

## **Two Non-natives:**

### **Weeds invade Bootheel cotton, migrants find jobs**

By Sarah Alban

A laugh. A short, brown boy running to catch a girl his size. Eventually, both peek to see if the white lady with a notepad is still watching. I am. These are the kids of migrant workers, skipping around a Casey's General Store parking lot in southern Missouri. For miles around stretch the weed-infested cotton farms that brought their parents here from Mexico.

Mexicans farming U.S. fields is an old tale. Since signing the Bracero Treaty in 1942, the United States has been employing Mexicans in sun-scorched hand labor. Some say the backbone of U.S. agriculture is connected by Mexican cartilage.

But Mexican labor in the Bootheel opened a new chapter three years ago: In 2008, weeds proliferated, despite being showered in herbicide. Migrants entered the field to chop them out by their rubbery roots.

"They got jobs hoeing now," said Charles Parker, 2011 chairman of the National Cotton Council and a Senath, Mo., cotton farmer.

That rise in jobs is stirring a demographic change in Senath. Despite an 8.8 percent state unemployment rate, farmers can't get locals to hoe. Fact is, the work breaks not just sweats, but also backs and sometimes skin.

"It's bad to say, but it's hard to get anybody to work around here," said Omar Karnes, Senath police chief. "The white people won't do it. They flat out refuse. They won't do it."

Senath cotton farmer Lewis Rone stood at his shop with a hoe: a long, unpolished wooden stick tipped by a silver ax. Nearby idled his green-and-yellow hooded herbicide sprayer, worth the price of a 2011 Ford Ranger. But Rone gripped the hoe. "This is weed control," he said.

Senath calls itself "cotton country." This is where white cotton tumbles by kids at Casey's like hay in an old Western. This is where across the street from Casey's, weeds tower. This is where, in short, cotton has drawn two non-natives: a Texan weed and a Mexican subculture.

### **Palmer pigweed, from Texas**

Thick red weeds overhang a Senath farm like a thief's fingers. Their roots snatch up water and nutrients, so they grow tall to suck up the sunlight, too.

Nutrient loss will stunt nearby cotton. The farmer's yield — and thus income — will shrink too. These days, some call a 20 percent yield loss to pigweed a relative success story.

"There is no question that in the southern [U.S., palmer pigweed] is *the* most prevalent problem right now," said Kevin Bradley, associate professor of plant sciences at the University of Missouri.

Pigweed reproduces lightning fast. Instead of shaking pollen onto its own seeds and regenerating in the same spot, like most weeds, male pigweed sends pollen to meet the seeds of a female, and vice versa. This is how pigweed, a Texan, has traveled states.

One female plant can have 2,000 to a million seeds. She could birth a million babies. So could each of her neighbors. Not even Missouri's second-worst weed, waterhemp, compares.

"Palmer pigweed is like waterhemp on crack cocaine," said Bradley.

Paul Jones, a cotton consultant and agronomist from Senath, recalls a time killing pigweed was easy: In 1996, when cotton went biotech. That year, Monsanto Co. engineered cotton to withstand glyphosate, an herbicide. Suddenly, farmers could spray whole fields in glyphosate — for as little as \$3 an acre — without killing their crop.

Jones hasn't had to use slower, less efficient, more costly methods, like hoods, since then. "We can't go back to the old ways of cotton," he said.

But Missouri pigweed was confirmed glyphosate-resistant in 2008. Said Bradley, "We used it to our death. We used it to our detriment."

Hoers entered the cotton fields to cut the escaping weeds.

### **Migrants, Mexico**

His green card said 66 years old, but the worker looked about 21. Charles Parker, dressed in American-made cotton clothes, didn't hire the migrant.

"You can't hire somebody you know is wrong," said Parker.

The Bootheel draws two types of migrants: those who settle, and those who return to Mexico after harvest. Seasonal workers are suspected of buying fake IDs online and sharing social security numbers to get jobs, Senath Police Chief Omar Karnes said.

"They find ways to beat the system," he said. "Some of them are good."

Karnes estimated 70 percent of Senath's migrants are illegal, but that rate drops to 50 percent or less by late December.

Senath's county, Dunklin, has been losing total population since at least the 1980s. Young people moved, old ones died and small farmers went out of business. After bad harvests, Senath shrinks a little.

"If you lived here, you could see it," said Angie Kitchens, owner of Angie's Beauty Shop outside Senath.

But the Hispanic population has doubled in the past 10 years. Homes are being remodeled stucco-style, Karnes said, and a Mexican grocery sells horchata and corn husks downtown. Even Senath Elementary is 55 percent Hispanic.

"I figure Senath is, if you count them all, probably 60 percent white and 40 percent Hispanic," Karnes said.

Hispanic and white are not mutually exclusive, but they're often viewed separate in towns with rich slave history, like Senath. Its census reported 96 percent white and 18 percent Hispanic.

Despite being saturated in farming traditions, Senath is changing. Yet its residents want only one change.

### **Solving pigweed**

In a suit and tie, as photos of his kids fade across a computer, Kevin Bradley sits at his desk and calmly says farmers should try "zero tolerance" for pigweed. And then he sinks to reality.

"You tell that to a farmer, and he'll say, 'You've got to be kidding,'" Bradley admitted.

Zero tolerance means letting no pigweed grow. That takes money, time, migrants, herbicides, hoods and strategies people haven't thought of yet.

"What a joke," said Jason Weirich, an assistant professor of plant sciences at the University of Missouri's extension center in Portageville, Mo.

Weirich works directly with farmers. One standing across from him, Ryan Wilson, said zero tolerance requires more people than he has. "Realistically, we're not going to be able to," he said.

Nobody knows how pigweed got to the Bootheel, and nobody knows how to remove it. Bradley said a chemical, another glyphosate for instance, isn't the answer.

"You're probably sick of me saying this," he said. "But there's got to be a change in mindset."