

# Virginia Apple Growers Call Their Camp a Model

By Laurence Stern  
Staff Reporter

WINCHESTER, Va.—A cluster of barracks-like buildings on the outskirts of this Shenandoah Valley community is a major bulwark in the Old Dominion's apple economy.

It houses an army of 1100 Bahamian and American migrant pickers—the Virginia apple grower's biggest organized labor pool.

Last year its workers picked 305 million bushels, a third of the state's total production, in a 5-county belt which juts into neighboring West Virginia.

**Growers Proud of Camp**

By 7 o'clock each morning, crews from the Winchester Labor Camp are fanning out by truck, bus and car into the long swath of orchard country that stretches from Charles Town, W. Va., to Front Royal, Va. By sundown they stream back into the camp.

The massive operation is carried off with remarkable efficiency and orderliness.

The Frederick County Fruit Growers' Association is proud of Winchester Camp in which it has sunk an investment of more than \$200,000. The growers consider it a model for migrant housing.

In 1952, the Association began to replace the dilapidated World War II "grain bin" shacks, a legacy of the wartime farm manpower program, with new cement-block compounds.

Today all of the 800 Bahamians and more than 40 per cent of the American migrants at Winchester live in the drab but fireproof and sanitary compounds.

"It's a good camp, better than most," said Estella Banks, who has been coming north with her family from Pehokee, Fla., to pick fruit and vegetables for 27 of her 42 years.

"Sure, there's always room for improvement," added I.

Fred Stine, secretary of the Association, "but we're moving as fast as we can."

Apple picking is one of the toughest jobs in agriculture. It takes a strong back and a discerning eye, trained to select fruit of just the right size and color.

**Job Takes Strong Men**

The picker works in trees on ladders ranging from eight to 24 feet in height. A pail, which holds 22 pounds when filled, is slung from his shoulders on a harness-like contraption.

"It's not like picking beans and tomatoes," said J. B. Moore, manager of the Winchester camp. "It takes young, strong men."

That is why the Appalachian growers prefer Bahamian labor to American migrants. The Bahamians are all males who have been given rigorous physical examinations before leaving Nassau and again on arrival in this country.

Until the American migrant becomes ill, no one is interested in the condition of his health.

Last Thursday Billy Bell, a migrant picker from Kissimmee, Fla., died of a typhoid infection at Winchester Hospital. Six other members of his crew were also stricken.

The seven workers, all Florida and North Carolina Negroes, came to Winchester from a camp near Chambersburg, Pa., where it is believed they caught the disease from a contaminated well.

Unlike the Bahamian, the American migrant brings his wife and children and the problems of family house-keeping.

Growers maintain that the American workers, mainly Negroes from Florida, Alabama and North Carolina, are lower producers than the foreign workers.

Figures compiled by the

Bahamas Government showed that the islanders averaged \$54 a week during the 2½ month picking season. American migrants earned 25 to 30 per cent less.

Both were paid at the prevailing 12-cent-a-bushel rate.

Bahamians come to Winchester on chartered buses. The American migrants travel in the back of their crew leaders' truck or in second-hand school buses.

**Other Camps in Area**

All Bahamians in this country are covered by workmen's compensation and off-the-job health insurance, guaranteed by their government. Winchester is the only labor camp in Virginia which provides Blue Cross and Blue Shield insurance to American migrants.

In addition to the Winchester camp, there are half a dozen privately-operated migrant quarters scattered

through the northern Appalachian area.

The largest of these is in a vast orchard owned by Sen. Harry F. Byrd (D-Va.) in Jefferson County, W. Va., just across the State line.

Nearly 200 American migrants are housed in two 50-room cinderblock compounds at the Byrd camp. There are two recreation halls and central cooking facilities for migrant housewives.

Virginia farm placement officials, consider the facility superior to most migrant housing.

B. Beverley Byrd, the Senator's son, supervises the two orchards at Charles Town and Berryville which produce 1.5 million bushels of apples annually.

"We'd like to see ideal conditions just as much as anyone else," said Byrd. "Our two crews have been coming back to us for six and eight years. We're trying to provide the best we can."