

Time again for pickin' berries

by MARK FLOYD

If you think postal employees are dedicated, try visiting a strawberry field some time.

It's done nothing but rain for the past three weeks, but that hasn't halted the efforts of local strawberry pickers who have returned to the berry battle front day after day. One of the area's larger strawberry farms, Liepold's of Boring, has been in business for some 30 years and Elsa Liepold said that its dedication of the pickers who make it all worthwhile.

"Rain or shine, these kids are out," she said. "It makes them tough, stoic. And it gives them money. These people really hustle out here — they like to hear the jingle in their pockets."

The rain has had a mixed effect on the strawberry business this year. On one hand, the mild winter and constant rains have helped produce a bumper crop of berries. But the rain has also presented the possibility of rot and the difficulty in harvesting.

"We have a huge crop this year, a really good crop," Mrs. Liepold said. "The rot isn't too bad. When the plants were blooming, my husband (John) sprayed them and we've been spraying them every week since. The rain has really sized the berries up, too."

That's good news for the pickers, as well as the growers and retailers. Many of the Liepold berries go to

commercial stands, such as Janz Berryland. Workers picking commercial berries, those with the stems on, are paid \$1.25 a crate on weekdays. A \$1.50 weekend price is an incentive to get workers on Saturdays and Sundays. A crate will contain 9½ pounds.

Berries picked without stems are targeted for canneries. Pickers can earn 10 cents a pound for their efforts.

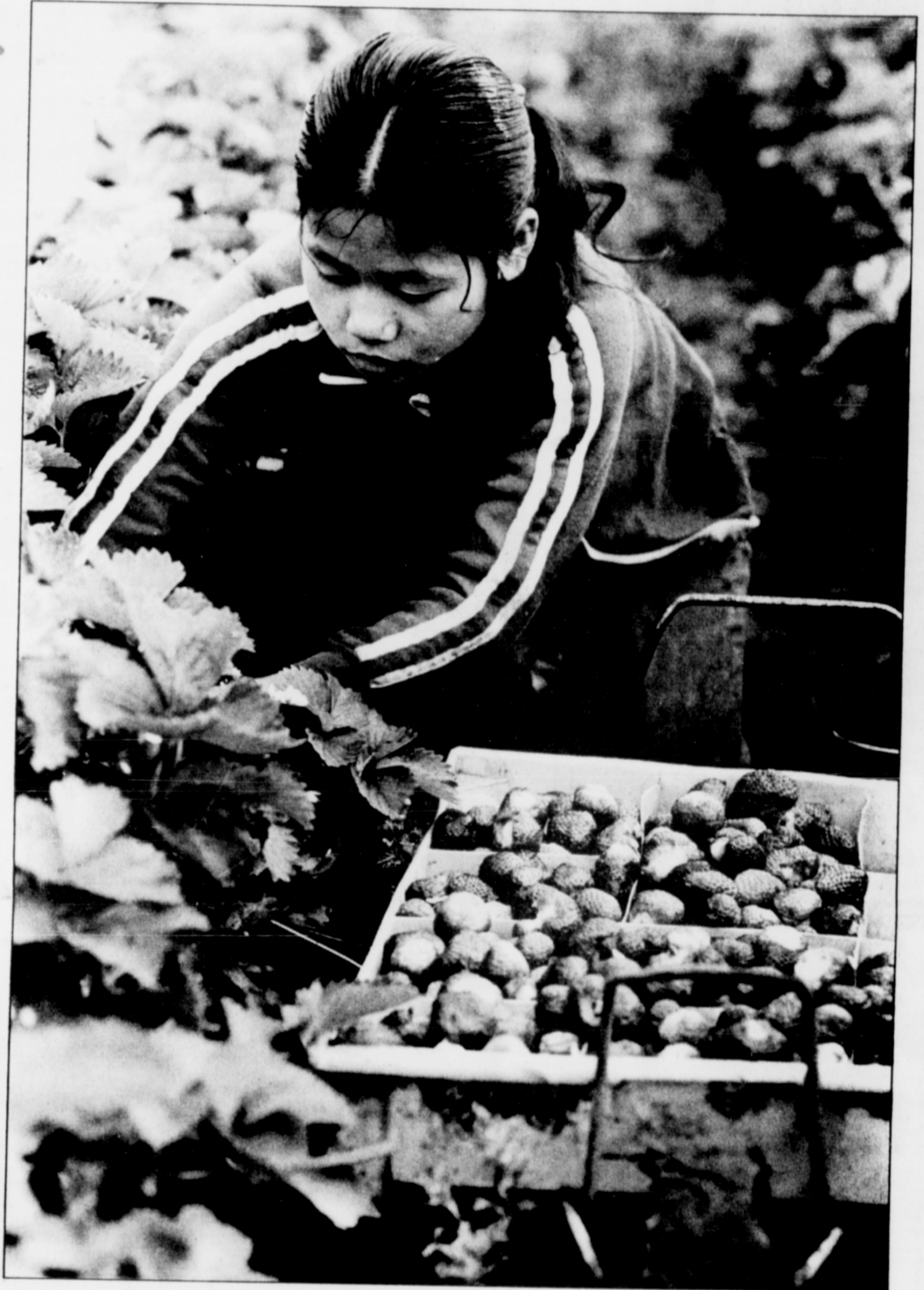
"It's hard to say how much you can make picking," Mrs. Liepold said. "There is no average. One Cambodian lady has been here two-and-a-half hours this morning and has already made \$25. But not everyone can make that much."

The Liepold farm is a family affair. Everyone helps out on the 45-acre farm and many of their pickers have returned year after year.

"We've been in the business for 30 years and there's lots of worries," Mrs. Liepold said. "But I love it when the old pickers come out; some have been here for years."

"You always worry about the berry business, though," she added. "You have the weather to contend with, the picker situation and the government. There are a lot of hands dipping into your pockets; it costs a lot to be a strawberry farmer."

There may be a lot of worries, but the pickers are out, the berries are plentiful and good and another successful season is underway.



photos by
Mark Floyd



(clockwise from top) Chang Dang, a Cambodian girl now living in Boring, picks in the Liepold fields; to young to pick, Lupe Castellanos plays with a cart in the mud while her parents work; Marcia Liepold weighs a crate of strawberries as the line of fast pickers builds; her mother, Elsa Liepold, shows off this year's bumper crop of ripe berries.