

# **The Forgotten People**

BY

**DALE WRIGHT**

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**DISTRIBUTED BY THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON FARM LABOR**

6819



A Message from the Consumers' League of New Jersey

by Nancy Hawkins, President

Ever since 1905 when Mina Ginger was sent by the Consumers' League of New Jersey to report on the seasonal migration of Italian pickers to New Jersey--its profits--its cost in illiteracy and disease, reports numbering in the hundreds, of these and similar conditions have come through regularly. Then the workers in south and central New Jersey were chiefly Italian descent, from Camden and Philadelphia--their children and old people of all ages worked long hours under a "Padrone" in the fields.

In 1923, a field worker of the Public Education and Child Labor Association of Pennsylvania reported, "As far as we can learn, the children from 4 to 8 years of age could pick 4 to 6 pecks a day."

In 1930 to 1932, an official study for the State of New Jersey found that the State is morally obligated to provide schooling for migrants. Though not acted upon until 1943, the schools were then open to them. (this was only a temporary wartime law)

In 1938, the National Child Labor Committee reported in "A Summer in the Country", "The employment of all individuals of both sexes and all ages makes possible the payment of extremely low wages. Living quarters are only euphemistically described as housing. Available welfare services are non-existent and children are deprived of much of their schooling."

In 1940, the New Jersey Child Labor Law was rewritten to cover migratory children for the first time.

In 1945, New Jersey passed a migrant labor law, which provided minimum standards for migrants, set up a Bureau of Migrant Labor in the Department of Labor and Industry. This has been of value, though some of its provisions have not yet been acted upon. This bureau has done an outstanding job on a small budget of approximately \$101,657 a year. There are some good camps, but in general these come up to just the minimum standards.

The main reason this "legalized slavery" continues to exist is because the problem is a federal one. Other states have improved laws too, but the problem is too big for any one state to handle.

Foreign and off-shore Puerto Rican workers are under contract with a guaranteed number of hours and minimum wage, and living quarters--also some on-shore Puerto Ricans; but many walk-in Puerto Ricans and all domestic workers are not covered by contract. Agricultural labor is exempted from most social legislation.

Because these people move from state to state, nothing will solve this dilemma, until federal laws are enacted and administrative machinery is set in motion to administrate these laws.

Certainly, these conditions are a moral crime for which all of us are responsible, to say nothing about the loss to the country in good, educated, and perhaps, tax-paying citizens.





STATE OF NEW JERSEY  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
TRENTON

ROBERT B MEYNER  
GOVERNOR

November 21, 1961

Dear Mr. Wright:

Your series of articles on the conditions faced by migrant farm workers, which appeared in the World Telegram, were read by me with great interest.

In the main I feel that they were very useful in pointing up to your readers the need for continued and concerted action, primarily on the Federal level, to deal with this problem. I am convinced that a giant step in this direction will be taken with the adoption of the bills that have been introduced by New Jersey's Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr.

There is general agreement that great progress has been made in our State during the past eight years, primarily in the areas of housing and orderly recruitment. Representatives of other States consult us frequently on the methods we have used. The Bureau of Migrant Labor in the Department of Labor and Industry, which has jurisdiction over the housing of migrant workers, has made important improvements in its code and has carried on intelligent and vigorous enforcement of the code requirements. The Bureau of Farm Placement in the Division of Employment Security in the same Department has been of great assistance to both the farmers and the labor crews in bringing about an orderly recruitment program.

One of the most serious problems remaining within New Jersey and other States is that of rural slums which, unfortunately, many people do not distinguish from the housing supplied by farmers for their migrant workers. Under

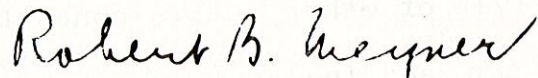


New Jersey Law this is under the jurisdiction of local municipalities. It is true that until recent years far too many of the officials of these local areas have been either unable or unwilling to deal with this situation. I am gratified to know, however, that in many areas of New Jersey our local officials are beginning to enforce their local health ordinances with vigor. It is interesting to note that this is occurring in several of the places which you described in your series. I am sorry that you did not discover this and report on these actions in your articles.

Not long after becoming Governor of New Jersey I made the statement that there were very few problems of migrant workers that could not be resolved by the establishment of an adequate mandatory minimum wage. I am still of that opinion, but I am even more convinced that this must be brought about on a national basis. With the agricultural economy as it is, the competition between farmers in different States cannot be drawn further out of balance.

As the first step we should strive for the adoption of Senator Williams' bills and then move on to still further refinements.

Sincerely,



GOVERNOR

Mr. Dale Wright  
New York World Telegram  
New York 15, New York



# The Forgotten People

## I Saw Human Shame

### As a Migrant Worker

Four migrant farm workers died Sunday as fire swept their squalid living quarters in a Suffolk County labor camp, described by investigating authorities as shocking, deplorable. The tragedy substantiates an on-the-spot survey by this paper. As long ago as last April the World-Telegram assigned staff writer Dale Wright to work as a migrant laborer to determine if protective laws are safeguarding the interests of America's "forgotten men." His articles revealing the abuses heaped on the overworked, underpaid, exploited migrant farm worker begin today.

By **DALE WRIGHT,**  
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Despite certain limited improvements — on paper — in the laws protecting the migrant farm worker, he continues to be America's forgotten man — forced to work long, tortured hours at sub-standard wages, cheated and exploited at every turn and compelled to live in filth and squalor and danger.

I know this because for six months, on and off from April to October, I worked as a migrant laborer along the Atlantic Seaboard from Florida to New York. I saw it with my eyes, I felt it in my blistered hands, I smelled it with my nose and I rebelled at it in my conscience.

I labored with, slept with, ate with and more than once suffered with the members of this vast army of men and women and children—most of them Negroes like myself—who stoop and lift and grub from nature's earth a great part of the nation's food crop.

#### Things Reporter Found.

These are some of the things I found:

Many migrant workers are forced to work as many as 14 hours a day at a back-breaking task, the rewards of which are, in most cases, a string of broken promises.

They are grossly underpaid and, many times, not paid at all by conniving labor contractors who have them at their mercy.

They are cheated and exploited all along the line by profiteers in the roles of growers, shippers, packers, labor contractors, crew bosses, landlords and merchants.



Staff writer Dale Wright shoulders a basket of tomatoes which he has just picked near Hightstown, N. J., in his six-month survey of the squalid life of a migrant farm worker.

Photo by De Marsico.





Photo by De Marsico.

The potato picker in the foreground is staff writer Dale Wright, too. The experienced pickers behind him could gather 70 to 80 such 100-pound bags in a 12 to 14-hour day—and get 5 to 8 cents a bag.

Thousands of them live in shabby, unkempt hovels and shacks, usually hidden behind a clump of trees out of public view, without sanitary or plumbing facilities.

And, despite laws enacted to protect them, their children, starting at age 6, are worked long hours under a searing sun for less than the prevailing—or promised—pay.

Under conditions inferior to those afforded cattle and freight, migrant laborers are transported from one work area to another in dilapidated, hazardous vehicles.

And at the end of the line, when all the crops are worked out, hundreds of the migrant workers wind up on relief at public expense in the Northern seaboard states.

The man who sits next to me in this newspaper office, Allan Keller, has done much to improve the lot of the migrant laborer. Mainly through his efforts and the campaigns by this newspaper over a period of years, a New York State legislative committee was named to look into the migrant labor problem and recommend changes in the laws.

Belatedly, teeth were put into regulations to provide better treatment for the migrant. The State Department of Health was empowered to license labor camps and require that minimum sanitary and health standards be maintained. Other states took steps—also on paper, to help and protect the forgotten man of America.

#### **Haven't Helped Much.**

The changes in the laws haven't helped much. The miserable migrants, virtually without hope for a

brighter tomorrow, are still hidden behind those clumps of trees.

At this moment, the migrant labor problem is being investigated anew by a subcommittee of the House Labor and Education Committee with a view toward drafting new remedial legislation.

It's another step in the long "investigation" of the "stoop" laborer, who has been studied, surveyed, microscoped and diagnosed over the years as perhaps the sickest segment of the nation's economy.

But I saw little improvement in the condition of the patient. The working and housing conditions were bad enough but it was the way he's cheated that outraged me.

He's overcharged for his squalid shack, his food, his clothing, his bottle of wine at the end of a hard week of work. And he's gouged on just about every other item he purchases.

#### **Meager Breakfast.**

I found workers in central New Jersey who were charged 75 cents for a breakfast of one chicken wing, a spoonful of watery rice and a slice of bread. An extra slice cost them 10 cents more.

In the Long Island potato belt, where the four migrant workers perished in flames Sunday, I found a large crew of men and women being charged by a labor contractor with \$1 weekly dues to a union which didn't exist. They also were being charged another \$1.40 for social security, far out of proportion to the paltry pay they had received.

In many cases, I discovered, workers forced to pay for social security had no SS numbers at all, the pay-



ments obviously going wholly to profiteers operating at their labor camp.

In Hastings, Fla., the heart of the state's potato belt, I bunked for two days in a near-collapsed, insect-infested shanty for which I was compelled to pay \$1.50 a night. Next door in an even more dilapidated hovel lived a married couple whose 2-month-old baby had been born there. They paid \$10 a week.

#### **Wailing Infant.**

The infant wailed endlessly from dawn to darkness in its makeshift crib, a cardboard cabbage carton, as flies and potato bugs crawled in and out of its mouth and nostrils. A ragged burlap potato sack served as the baby's blanket.

But Florida has no corner on squalor. Near Hightstown, N. J., less than 20 miles from Trenton, the state capital, I found seven men and women tomato pickers—none of them related—living in filth in a 10-foot square tarpaper shack for which they were charged \$10 a week for rent.

Everywhere I traveled I found the itinerant laborer getting a wretched deal. And being inarticulate and always on the move, he is least able among America's workingmen to have his cries heard.

On a warm, humid morning last April, a rickety old bus jolted along at its top speed between rows of carefully manicured estates along Route 1 from Miami south to Homestead, Fla. Although the vehicle had seats for 35 persons, it was crammed with 64 passengers.

I was one of them.

I was on my way to my first day of work as a migrant farm laborer in the lush tomato fields of southern Dade County. I had shaped up (reported for assignment) earlier that morning on a Miami street corner and was hired—with no questions asked—by a fat character known as a "labor contractor."

In the South, labor contractors round up crews of workers for transport and assignment to farms where crops are to be harvested.

#### **Sales Pitch Sounds Good.**

"Everybody that gets on this bus," he promised reassuringly, "makes \$10, \$12, \$15 today if you want to work. There's plenty of tomatoes to pick and there will be no cheating, nothin' taken out of your pay. And it will be clean work."

His pitch sounded good but I wanted to see for myself. The smirks on the faces of the seasoned migrant workers around me raised my doubts.

In a vast patch of ground outside Homestead our crew joined about 150 other farm workers. They were busy when we arrived gathering a crop of "red ripers," tomatoes ready that day for shipment to the markets and canneries. It was just after daybreak and a bright sun already had begun to broil the pickers as they stooped in the long rows.

The job was to pick and pack the tomatoes into baskets that contained five-eighths of a bushel. Each loaded basket weighed 60 pounds. When we had them filled we lugged them to the end of the row where they were loaded onto trucks. Pay promised was 12 cents a basket.

#### **'Kids Gotta Eat.'**

In the row next to mine, an emaciated man of about 40 coughed and spat incessantly as he bent to his task. When I noticed the blood and spoke to him about it, he muttered:

"Yeah, they say it's consumption. It don't make no difference. I gotta keep working. The doctor, he can't do nothing for me. I got no money for medicine. I got a woman and a lotta kids. I gotta keep pickin' tomatoes."

Obviously, the man was seriously ill and belonged in a hospital. But he was trapped by the need to work for his family in the only job he knew how to do.

Later, when we stood up to smoke a cigaret, he said to me: "Been doin' farm work all my life. Don't know nothin' else. I can't go to a hospital. Kids gotta eat."

#### **Children Sick, Too.**

He said his name was Alonzo and that he lived in a tin and tarpaper shack near Goulds, Fla., for which he paid \$10 a week rent. He added that three of his children—the small ones—had dry, hacking coughs and probably had caught the misery he had in his chest.

Medical treatment? No. None of the youngsters had ever seen a doctor.

Despite his illness, Alonzo was a hard worker. As we worked along the endless rows of tomato plants, he loaded basket after basket of tomatoes and was soon far down the field from me.

Later that day Alonzo told me he soon would be moving North from Homestead because the harvest was "going down." To keep living, he explained, he'd have to load his family and his belongings onto a truck or bus going North, where other crops were ripening.

"It's the same," he said. "This job is just like the last one. Next be just like this one. Never no different. Never will be."

#### **Typical Case.**

This sick, frustrated laborer, doomed long before his time, was summing up the lot of today's migrant farm worker.

The back-breaking labor of stooping close to the orange-tinted Florida earth begins as soon as a picker can distinguish red tomatoes from green ones in the grey dawn of an endless day.

His work ends when he no longer can see the tomatoes to pick them. At the promised rate of 12 cents a basket, a good picker can fill 70 to 80 baskets a day and earn—it says there—from \$8.40 to \$9.60 a day.

As bad as that kind of pay is, it generally worked out that the man in the fields received considerably less than the promised rate. Often the rate dropped on payday to 8 cents a basket and the field hand who actually "took home" \$7 a day for his work considered himself lucky.

On my first day in the fields, I worked 10 hours with only a 15-minute break for what they called lunch. It was the hardest, most punishing work I had ever done.

#### **No Toilet Facilities.**

In the first hours of that miserable day, my hands be-



came grimy and encrusted with the green insecticide they spray on tomatoes. It covered my khaki pants and ate its way into my legs. It collected under my finger nails, covered my shoes and socks and festered in the scratches I received from the tomato vines.

But picking the tomatoes was the easy part of the job. The hard part was lugging the heavy baskets to the end of the rows—often as far as 150 feet—to be loaded onto the trucks.

All around me were men and women—all ages—dragging themselves along the rows on their hands and knees in the near-90-degree heat.

Toilet facilities? There were none. The pickers, male and female, used the field whenever they found it necessary. It was more than a mile to the nearest clump of trees.

#### **Day's Pay: \$4.32.**

That lunch I spoke of? A little before noon a battered pickup truck drove into the fields. The meal consisted of greasy sausage sandwiches and warm soft drinks. The sandwiches cost 35 cents and the drinks 20 cents.

Drinking water was dispensed from a wooden barrel. We dipped our water with a sawed-off tomato can shared by some 200 other migrant laborers toiling in the fields. Because the barrel was in the middle of the field, thirsty workers had to walk as much as a half mile for a drink of water.

As I figured it that first day, we picked more than 5000 baskets of tomatoes. After 10 hours of stooping, squatting, crawling, picking and loading, I'd earned just \$4.32.

Many of the men and women working with me had earned less.

The transportation of migrant workers within a state such as Florida is a horror story.

I was in Florida last spring riding with and working with the thousands of migrant laborers who follow the harvest of crops for their miserable livelihood. Travel, for a migrant and his family, is a nightmare anywhere. In Florida, and other states which don't regulate migrant transportation, it's worse.

**Item**—The federal statutes decree that drivers of interstate migrant carriers must pass physical fitness tests.

I rode in a bus with a labor crew of 17, including a young couple with a 4-month-old infant. The trip from Homestead to Ruskin, Fla., covered 325 miles. The driver, in a moment of sleepy candor, told me he was subject to violent epileptic seizures.

**Item**—Federal laws say that rest and meal stops must be made at least every six hours.

Our crew traveled 13 hours before the first stop was made. The driver stopped for gas but not for people. The infant had to use for toilet purposes a filthy rag salvaged from the bus floor. As for the men and women, their experiences must go undescribed.

**Item**—Every state requires that bus and truck drivers be properly licensed.

The driver of the ark-like vehicle I rode in admitted that his license had been lifted because of a conviction for drunken driving.

**Item**—Most state laws require that migrant carriers be maintained in reasonably safe and operable condition.

But on our antique bus, windows were cracked or broken. Seats had collapsed. Floorboards had long

since broken away from mountings and been removed. Both rear wheels, with their smooth, whirring tires, were visible from inside the bus. The owner admitted to me later that the bus had not been inspected in the five years he had owned it.

Baggage and trash barred access to the rear emergency exit door. And, because the door catch was broken, it had been bound firmly shut with baling wire.

#### **Never Stopped by Cops.**

And thus we migrants—I was one of them by now—rolled along Florida's roads. We passed—and were passed by—several state troopers and local police patrol cars. Not once were we stopped.

Our destination was Ruskin, next stop on our journey to the never-never land of plenty. We'd all been promised "top wages," good food, "a real, nice place to live."

The crew boss' name was David Tuten Jr. of St. Petersburg, Fla. He made it sound real good.

"Every man and woman of you will make \$15 a day. And nobody takes nothin' out of your pay."

An old man sitting next to me muttered "Amen," which gave me a pretty fair idea what was coming.

When we arrived at the camp outside a big farm about three miles from Ruskin, we had been traveling—with just one stop—for 18 hours. Everybody was tired, dirty, hungry. And then we got the bad news.

The tomatoes were still green and not anywhere near being ready for harvest.

"Sorry to tell you this," said the grower, "but there'll be no work for at least 10 days."

This, I learned from friends I had made on the bus, often happens when that "land of plenty" is just around the corner of the winding road. It meant just one thing, that the workers were there on their own to wait until green tomatoes turned red.

It also meant that, at the mercy of the tomato farmer and the crew contractor they would run up big debts for food and lodging to be paid for later when they trudged out into the fields.

#### **Few Shouts of Protest.**

There were a few shouts of protest but not many. This had happened too often before, just as it will happen too often again.

I looked around the camp. There were no toilet facilities whatsoever. There was no kitchen equipment in the barracks-like living quarters. There was no food that I could see.

The only available water came from an irrigation pump. Adequate provision had been made to water the tomatoes—but not the people. Some of the migrants washed themselves and their clothes in a muddy irrigation ditch.

The crew boss explained, without apology, that he hadn't known the crop was late or that the grower hadn't installed facilities for his workers. Nobody said anything. We were all too tired.

A man who had brought his wife and child along finally broke the silence.

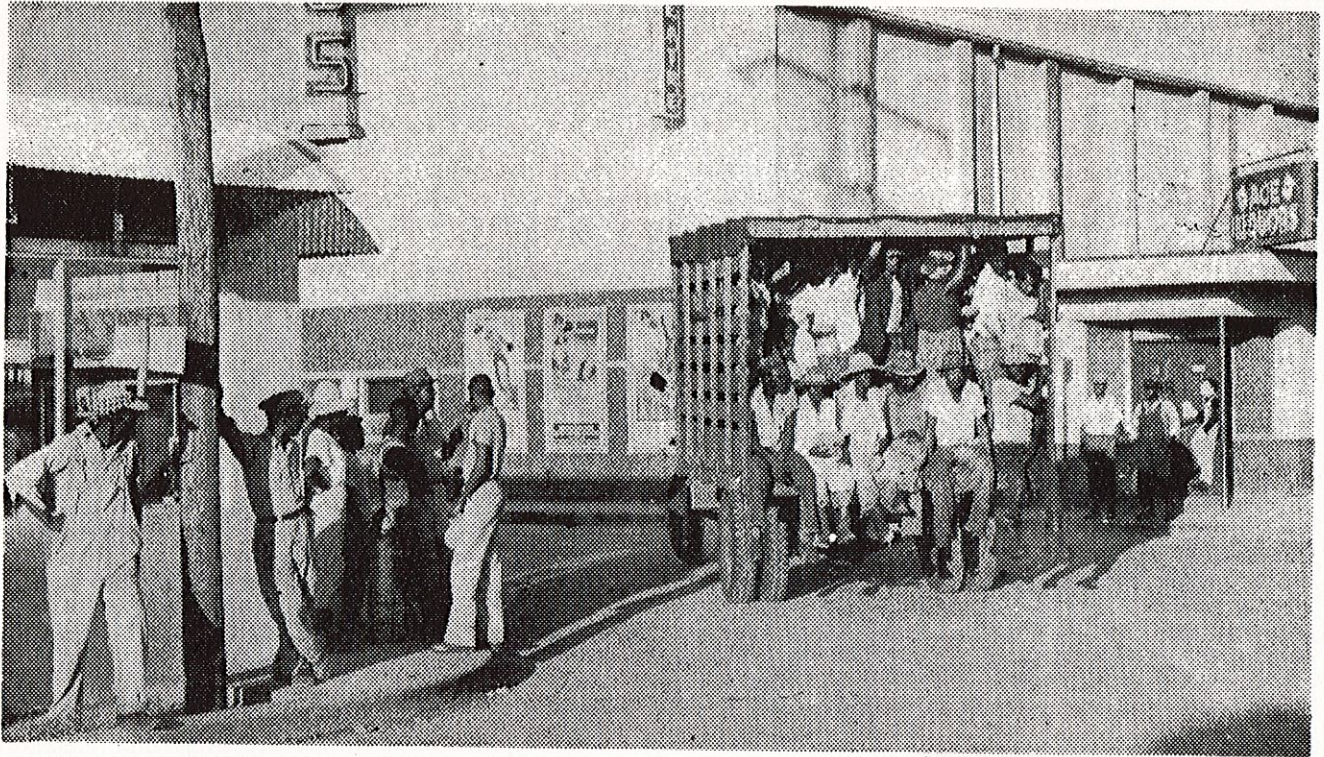
"We got here broke," he said mournfully. "Everything we got is tied up in this bundle." He pointed to a tattered bedspread tied up by its four corners. "And now we're even worse off than before 'cause we got to start borrowing money to live on."

The man then walked away with his family and slowly dug a hole in the ground. Then he set up a makeshift stove by placing a piece of sheet metal on four empty cans and built a fire under it.

I watched as he tramped off into the fields. In a few minutes he was back with a small cabbage and a can of water—from the irrigation ditch.

He and his wife boiled the cabbage over the can stove. It was the first meal that they and their child had eaten since leaving Homestead 18 hours before.





**This is everyday practice in transporting migrant labor in Florida—men and women packed in more closely than the law would allow cattle to be shipped.**

When I found myself stranded in a miserable Florida migrant labor camp with no work for 10 days because the tomato crop was late, my first thoughts were charitable ones.

Naively, I figured a mistake had been made, that I and the scores of other workers with me had been transported 300 miles in the good faith that jobs were waiting for us.

I've never been more wrong in my life!

It wasn't the weather and the fact that the tomatoes had not ripened by the time we arrived. The simple truth was that the tomato grower and "the labor contractor" who hired us with his fat promises planned it exactly that way.

#### **Off-Used Exploitation Gimmick.**

It's a favorite gimmick, I discovered, to exploit the illiterate, inarticulate migrant worker. Hang him up at a camp or a farm where he can't run and then charge him for his food and lodging.

What does a migrant do? I found that most of them, in hock to somebody all their lives, are forced to "go along" with the only rule of life they've ever known.

They stay on, run up debts to the farmer-grower or contractor and then work off their debts with sweat

and toil when the crop comes in.

And at the end? They have nothing and so they move on.

I stayed a couple of days, running up bills for food and my bed. There was no work, or no pay for anybody.

So I talked to the crew boss, the "contractor" who had led me to what he called the land of plenty but which I had discovered was a land of nothing. I told him I was leaving, that I was going into town.

#### **Threatened With Beating.**

"Walk away from this camp, boy" (a term often used condescendingly in the South and one that always grates on the nerves) he told me, "and the cops in town will catch up with you and beat you half to death. And if they don't get you, I'll come after you myself."

He was a mean-looking fellow, over six feet and 200 pounds-plus. But I decided that I would leave anyway and take my chances getting into town—three miles on foot—and moving along to another stop where there was more work.

Later I heard this bully make the same threat to other restless members of the migrant crew he had gotten to the camp. About forty of them, including a dozen small children, had straggled into the camp in a motley caravan of broken-down buses and trucks. There was much grumbling and discontent over no work.

When anyone objected too loudly, he was threatened with head-whippings. I didn't see anybody get slapped around, but there was not the slightest doubt in my mind





As (William Lewis) told Dale Wright, children of migrant workers start work as soon as they're able to lift a hamper of beans.

that the bossman would do whatever he felt necessary to make his point.

Men and women I had talked with on the long bus trip up from Homestead told me that getting a fist or a club "upside your head" was one of the things you expected working in the fields.

#### Off to Tampa by Bus.

I had seen and heard enough. And despite the threats of the crew boss, I left camp the next morning, walked three miles into Ruskin and caught a bus for nearby Tampa. I had money, of course, for travel and I was able to get away. The others stranded at the camp, stayed on and waited for the crop to come in.

On the bus, I met a 43-year-old farm worker I shall call William Lewis. He was born in a shack in a clump of trees near Okeechobee, Fla., one of 11 children of migrant parents. As soon as he was able to lift a basket of tomatoes or a hamper of beans, he had gone into the field with the rest of the family.

William had never gone beyond the third grade in school, a backwoods classroom. He never learned to read or write. With his brothers and sisters he went through his early years suffering from malnutrition.

As he put it, "We was hungry lots of the time."

The hungry years had left their mark. He wheezed and snorted constantly. His arms and legs were bent and misshapen. He shambled and shuffled along in a permanent stoop.

Long ago, he said, he had lost track of his father and mother, didn't know if they were alive. Occasionally, he stumbled across a brother or a sister in a work camp or a potato field.

#### One Indelible Recollection.

Stamped indelibly in his memory was the recollection of the succession of filthy shacks and camps where there never was enough food to eat or milk to drink. As long as he could remember, he said, he had been overworked, cheated out of his wages and overcharged whenever he bought anything.

"Ain't nothin' you can do about it," he said wearily. "You got to take what the bossman give you. Then, when the work is done, you move on. You gotta go somewhere else."

William told me he had worked in just about every state from Florida to Maine. In several states, including New York, he added, he had gone on relief when there was no work.

I asked him if he thought he could escape from the treadmill of migrant labor.

"Never escape," he replied. "I don't know nothing but picking and grubbing. I'll keep moving on from farm to farm until the day I die."

William's plight, I discovered on my assignment, was that of scores of others I talked with—Negro, Mexican, Puerto Rican, West Indian and poor white migrants who work the good earth but who get very little good out of it for themselves.



What's it like working in a potato harvest? It's monotonous, brutal, strength-sapping labor.

Toiling and sweating in the long potato rows, filling 100-pound sacks under the blazing sun, tries any man's endurance. But working in a potato grading shed was even worse.

In my travels as a migrant laborer, I found myself in the Florida town of Hastings. With 20 other workers, I had arrived there one morning last April in a bus. By early afternoon I was pushing a hand truck for Florida Planters Inc.

As a laborer, I grew up fast in this job.

My job was to wheel the truck, loaded with four 100-pound sacks of potatoes, from the grader into boxcars and trucks. Often I had to jockey the handtruck as far as 200 feet along a loading platform, then up a short ramp into the cars and trucks.

#### Speed-Up Ordered.

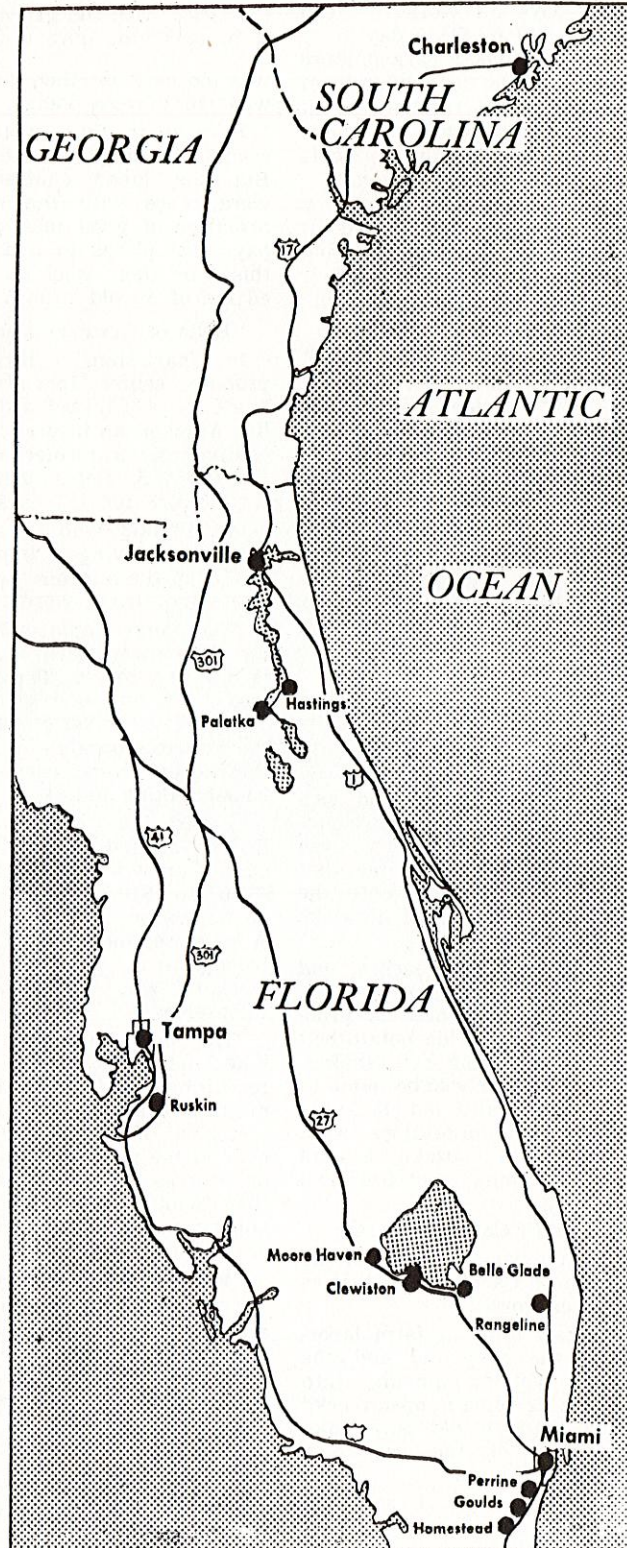
I held up well for six hours, until the grader boss ordered a "speed-up." Loaders who took the potato sacks off a moving belt and stacked them on my handtruck were told to increase the number of sacks from four to five. This meant I would have to push 500 pounds instead of 400 pounds up those ramps.

I have my share of muscles and I had developed new ones as a migrant laborer but this new order sounded impossible. Once, twice, three times I tried to force that overloaded handtruck up the ramp. I just couldn't do it.

The grader boss came along and told me to quit "dogging" it, to go to work. I told him the 500-pound load was too much for me. He laughed at me. I told him I was quitting.

I asked to be paid for the hours I had worked. The boss sneered.

"Boy," he said, "we don't pay around here until Satur-



The dots indicate the Southern towns staff writer Dale Wright visited while working and living as a migrant laborer. Map by Williams.

day and that's six days away. You wanna hang around waitin' for your pay and doin' nuthin'?"

#### Make You Quit.

It wasn't until later that I got the picture. Other workers in Hastings told me that employers often make the work so tough for migrants, particularly before pay day, that the men quit and move on.

Rarely do they return for the wages due them. It was obvious to me that I had contributed my share of free labor.

Sometimes, I learned, a worker will come back for the money owed him only to be brushed off again. The employer or contractor can't remember ever hiring him; or the records have been lost; or pay day has passed, or they're out of cash and the worker is told to come back the following week.

These are just a few of the devices used to exploit the migrant farm worker.

So I marked off to experience the \$6—at \$1 an hour—I had earned. It was worth it, to hear the stories of the other workers who had been swindled the same way.

#### Filth at \$1.50 a Day.

I was dog-tired when I limped away from that grading shed in Hastings. What I wanted more than anything else—more than the six lousy bucks in uncollected pay—was a place to rest my aching bones.

I learned quickly that a room and bath was not to be found. Such accommodations for migrants didn't exist. I settled for what I could find: A seedy, dirty, 10-by-12 closet-like room in a boarding house. The bare mattress was so filthy I slept in my clothes. The price was \$1.50 a day.

Nine other rooms, including some with families and children, were already occupied in the shanty. It was an ancient, one-story wood structure, supported precariously at the corners by concrete blocks.

The door to my room had no lock. It had long since been broken. To assure



privacy — and to guard against theft — I jammed a broken-legged chair against the door to keep it shut.

There were kitchen facilities in the so-called rooming house, but they were unusable. The three-legged kerosene stove was charred a burnt black with grease. One corner of the stove was supported by a milk crate. A film of grime and grit covered the bottom of the stopped-up sink.

#### **Women, Kids Used.**

The bathroom was even worse. After I waited my turn — hours it seemed — I stepped inside and right into a wall of stench which turned my stomach. It was too much. I went outside.

I learned many other things. During the peak of the potato harvest in Florida, men and women are worked on the grader for as long as 15 hours daily. Some of the women told me they were paid only 40 cents an hour.

I found an 11-year-old boy who was working 10 hours a day lugging 100-pound potato sacks onto trucks in the grading yard.

The Federal Labor Standards Act of 1938, I was aware, prohibits child labor under 16 at establishments producing goods for interstate or foreign commerce.

A Florida law prohibits child labor under 16 except after school hours or during school vacations. The children I saw here were working in April when the schools were in session.

#### **Work Till Midnight.**

At another grading shed in Hastings I found 9 and 10-year-olds loading the 100-pound potato sacks. They were working after school hours all right — from 3 p.m. until midnight!

John Kemp, owner of the ramshackle rooming house where I lived for a while, told me:

"Nothin' unusual about kids workin' down here. I got four boys — 9, 10, 13 and 14 — all workin' in the potato fields every day after school until it gets dark. They pay seven cents a hundred pounds. When me and my wife and

the boys all work, we can make \$17 or \$18 a day."

In Hastings, I learned, there are schools for children of year-round residents but none for children who come into town with their parents to work "on the season."

So these latter youngsters, despite the laws aimed at protecting them, move from farm to farm with their parents and work right along with them in the fields.

It's dirty, rotten work for adults, let alone children.

I was asleep in a filthy room near Hastings when a baby's shriek pierced the night and woke me up. I pushed open the unlocked door of the room next to mine to investigate.

There, lying on a burlap bag in an old packing case, was a baby, two or three months old, screaming in terror.

A huge beetle had crawled into the baby's mouth. Its parents were not home.

I picked up the baby, removed the beetle and succeeded in quieting the frightened youngster. There was no more sleep for me that night so I stayed with the baby and waited for his folks to return.

Beetles and roaches and chinchies, they told me later, were the least of their problems. The Florida potato belt also breeds big rattlesnakes. They are likely to be found in or under any old building. Flies and mosquitoes were everywhere, buzzing around in the remnants of food and debris.

#### **South Carolina Worse.**

But what lay ahead of me in South Carolina was just as bad or worse.

I saw migrant farm laborers, the very old and the very young, moving into South Carolina in open trucks and battered old buses like livestock on the way to a slaughterhouse.

In the fields I saw the same kind of people I had met in Florida, working 12 to 16 hours a day, cheated on their wages and exploited at every hand.

But in South Carolina there were youngsters only 6 and 7 years old working in

the fields with the grownups from early morning until it

was too dark for them to see what they were doing.

Here again, there were no schools for migrant children. But the labor contractors were there with the same promises of good jobs, good pay, nice places to live. By this time their spiel reminded me of an old record.

#### **Evils of Crew Leader.**

In Charleston, a thriving produce center for several truck crops, I talked with Julius Amaker, an insurance executive and a former agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 13 years.

Mr. Amaker, who has spent much time trying to improve the lot of the migrant worker had some strong words:

"The worst single evil facing the migrant farm worker is his crew leader. The crew boss cheats him, short-changes him and uses every trick in the book to separate him from the money he has earned by back-breaking toil.

"I see the crew leaders driving around in big, fancy cars. I know they make from \$7000 to \$10,000 during a single season, after expenses. A lot of the money rightfully belongs to the poor, illiterate workers who can't defend themselves.

"The only solution is to take the responsibility for recruitment and payment of migrant workers away from the crew boss and turn it over to the grower or packer or processor. The employer then should be under the supervision of a trained federal agent.

#### **Records Must Be Kept.**

"The employer should be required under penalty of law to keep accurate work records so that withholding, social security and workmen's compensation credits can be made."

Mr. Amaker said many migrants who come to Charleston die there or land on the local welfare rolls.

"It's always the same story," he said. "Somebody's promise of better work, better pay. When they learn it's no better here, they either keep going north or get stranded here.

He's particularly concerned with the children. He pointed out that state legislation to provide schools for the migrant children was killed two years ago by a strong farm lobby and the action of segregationists.

#### **Federal Protection.**

If these youngsters don't go to school in Florida," he said, "or wherever they come from, they simply don't go at all. So they grow up in the fields and are never prepared for anything more than farm labor."

Because no state will take on the job of protecting the migrant laborer's interests, he said, he'd like to see federal supervisors watch the harvesting operations as the labor gangs move north and thus protect the workers' interests along the way.

"Migrant farm workers," he continued, "are absolutely the lowest on the American economic scale. Yet they are vital to the harvest of American crops. Without them, the farmer, the shipper, the packer, the processor and the consumer could not exist."

Mr. Amaker sees some protection for the migrant worker in the minimum wage laws, but only if there are adequate teeth in such legislation.

"Employers," he declared, "find ways to skirt the law. The migrant worker continues to be a sorrowful victim of neglect and omission.

#### **Trip to Nowhere.**

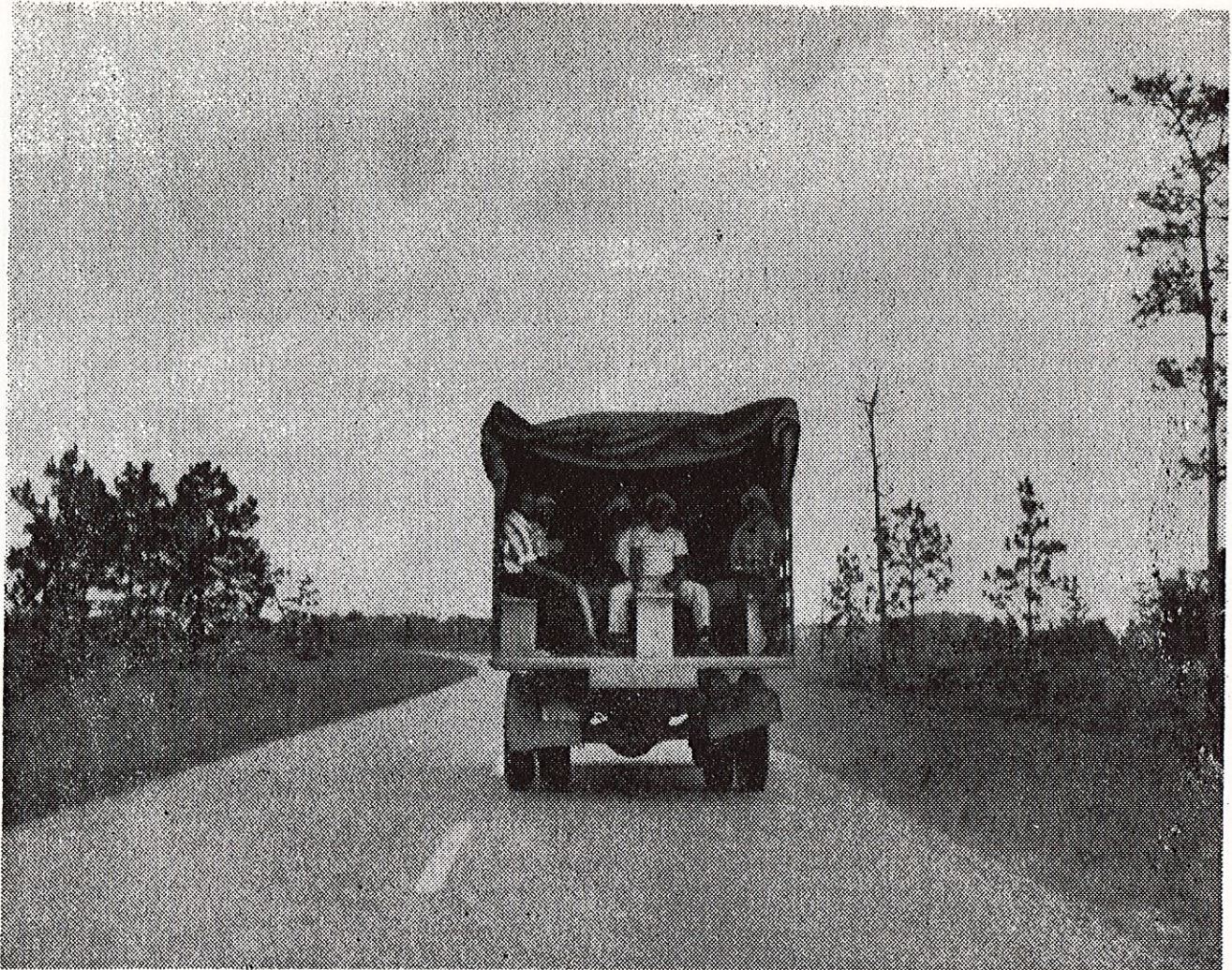
Some new approach is necessary, some code of 20th century laws to protect these people from exploitation everywhere along the line."

I stood on a Charleston street corner and watched the exodus of migrants northward to another stop on the trail. A convoy of two buses, a stake truck and an ancient, broken-down station wagon was overcrowded with people and work gear.

It was a trip to more unfulfilled promises, more cheating and more sorrows.

A bus like one of those in the convoy had crashed into another vehicle in North Carolina a few years ago. A score of workers were killed.





**For the long journey north from Florida, migrant workers ride in an open truck on crude wooden benches. The mode is the same for old and young—over hundreds, sometimes a thousand, miles.**

The driver was found to have had no insurance.

Mr. Amaker had pointed out in our talk that labor contractors pick these people up along the road somewhere, then rumble off anywhere there's a buck to be made—for the crew boss.

#### **1000-Mile Trips.**

The trip is frequently as long as 1000 miles, both going north to harvest and returning home after the work is over.

The law does not require operators of migrant transport vehicles to carry liability insurance in Florida and South Carolina, or in most other states in the south. If passengers are injured or killed, it's just tough luck for them or their families. And

while compulsory insurance laws are non-existent, safety inspection regulations are so loosely enforced that they're almost useless.

I had seen many such caravans earlier in Florida. I was to see many more in my travels along the East Coast. The great tragedy was that for many of these miserable men, women and children, the trip was to nowhere.

The great dream of many migrant farm workers, born and reared in a shack in the South, is to go North to the land of plenty—to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

On his first trip "on the season," the migrant finds that dream quickly shattered. I, too, was a dreamer when I went into the fields in Delaware, New Jersey and eastern Long Island.

I found that, unlike the South, there were, indeed, a few laws aimed at protecting the rights of the itinerant harvester. But the truth is that these laws are so scant and so haphazardly enforced that they have little effect.

#### **Inspected?**

They have had no effect whatever, for example, at one camp where I found the same shocking conditions bared by another World-Telegram survey eight years ago.

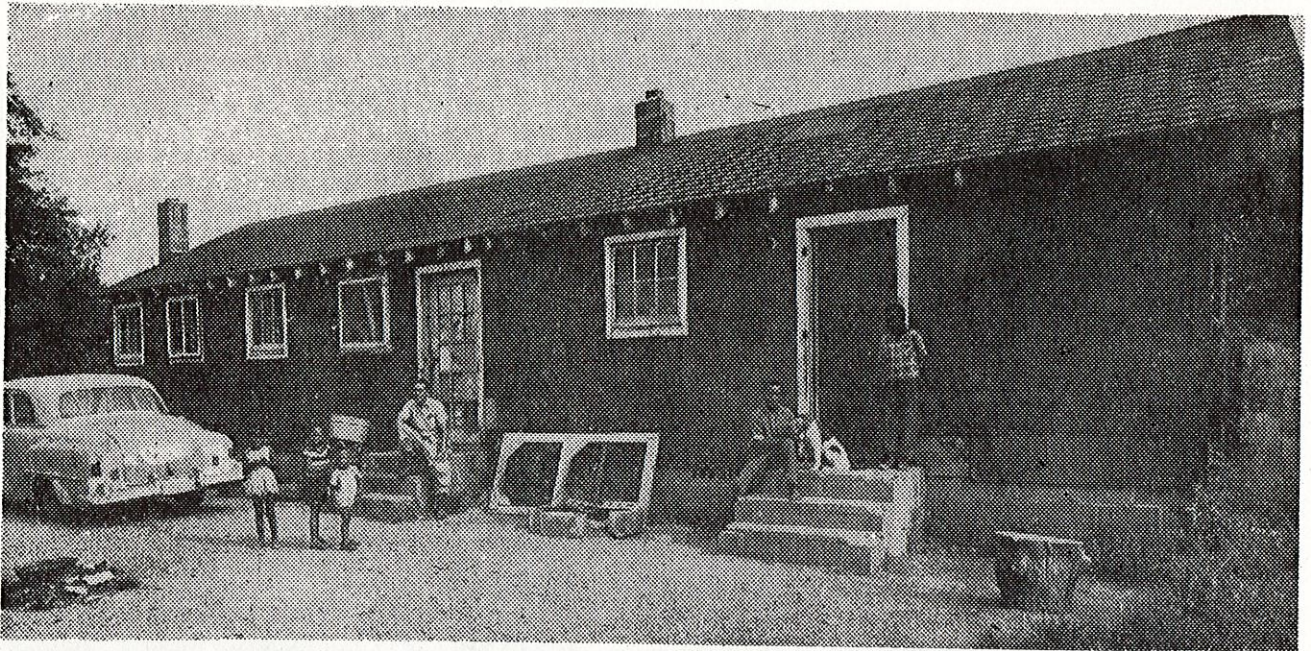
I found a mean-looking labor camp on the Enos Herbert farm near New Sharon, N. J., that a health inspector had visited the day before I did. Six inches of slimy water covered the concrete block community shower room. There was no drainage system.

About 20 percent living at the camp drew their water for drinking, cooking and bathing, from a handpump in the middle of the camp compound. The water tasted acrid appeared to be contaminated. In every glassful a gritty sediment settled to the bottom.

#### **Owes Too Much to Die.**

In Cedarville, N. J., a little farm town in the southwestern corner of the state, a





**This is home to a migrant worker and his family—on Route 33 between Hightstown and Freehold, N. J.—where staff writer Dale Wright found conditions no better now than they were eight years ago when first exposed by staff writer Allan Keller.**

Photo by De Marsico.

woman crew leader told me that after spending most of her life as a migrant, "I'm ready to lay down and die."

She said her name was Mable Brown and that she came from Portpano Beach, Fla. "I can't die now, though," she added. "I owe too many people."

An angular, work-worn woman wearing a pair of incongruous johns, Mrs. Brown said she had brought 17 laborers into Cedarville in a battered Chevy sedan and a dilapidated bus. Bad weather, she said, had held up the tomato crop and as a result none of her crew had earned any money. She was paying their food bill out of her own pocket.

Mrs. Brown's camp was worse than any I had seen in the Deep South. She repeated an old refrain: "Ain't seen any government people around here in a long time."

The camp consisted of a row of shanties—off the main road in the woods—with no running water, no indoor toilet and no plumbing. There was a filthy community shower and a cramped, one-room kitchen which served the whole camp.

A mangy dog sprawled in the doorway of one shack. A goat and some flea-bitten sheep scratched in the dirt in front of the row of shanties. A few little children played hop-scotch in the dirt with the menagerie.

#### **No Lettuce for Him.**

One of Mrs. Brown's "help," a stooped, gnarled man in his late 60s, stopped rolling a cigaret and spoke up:

"We was chopping lettuce on the Sorantino Brothers farm a few weeks back, just keepin' busy till the tomatoes got ripe.

"The bossman said he was paying \$1 an hour. When it came time for the money, the man didn't give up but 85 cents an hour. He didn't say why; he just told us to move on in the pay line. I guess he forgot that we were supposed to get the dollar."

#### **White Worker Rare.**

One of the rarities I saw in the migrant labor camps along the Atlantic Seaboard cropped up in Hightstown, N. J., a prosperous little village between Freehold and Trenton. It was a white migrant farm worker.

I found him perched forlornly by the side of a railroad track. He was broke and hungry. A scrawny little man, he said between dips from a can of snuff that his name was Glenn Hubert. "Don't forget, it's spelled with two n's."

He said he was 46 years old, that he came from Madison, Wis., and that he had been "on the road for seven or eight years."

I hadn't seen a white migrant since months earlier in Belle Glade, Fla., when I talked with a group of them as they shaped up for work in the bean fields.

Mr. Hubert said he suffered as a white man working with migrants. He got the least to eat at his labor camp commissary and he was the first to feel the brunt of the crew leader's anger.

#### **Beaten for Slowness.**

"I don't pick very fast," he complained, "and the bossman (his crew leader) don't stand for no slacking." He said he had been beaten with fists and clubs and pointed to a gash on his cheek.

At another stop in New

Jersey—near Manalapan—a young mother of three told in painful detail how it feels to get trapped at the end of the migrant trail.

Mrs. Inell Jennings, 27, shooed flies away from an infant asleep in a cot and declared:

"That child ain't got a chance. His daddy and me want to give him the best but we can't do no better than this." She lived with her family in a two-room tarpaper and tin shanty in "Bielson's Quarters," a row of about 20 dilapidated dwellings without indoor plumbing or sanitary facilities. The rent was from \$10 to \$15 weekly.

The only time the landlord visits his private housing project is on Saturday morning, to collect the rent.

#### **Reported 8 Years Ago.**

The tragedy of this family's plight is that World-Telegram

reporter Allan Keller had found and reported in shocking detail the same kind of conditions at the same camp eight years ago.

Mrs. Jennings said she had been forced to make her



home at the "quarters" six years ago, after coming there from Tallahassee, Fla., and getting stranded with a farm labor crew.

Shuffling down the dirt road which leads off the highway to Bielson's Quarters I found Thomas Miller. He said he was 51 and that he came from Charleston, S. C. At that moment, he said, he was looking for a state trooper.

"I've been working with Daisy Durham's outfit," he said, "and now I'm gonna get her arrested." Mr. Miller said that Mrs. Durham, from Plant City, Fla., his crew leader, had charged him and six other laborers—both men and women—\$10 weekly rent for a one-room shack at the quarters when the place had been condemned.

"That shack is damned," the worker said, "and Bielson's not supposed to rent it." He explained that his crew leader charged rent for it anyway and pocketed the money.

Mr. Miller's story of cheating and gouging was familiar. I was to hear it many more times in New Jersey and New York—more times than even in Florida.

A migrant farm worker expects exploitation as one of the grim facts of his miserable life.

He knows he'll be cheated and he learns to live with it. He knows he'll be underpaid for his labor and overcharged for many of the things he has to buy for himself and his family.

Because many migrants never get to school—or have to leave during the early elementary school years to go to work in the fields—they are uneducated and illiterate. For this reason they are easy marks for sharp operators.

#### Gimmicks Described.

While driving along a country road through the fertile North Shore potato area near Peconic, L. I., last August, I picked up two hitchhiking

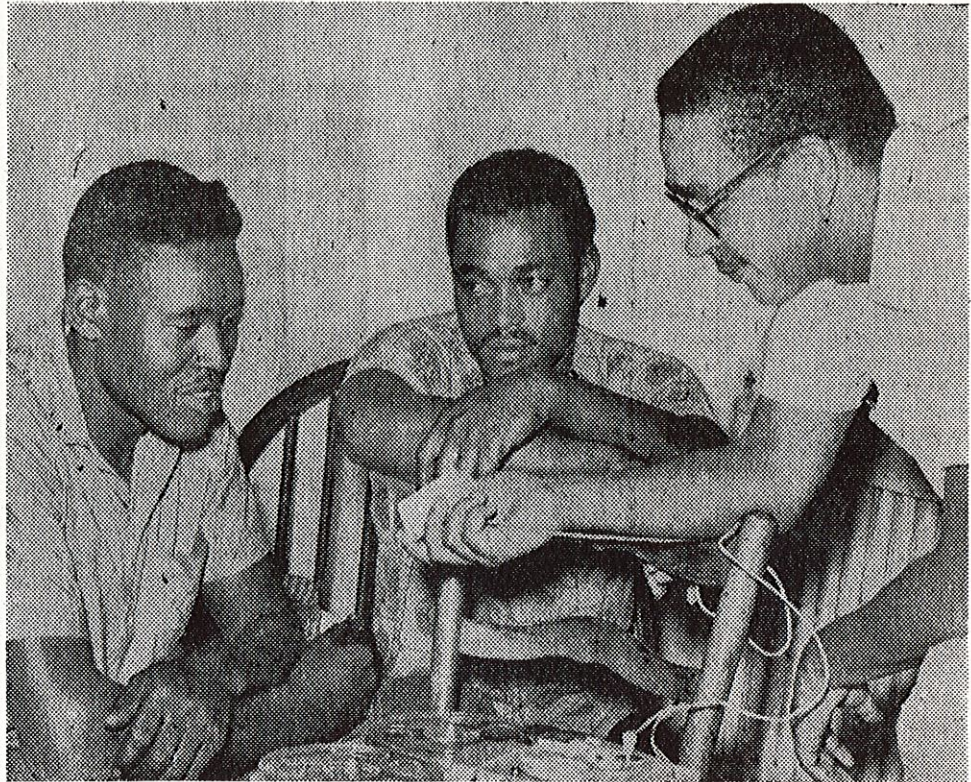


Photo by Hiller.

**Evon Washington (left) and James Taylor, migrant workers from Florida, tell their stories of being cheated to staff writer Dale Wright.**

farmhands who spelled out some of the gimmicks the sharpies use to separate a migrant worker from his hard-won wages.

James Taylor, 10, and Evon Washington, 31, both from Polk County, Fla., had been taken to Peconic last July to work as potato graders. They had joined a traveling farm crew headed by a Virginia man earlier in the summer on a promise that they would be paid \$1.25 an hour.

(The World-Telegram is withholding the Virginia man's name at this time because of an investigation now under way.)

Both farmhands agreed that in nearly three months of work with the crew of 67 graders and loaders they had never earned more than 50 cents hourly.

At the time I gave the two men a lift they were headed on foot for New York City, 95 miles away. Between the two they had 12 cents in cash and only the clothes they wore. They had left the

camp the night before, they said...because there was no chance of earning enough money to subsist.

#### Story Recorded.

The stories they told were so typical of the cruel swindles I had heard many times before in other farm areas, North and South, that I brought them into New York, staked them to a room at a YMCA and tape-recorded their stories.

Two days later I rounded up some shirts and underwear and helped get them jobs at an upstate New York fruit cannery through the State Employment Service.

Here are some of the things they told me—on two hours of tape:

Their crew leader deducted \$1 weekly for "union dues" for a union that doesn't exist. The men had not signed any union membership cards. They did not know the name of the "union" to which they paid dues.

The two said they were told that the deductions would be

made for 20 weeks. I already knew the reason. It was one of the gimmicks frequently used by labor contractors to write off the expense of transporting migrants from one stop to another.

In their recruiting pitches in the South, contractors promise to bus or truck migrants "up the road" at no cost. But they get back the money in hidden charges.

#### Illegal Deductions.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Washington also declared that their crew leader deducted \$1.40 weekly for social security benefits. Mr. Washington emphasized that although he had lost his SS card he knew his number.

"Neither the contractor nor the timekeeper knew my number," he said. "They never asked me."

The deductions were illegal even if the crew leader had known the number. The maximum legal deduction is 3 percent of gross salary up to \$4800 annually. For the \$1.40 deductions to have been legal,



the crew leader workers would have to be paid at least \$46.67 weekly. The two hitchhikers insisted that they had never grossed more than \$32 a week with the crew.

On paydays, the men declared, the crew boss charged his workers \$1 a pint for wine which retails for 53 cents.

Though state law requires that migrant farm workers be furnished with written statements of hours worked and wages received, both men asserted they had never received such records.

#### No Contracts Posted.

Another state law requires that farm labor contractors post in conspicuous places, either in living quarters or at grading houses, copies of labor contracts detailing wages and hours and charges for food and housing.

Mr. Taylor, who has completed 11 years of public school education, said he had never seen a labor contract posted and did not know the procedure was required.

These are just some of the many complaints of shoddy record-keeping and questionable payroll operation that both men gave in their interviews.

Mr. Washington said he had been paid nothing for his first week of work and that at the end of the second week he received \$4 for well over 40 hours of work. This was after the deduction of \$13.50 for 19 meals weekly and \$4 for room rent.

"Sometimes the boss would pay us whatever he felt like," Mr. Washington explained, "no matter how many hours we worked."

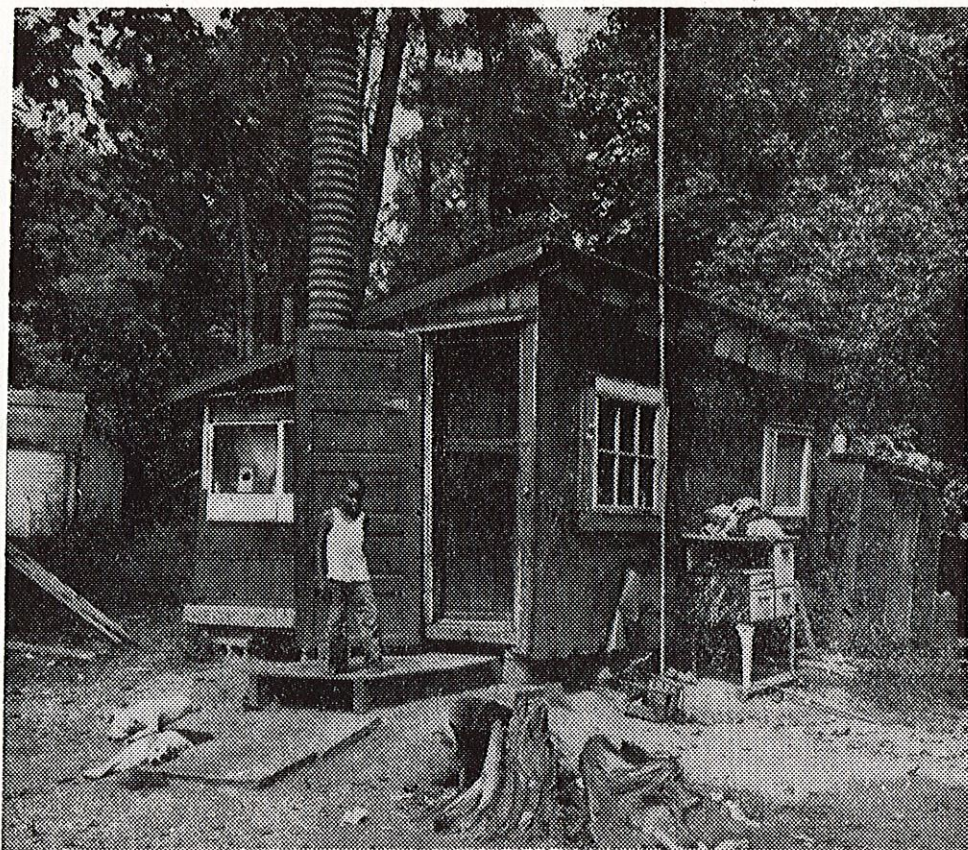
"Other times he wouldn't take the hours we worked as reported by the timekeeper. He'd tell me, 'You couldn't have worked that much time.' Then he'd pay us what he wanted to."

#### \$17 in Best Week.

Mr. Taylor said that for his best week of work he received \$17, after "union" dues, social security and food and lodging.

Both men charged that there were many others at the camp who had been bilked by illegal charges.

The two men estimated



Even a city slum would be preferable to this migrant worker's hovel in a clump of weeds near Matawan, N. J., with its make-shift chimney and outhouse in the rear.

Photo by De Marsico.

they had been cheated out of a minimum of \$200 each.

One of their biggest gripes concerned what they called "waiting time."

As Mr. Taylor explained it: "If we're loading potatoes off the grader and into trucks and the trucks are late, we don't get paid for waiting. But we have to work around the shed anyway, stacking sacks of potatoes for the next trucks or just moving things around."

"There's sometimes two or three hours between trucks. We're working but we're not getting paid. The time stops when the truck is loaded and it don't start until the next one comes in."

#### Take It Or Leave It.

An intense, serious young man, Mr. Taylor's summation of the exploitation of migrant farm workers mirrors the feelings of the essential laborers (about 25,000 come into New York State every

year who harvest the nation's crops:

"We're getting cheated and we know it. You gotta take it or leave. We left."

I later made another visit to the camp, tucked away in the trees, to see for myself what the two men had left behind. There, glistening in the bright Long Island sun, I found an explanation: an expensive 1960 sedan was parked in front of the shabby quarters alongside a 1956 luxury car. I had been told earlier by Mr. Taylor and Mr. Washington that they were owned by the crew leader and his wife.

A 30-page, slick paper booklet published earlier this year by the New York State Migrant Labor Committee boasts proudly that the state "marches forward" in long strides in its handling of itinerant farm workers.

Photographs of smiling laborers and their children beam from its pages—at work, at play, in school and in church. The committee booklet spells out step-by-step the regulations under which more than 25,000 transient crop pickers who come into the state every year live and work.

The publication lists rules for the supervision of crew leaders, growers, packers, processors and labor camp operators. The work of seven state agencies is exhaustively outlined. Impressive statistics tell what has been done to improve the lot of the migrant farm worker in the past 40 years.

#### Many Still Exploited.

It is true that forward steps have been taken. They can be seen in Eastern Long Island and other farm areas. Yet here, in perhaps the most enlightened of all of the 50 states, many migrant farm people still face poverty



amid plenty. They are neglected, exploited and left hopeless.

The seamier side of the state migrant labor picture can be examined in all of its shocking clarity in and near Riverhead, L. I., just 83 miles from Times Square.

I've been there. I've seen and talked with the migrant farm worker at two bottom-land squatter communities called Griffing's Path and Tin Top, both within Riverhead city limits. The people I've seen there don't appear in the committee booklet.

A place called Warner's Duck Ranch, about three miles from the center of town, some 200 Negroes and a few Puerto Ricans exist in appalling misery and degradation.

In many weeks of traveling, working and living with migrants I was prepared for anything. But Warner's Duck Ranch bowled me over!

#### Many on Relief.

Most of the ranch tenants are migrants. Others are former migrants brought up from southern states in labor crews, for potato, corn and bean harvests. Because of poor crops—or poor crop prices—and peon wages, they are now stranded with little or no funds.

Many families who live on the ranch are on welfare, swelling the relief burden borne by Riverhead taxpayers.

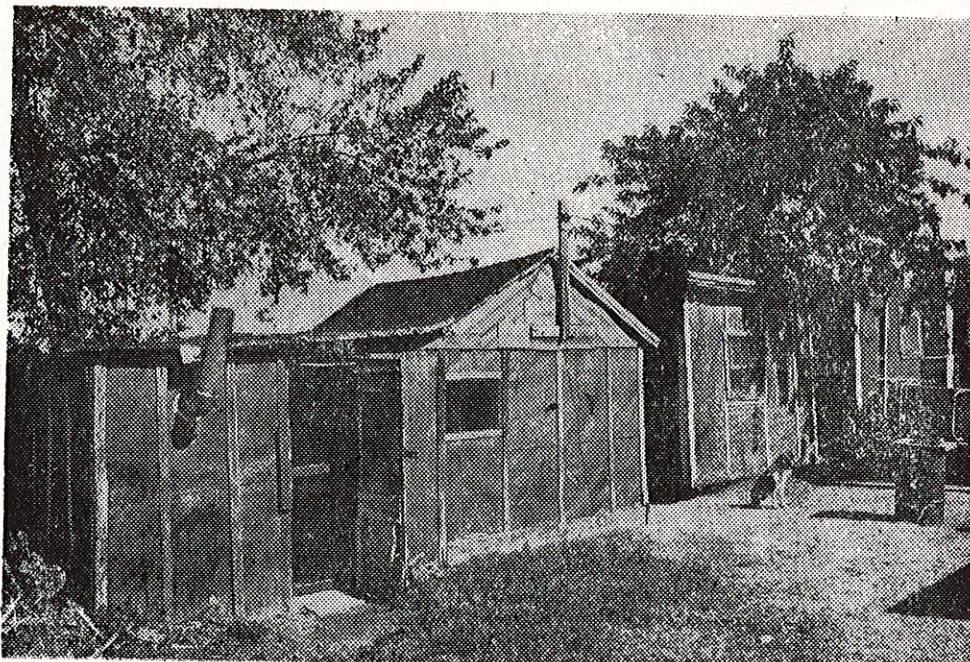
The ranch, operated by Hollis V. Warner, is run like a pre-Civil War plantation. Mr. Warner was at one time the world's leading duck raiser. He went out of business in 1957.

"The politicians," he told me, angrily waving his hands, "boosted feed prices so high that they ran me right out of business."

Although Mr. Warner got out of duck raising, he did not abandon his ranch. Instead, he converted it into a private housing project and replaced the ducks with people.

#### Hidden Behind Trees.

He partitioned the long, flimsy uninsulated wooden sheds, which only three or four years ago housed ducks, into separate units. Today they house human beings, including many families with small children.



Photos by De Marsico.

**People—"forgotten people"—live in these flimsy tarpaper shacks at Griffing's Path in Riverhead, L. I. They pay \$6 a week rent for each of these cabins, which lack plumbing or indoor sanitary facilities.**

The ranch is, typically, off the main thoroughfare and hidden behind a clump of trees.

Mr. Warner charges \$10 to \$15 a week rent. Each of the converted duck sheds contains two to four rooms. There are almost no indoor toilets. Tenants must use vile outhouses in the rear of each shack.

Because of the lack of a drainage system, it is common for housewives to dump dish and washwater through the front or rear doors into the dirt street.

"This is no place for humans to live," said Louise Davis, a three-year tenant in one of the converted duck sheds. "Why, even the ducks couldn't make it here. But there's no other place for us to go."

#### 'Stuck for Good.'

Mother of two small children, Mrs. Davis said she migrated to Riverhead from Florida three years ago with a farm labor crew.

"The potatoes were late," she recalled, "and when my babies started coming, my husband left. Now it looks like I'm stuck here for good."

Mrs. Davis said she had

been on welfare most of the time she had lived in Riverhead and received \$61.50 weekly. Her relief check is boosted to \$64.50 during winter months to pay for coal for cooking and heating. She added that many of her neighbors are also on welfare.

Another ranch tenant, Mrs. Nettie McCrary, who has lived there for nine years, said she had never seen a health, labor or housing inspector at the camp; nor any representative of other state agencies.

"If a fire ever started here," she declared, "the whole place would go up in a cloud of stinking black smoke."

#### 'Can't Get Out.'

Edward Delaney, 62, a bent, toothless man from Durant, Miss., complained: "I can't earn enough to get out of here." He said he paid \$15 weekly for a two-room waterless and toiletless shanty.

He arrived in Riverhead with a labor contractor and a crew in July of last year. Like many others, he could not find work enough in the potato fields and grading sheds to earn the fare back home.

It was the old story of

over-recruitment of farm laborers so they could be worked for the lowest possible pay.

Mr. Warner, who operates a general store in one of his converted duck sheds, has a different view of his tenants. He was one of the few persons to whom I revealed my identity as a reporter.

I asked him how he could justify charging \$40 to \$75 monthly rents for such miserable living quarters.

#### 'Everybody's Happy.'

"These people," he said, shaking his fist menacingly, "are all happy here. They're all satisfied. I give them a place to live and something to eat. Nobody else will take them."

Mr. Warner moved closer, threateningly, and as he spoke I watched over his shoulder as a tiny girl, naked, about 3 years old, played with a ragged doll in the dirt. Scratching in the same patch was a flock of dusty, a nemic-looking chickens.

The little girl was one of Mr. Warner's "happy" tenants. She lived in one of his duck sheds.

She may die in one of them.



I saw it all—the misery and ugliness of the migrant's labor camp and the fields where he worked from Florida to Long Island.

I labored in the same bean and tomato patches with these itinerant crop harvesters. I grubbed in the rich earth with them for potatoes and I chopped cabbage in the same fields.

I shared wretched food with the "stoop" laborer and along with him I was cheated out of my meager wages for work honestly done.

I found that despite legislative efforts and the work of social and religious agencies to improve the lot of the nomadic farm hand and his family, little has been done to better their way of life.

I found that he is forced to exist in degradation without human dignity. I was touched by the hopelessness I saw in a little child's eyes.

I came away angry and sick from the tomato fields just 30 miles south of the glitter and wealth of Miami Beach. I found the same crude exploitation, the same dreadful living conditions, just 30 miles south of New York City.

The question is what can be done to remedy the plight of the migrant farm worker, whose sweat and toil—yes, and sometimes blood—go into the harvest of this nation's food crops.

These are the things that must be done:

Guarantee the migrant farm worker a fair wage for his labor, if necessary through federal minimum wage laws.

Protect the migrant, the man least able to defend himself, from exploitation by his crew leader, the grower, the shipper, the packer of the processor.

Provide him and his chil-



**Staff writer Dale Wright at his typewriter, assembling the revealing story of his experience as a migratory worker.**

Photo by Ford.

dren with an education, so they can better themselves and compete for jobs with others who have that advantage.

Treat and cure his many ailments so that he can do an honest day's work.

Give him a decent place to live where he can care for his family in peace and dignity.

There are before Congress today forward steps in this direction. Sen. Harrison A. Williams Jr. (D., N. J.), chairman of the House subcommittee on migratory labor,

has proposed an 11-point package of legislation designed to bring the migrant out of that clump of trees where he lives and out into the mainstream of American life where he can enjoy his rights and privileges as a citizen.

The migration division of the Puerto Rican Labor Department has set up contractual arrangements under which off-shore workers are guaranteed minimum wages and a fixed number of work hours during harvest seasons.

None of these guarantees are available to the vast ma-

majority of migrant farm hands—Negroes, West Indians, Mexicans, Cubans, Bermudians and a sprinkling of whites—who come out of the South or from their respective islands to labor their way North. They hope to end the summer with enough money to pay their way home. Instead many remain here as relief burdens.

Enlightened New York State should show the way in improving working and living conditions for migrants. Although seven separate agencies are at work on the job, they have only scratched the surface.

The work of these agencies should be consolidated into one all-encompassing unit with adequate powers to enforce all existing laws and press for new remedial legislation.

New Jersey often points to its pioneer role in handling the itinerant crop picker. It is true, there are some laws. But they are not being adequately enforced. I found many examples of laxity in south and central New Jersey.

The migrant farm worker has been tucked away with his family in that inevitable clump of trees and forgotten for so many years that he is unaware that he has rights and privileges as a citizen.

Can anyone expect the sweating, hard-working, underpaid tomato picker who is cheated at every hand to ask for his rights as an American when he does not know they exist?

October 10th, 1961 through October 24th, 1961



# Time to Remember the 'Forgotten'

No one with a conscience could have read World-Telegram staff writer Dale Wright's first-hand reports on migrant farm workers without experiencing a deep sense of outrage.

Life for the migrant worker, as Mr. Wright saw and temporarily lived it, is a continuous nightmare of back-breaking work, filth-shack "housing," deceit and cheating by bosses who under-pay and over-charge him at every turn. And geography makes no difference. Mr. Wright found conditions in the North—in New Jersey and Long Island—worse than those he encountered in the South.

Worst of all, the misery is self-perpetuating. Children who should be in school are found toiling in the fields with their parents to help eke out a bare existence. Uneducated, unskilled—what's their future?

Of efforts to improve the lot of these "forgotten people," the result to date is next to nil. Corrective legislation has been inadequate, largely unenforced and hence meaningless.

In his closing article, Mr. Wright pointed out that remedial action should come from Washington and state capitals. Coverage by federal minimum wage laws is one answer—but that's only part of the story.

In Charleston, Mr. Wright talked to an insurance executive and former U. S. Agriculture Department agent who said: "The only solution is to take the responsibility for recruitment and payment of migrant workers away from the crew boss and turn it over to the grower or packer or processor. The employer then should be under the supervision of a trained federal agent. The employer should be required under penalty of law to keep accurate work records so that withholding, social security and workmen's compensation credits can be made."

Such federal protection should be augmented by state and local legislation mandating standards of basic decency in housing. Provision should be made for schooling migrants' children. Regular inspections should be made to see that lawful conditions are maintained.

But it is because there are state and localities that don't care—and because migrant labor is essentially an interstate matter—that Congress must provide the backbone of protection.

Slavery was abolished a century ago. It's time the exploiters of migrant labor were dragged by force of law into the mid-20th century.

October 24th, 1961



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