands, and the Honolulu cannery is closed. It is cheaper to grow them in Asia and South America and ship them to the USA. A few are grown for the local market, but pineapple fields on Oahu are being converted to housing and other uses.

The same thing has happened to the sugar industry, though my sister, Martha, who lives on Maui, says they still have some fields there. This is a source of great annoyance to people who moved there recently from the mainland, and who resent the smoke produced when the sugar cane fields are burned at harvest time. In the first days of the industry, the mature canes would be cut and then the sugar extracted at the mill. However, many years ago a fired worker, angry at the company, set fire to some fields in revenge. Then it was discovered that burning off all the leaves made harvesting the stalks easier and more profitable.