

# Now & Then

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We've got some 'real news' for our readers this month, 'real' meaning stuff you won't read anywhere else. The subject in this case is Leonard Peltier. Our regular readers know him well, but new folks might be reminded. Leonard is a Sioux prisoner of war in the ongoing fight against the first folks. Those folks who owned the land we now live on. He was convicted of killing an FBI agent while trying to defend his people. He is, of course, in prison. He has been in prison for over twenty-five years. The news is that every once in a while they go through a ritual at the prison where he has been held and talk about whether he has paid his 'debt to society'. We were informed that the folks who denied him his freedom, once again, told him that the widow of the FBI agent who was killed said that she wanted him to die in prison. They also said that though there was no actual proof that he committed the crime, someone had to pay. No, his lawyer, Ramsey Clark, former Attorney General, was not permitted to be there, and no, he wasn't really surprised at the decision. Some are people, some are not. If the people of Indonesia can change things, and the people of South Africa, Ireland, and Bosnia, and hopefully Israel, can find ways to peace, understanding, and forgiveness, why can't America? Just a thought.

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I have made mistakes but I have never made the mistake of claiming that I never made one.  
- James Gordon Bennett



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## FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

Bitter Struggle, Sweet Harvest  
Victoria Stoppello

Strawberry picking was my first paid employment when I was a kid growing up in western Oregon. Sometimes we were wet and muddy, sometimes sun-drenched and warm, but always there was the feast at hand, the big one that I couldn't resist. As a 10-year-old, deferred gratification wasn't my forte. Besides, I wasn't desperate for money. My family provided all my basic needs.

The one strawberry patch near our town on the lower Columbia was the only place we kids could get work, so we rose early, caught the stake-sided flatbed truck at dawn and rode to the fields, clutching our lunches in brown paper bags. We received 27 cents a carrier for our work, six one-pint boxes. We would have accepted this with good grace except that the field bosses were always grouchy and the farm cheated us. At least that's what we thought.

We weren't paid by weight, but by the carrier and their policy was no credit for our boxes unless they were overflowing. Then they'd punch our ticket, but as we walked away, the lady in the booth would scrape the tops off our boxes into empty flats. It made sense, of course, because when the flats were stacked for transport, the overflow would have been smashed. We saw this, commented to each other, and resentment grew. It just didn't seem fair. Even as kids we were astute enough to figure out the farmer would be paid by weight and the only reason for this behavior was to pay us less, 20 or 25 percent less.

Then another farmer opened a new field, farther away, but with several enticements: 30 cents a carrier, a bonus for pickers who stayed throughout the harvest, and an end-of-the-season party. The people were nice, too. It was a pleasure to work for them, and poetic justice to leave the other farmer in the lurch.

In fact, soon no one went to work at the old place. Rumors moved through the grapevine that they were scraping bottom to get pickers, calling in all their relatives, even matching the new farmer's pay. But still nobody went. The following year, they tried again, but soon they were out of business. We pickers, mostly kids and a few deft old ladies, had laid them in the weeds.

Now kids aren't allowed to pick berries. The law purports to protect kids from child labor, but I believe it's because the authorities don't want kids exposed to the pesticides that are put on crops nowadays. Others, far more desperate than we were, older and much harder working, are bringing in the strawberries. Mostly Mexican immigrants, they, like immigrant groups before, attempt to pry open the door of American opportunity with back-breaking labor.

In the Pacific Northwest, berry pickers have been trying to organize to improve pay and working conditions, including things like toilet facilities in the fields. (When I was a kid at least there were outhouses.) Last year, one of the growers took an extreme measure in response to organizing efforts. Police were brought in to remove a union organizer unless a written invitation could be produced. The intention was to fire the picker who had sent the invitation; instead the pickers as a group took responsibility. In retaliation, the grower plowed under the field of ripe berries and turned the workers out of their temporary homes.

The strawberry industry is being polarized into big farms in California and small, select berry farms in the Northwest. The Northwest berries are superior in flavor, but the California berries have been bred to travel and hold up better in the stores. Soon the only really tasty berries you'll be able to get will be from your own yard or from a few specialty growers. It isn't easy for a small farmer to operate in this context. But, it also doesn't seem right to take it out on the pickers. Maybe it's easier because they look different and speak a foreign language. There is a ray of hope, however. This March 31, Scott Frost, the owner of Nature's Fountain Farm, a transitional organic berry farm in the Willamette Valley, signed a contract with the Oregon farmworker union, PCUN. Frost was quoted as hoping to create a working model of labor and ownership working together for change and growth. One more reason to buy organically grown berries.

When we kids harvested the crops, our work touched every part of the community. All the kids in town, well off or not, picked berries. When we were disgruntled with our working conditions, our families knew it. The justice of our cause seeped like water through every inch of the community. Boycotting a grower was easy because the community as a whole understood and supported us.

My grandmother was also a berry picker. She immigrated here at the age of five and was bilingual in English and Finnish. I have photos of her and other women out in the bogs with old-fashioned cranberry scoops. My dad mentioned once that she used to "talk for the cranberry ladies." I wonder, what would she say now?

Victoria Stoppello is a writer and thinker living in Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington state.

**WHERE TO GET AN EDGE**

**Cannon Beach:** Jupiter's Rare and Used Books, Osburn's Grocery, The Cookie Co., Coffee Cabana, Bill's Tavern, Cannon Beach Book Co., Hane's Bakery, The Bistro, Midtown Cafe, Once Upon a Breeze, Copies & Fax, Heather's, The Homegrown Cafe, Haystack Video, Mariner Market, Espresso Bean, Ecologia Square & Cleanline Surf

**Manzanita:** Mother Nature's Juice Bar, Bayside Gardens, Cassandra's, Manzanita News & Espresso, & Nehalem Bay Video

**Nehalem:** Mermaid Cafe

**Rockaway:** Sharky's

**Tillamook:** Rainy Day Books

**Bay City:** Art Space

**Yachats:** By-the-Sea Books

**Pacific City:** The River House, Far Country Books, & Village Merchants

**Ocean side:** Ocean Side Espresso

**Lincoln City:** Trillium Natural Foods, Driftwood Library, & Lighthouse Brewery

**Depoe Bay:** Oregon Books

**Newport:** Oceania Natural Foods, Cafe DVA, Cosmo Cafe, Bookman Cafe, Newport Bay Coffee Co., Cuppatuna, Bay Latté, Ocean Pulse Surf Shop, Coastal Coffee Co., Sylvia Beach Hotel, Green Gables Bookstore/B&B, & Canyon Way

**Eugene:** Book Mark, Cafe Navarra, Eugene Public Library, Friendly St. Market, Happy Trails, Keystone Cafe, Kava Foods, Lane C.C., Light For Music, New Frontier Market, Nineteenth Street Brew Pub, Oasis Market, Perry's, Red Barn Grocery, Sundance Natural Foods, U of O. & WOW Hall

**Corvallis:** The Environmental Center, OSU

**Salem:** Heliotrope, Salem Library, & The Peace Store

**Astoria:** KMUN, Columbian Cafe, The Community Store, The Wet Dog Cafe, Astoria Coffee Company, Cafe Uniontown, & Shark Rock Cafe

**Seaside:** Buck's Book Barn, Universal Video, & Cafe Espresso

**Portland:** Artchoke Music, Laughing Horse Bookstore, Act III, Barnes & Noble, Belmonts Inn, Bilet Art Gallery, Bijou Cafe, Borders, Bridgeport Brew Pub, Capt'n Beans (two locations), Center for the Healing Light, Coffee People (three locations), Common Grounds Coffee, East Avenue Tavern, Food Front, Goose Hollow Inn, Hot Lips Pizza, Java Bay Cafe, Key Largo, La Patisserie, Lewis & Clark College, Locals Only, Marco's Pizza, Maryhurst College, Mt. Hood CC, Music Millennium, Nature's (two locations), NW Natural Gas, OHSU Medical School, Old Whies Tales, Ozone Records, Papa Haydn, PCC (four locations), PSU (two locations), Reed College, Third Eye, TransCentral Library, & YWCA

**Cornelius:** The Weekend Garden Market

**The Dalles:** Klindts Bookseller

**Hood River:** Purple Rocks Art Bar & Cafe

**Ashland:** Garo's Java House, The Black Sheep, Blue Mt. Cafe, & Rogue River Brewery

**Cave Junction:** Coffee Heaven & Kerby Community Market

**Grants Pass:** The Book Shop

**(Out of Oregon)**

**Vancouver, WA:** The Den

**Longview, WA:** The Broadway Gallery, & Carat Patch

**Long Beach, WA:** Pacific Penitents

**Naselle, WA:** Rainy Day Artistry

**Nahcotta, WA:** Moby Dick Hotel

**Duvall, WA:** Duvall Books

**Bainbridge Island, WA:** Eagle Harbor Book Co.

**Seattle, WA:** Elliot Bay Book Co., Honey Bear Bakery, New Orleans Restaurant, Still Life in Fremont, Allegro Coffeehouse, The Last Exit Coffee House, & Biolog News

**San Francisco, CA:** City Lights Bookstore

**Denver, CO:** Denver Folklore Center

**New York, NY:** The Strand Book Company

**Washington, D.C.:** Hotel Tabard Inn

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- Hansell B. Duckett

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