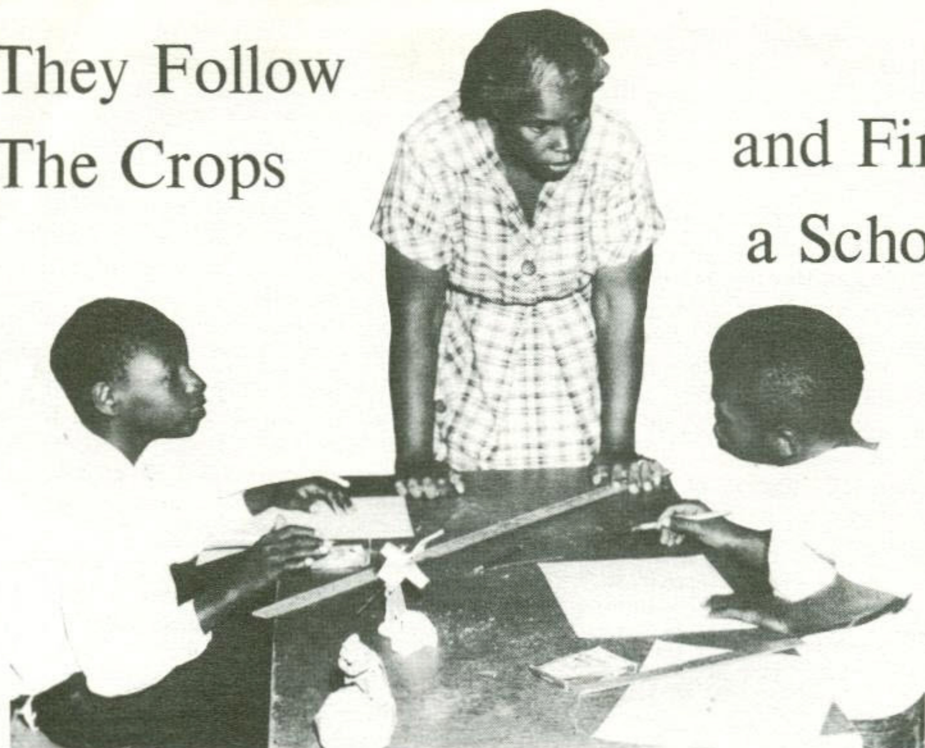
They Follow The Crops and Find a School



Theodore Jackson and Rubin Morris learn to measure—with help from their teacher

LOUISA R. SHOTWELL

Every year some 20,000 migrant farm workers come into New York to pick beans or other crops. Their children have almost no chance to go to school. Here is the story of an experiment in education for these children.

HERE'S YOUR school room, ma'am. We use it mostly for recreation and church, but you can have it every morning."

The camp manager unlocked the door and held it open for the teacher to enter.

"Only you'll have to get it put to rights again every day by noon," he added apologetically. "Days when the beans run out or it rains so the folks aren't picking, they swarm in here like flies."

Genevieve Randle looked at the room and her heart sank. For one wild moment she wondered how soon she could get a train back to Mississippi.

For this is what she saw. A room twenty feet by fifty, window panes daubed a night-club blue, shutting out the sunshine. Three bare light bulbs dangling from the ceiling. An old-fashioned sewing machine. A pulpit, a communion table, two pianos, some folding chairs. Two juke boxes. And through an opening in a makeshift partition at the far end, a pool table.

John Crane sensed her misgivings.

"We sure want this school, Mrs. Randle. It'll mean a lot to these kids. The parents want it too." He gave her an anxious look. "We'll help you all we can."

Banishing from her mind the picture of last summer's tidy class room in Hamilton, Mrs. Randle drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Not for nothing had she coped with obstacles for fifteen

years in rural Mississippi as teacher and minister's wife.

"We'll make out fine, Mr. Crane," she declared. "Just fine."

Pilot Projects

The 1952 summer school for children of agricultural migrant workers at King Ferry became the second pilot project of the kind in New York State. The previous summer the First Baptist Church at Hamilton in the Mohawk Valley had made its classrooms and equipment available for 21 children from the Poolville Migrant Camp, six miles away.

Widespread interest of educators and welfare agencies in this approach to the special needs of migrant children led the sponsors to try again, this time in a center with more children and no transportation problems. They chose King Ferry, twenty miles north of Ithaca in the fertile Finger Lake section, where 600 to 1200 southern Negroes converge each summer to answer the labor needs of some one hundred farmers making up the Cayuga Producers Cooperative Association. They come in family groups, most of them in labor contractors' trucks, and they are housed in a camp half a mile from the village of King Ferry, population 200.

Administering this educational experiment as part of its service to migrants in 25 states is the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches in cooperation with state and local councils of churches and church women. Material assistance in planning and operation comes from representatives of the State Education Department, the State Migrant Child-Care Program, and 4-H Clubs.

Mrs. Randle's first step was a census of the children in the camp, conducted evenings and rainy days by door to door visits with parents. Three to one the parents agreed with John Crane that the school was a good idea.

"Sure, my kids can go." "School will keep them out of mischief." "I want my children to learn how to earn more money than their old man."

Only a few echoed the sentiment of the one who said: "You all don't seem to intend for my children to help me at all!"

The census revealed 78 children of school age. It seemed wise to limit attendance to the 6 to 14 age group, and 52 enrolled; a few with large families were deterred by the cost of $1.50 a week for mid-morning juice and noon lunch to be served from the child-care center kitchen, until they understood that for each additional child in the same family the charge was only a dollar. Camp Manager Crane agreed that if any older ones wanted to go to school in the morning and pick in the afternoon, he would drive in from the fields at noon and get them. Forty-three entered on the opening day, the second of July. The 11 dropouts were accounted for by one who "took sick," 5 whose parents moved on to berries, 5 who went to work because "beans picked up."

For two weeks, newspapers spread out on the floor served as work tables. Meantime a work camp of volunteer young people who led the children in recreation every afternoon undertook to build benches and tables. The day these were finished, discipline problems eased.

Two members of the work camp assisted Mrs. Randle each morning: Eunice Merchant of Binghamton, member of the class of 1953 at Oneonta State Teachers College, and student June Hill from Triangle College in London, England. Mrs. Randle herself is a graduate of Fisk University and teacher of an ungraded group in Union County, Mississippi.

Children to whom home has never been any place but one or two rooms in a migrant camp, whose experience has not gone beyond the vegetable field and the camp store, who have traveled thousands of miles so packed in a truck they can't see the world outside, such children find the average school curriculum beyond their comprehension.

What Do They Need?

What do they need from school? For one thing, basic skills in terms of everyday

living as they experience it: telling time, making change, writing money orders, figuring pay for piece work. They need training in good health habits of a kind they seldom get from a mother who goes to work before daylight and returns after dark: care of teeth, face, ears, hands, hair, shoes, handkerchief. They need to know what it is like to sit down at a table and eat with a knife and fork and spoon. They need to open their eyes to the world around them. Their attention span is short. They need the security of routine without pressure, the assurance of affectionate understanding and patient explanation, the sense of creating with their own hands, the satisfaction of carrying through a hard job to the end.

"Living in our Community" formed the basis of all their study. Reading, writing, arithmetic, drawing, nature study were all given in terms of life in the King Ferry Camp.

Some made a crayon drawing of the King Ferry Camp, a giant frieze on brown paper, five feet wide and eight feet long, showing the long houses with a door for each family, the lines of washing streaming in the wind; the wash house; the cook kitchen where their mothers take turn about at the wood stoves; a larger tree and more green grass than any visitor could find; and of course the school, which doubled as church and social center.

Others fashioned a clay model of the camp, with pipe cleaner figures of all the people who contribute to the community: the nurses from the health department who visit the camp and the school twice a week; the camp minister, who is also the mail man; the King Ferry school principal who makes out work permits for those under sixteen.

In the store corner the children labeled and priced empty cans according to quotations of a chain store advertisement in the Ithaca paper. They practiced telephoning orders on a homemade telephone, writing them down and making out the bills.

The climax of their study came with "Our Visit to a Larger Community." They took a trip to Ithaca and made a movie of it: a carton tipped sideways fitted with two rolling pins manipulated by hand displayed their sketches on a roll of paper.

Visitors' Day

It was a wonderful day when the children from the vacation church school at nearby Poplar Ridge came to visit, to hear about the trip and see the movie. At last the King Ferry children had something all their own that they could share with guests. The resident children watched and listened with respect and maybe a little envy as the picture story slowly unwound and the soft, slurred southern voices, haltingly at first, then with growing confidence told of the picnic in the park, the ride on the fire truck, the visit to the bank where the man took them in to see where the money was kept, the wonders behind the post office window, their conversation with the mayor.

"My children never talked so much in all their lives," said one father. "I had to shut them up last night so I could get some sleep."

Not the least of the migrant child's difficulties, Mrs. Randle finds, is the fact that from birth he lives in an adult world. There is no time between crops, no place in a one-room home, no resources and no stimulus to do or make anything just for children. At an early age he learns to shift for himself.

Often they were sleepy in school because they had been to the movies the night before; camp movies three nights a week usually began no earlier than nine or ten after everybody was in from the fields, finished close to midnight.

From Florida to Maine

The report of a minister in a migrant community in South Bay, Florida, on Lake Okechobee, where many of the King Ferry children come from, helps piece out the picture. Many come down in the fall from Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas; make four or five moves in Florida during the winter; and journey up the seaboard in the spring following the harvest through the

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At the Rocky Mountain Plateau Conference, covering nine states through which Spanish-speaking Texas-Mexicans migrate between cotton and sugar beets, concern was expressed at the practice of crop vacations in schools in areas of migrant concentration. These were characterized as good for employers but hard on the many children who find themselves constantly in communities where school is closed. Importance of school, community, and grower cooperation was stressed, and examples cited where barracks and freight cars were used to expand school facilities to care for migrant children.

The West Coast states pointed to lack of definition of responsibility for migrant education as the greatest obstacle.

A group of 30 private organizations working together as the National Council of Agricultural Life and Labor has launched a one-year project under which intensive case studies will be made in one or more communities to inquire into characteristics of the migrant group; economic factors; school facilities; and community, school, and migrant attitudes. The project has the cooperation of the United States Office of Education and the National Education Association, and should result in positive and practical recommendations for action at national, state, and local levels.

Pilot Projects Open Doors

Meantime pilot projects like that at King Ferry, the state-sponsored migrant summer school at Freehold, New Jersey, and others serve to open doors for a few children and to develop methods that may in time mean wider horizons for the many boys and girls, Negro, Texas-Mexican, and white, to whom home is where the crops are ripe.

On commencement day at King Ferry, late in August, the children acted out a dramatization of their school as assistant teacher June Hill read the narrative.

"We live in a camp where there is no school. We fight." Here the vigorous demonstration of two small wrestlers stopped the show, and the narrator had to wait for applause to subside. "There is no need to clean up. Our mother will not send us to the child-care center. She says we are too old."

Chorus: "We want school!"

"We enrolled forty-three strong the first day, and we sang 'America.' We saluted the flag. It's great to be an American.

"When work season began we had money and we didn't know what to do with it, so we went to the camp store and bought ice cream, popcorn, candy, cookies, balloons, and bubblegum. Our teacher talked it over with us and now some of us buy milk and fruit."

Here the children took over and demonstrated the puppet show they had made with Little Red Riding Hood. They took turns explaining "A Frieze of Our Community." They showed their Ithaca movie.

Two special awards for perfect attendance—there would have been more had it not been for a midseason epidemic of mumps—went to Newgene Summers and Gladys Jenkins, both of Pahokee Migrant Labor Camp in Belle Glade, Florida. Everybody won an award for something, ranging from "a good listener" and "learning to work in a group" to "improvement in manuscript writing" and "creative work in art."

Of the thirty visitors in the commencement audience twenty-nine were friends from the community and interested groups across the state. Only one was a migrant parent. All the other mothers and fathers were out working in the fields.

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The Migrant and the Church

The King Ferry experimental school is a part of an agricultural migrant ministry conducted in cooperation with councils of churches and church women by the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches. Twenty-three denominations pool resources to delegate to the National Council this aspect of home missions.

Begun in 1920 with three child-care centers on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, this interdenominational ministry now extends into twenty-five states:

Eastern	*Midwestern*	*Western*
Massachusetts	Minnesota	Washington
Connecticut	North Dakota	Oregon
New York	Michigan	California
New Jersey	Wisconsin	Idaho
Pennsylvania	Illinois	Arizona
Maryland	Indiana	New Mexico
Delaware	Ohio	Colorado
Virginia	Texas	
North Carolina		
Florida		

Services for all members of the migrant family include worship and Christian training, recreation, education, child-care, counseling, and referral of special cases to appropriate agencies. Fifteen station wagons, called "Harvesters," equipped to serve as churches and play centers, travel from camp to camp, bridging the gap between the migrant family and the resident community and interpreting each to the other.

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