

# The Migrants

A river of humanity, flowing with the seasons. Tourists nobody sees.

Story by CLARENCE JONES Photographs by ALBERT COYA

Time was, the farmer raised enough to feed his brood and maybe sell a little at the country store. But the young people moved away to the towns. The little farmer disappeared and his land was swallowed into the massive farms it took to feed the hungry cities. Tractors till and plant now. But the harvesting still depends on human backs and human hands that can follow the ripening spring as it moves up the country. Nobody yet has invented a machine that can tell when a tomato is ripe. Or a steel finger that can pluck a strawberry at the stem and put it in a basket without bruising.

**S**TOOP and hunker. Sloop and hunker. All day the migrants shuffle down the endless rows. Bent backs, darkened by dust and sweat, filter through the lush green lines that stretch horizon to horizon.

The quick fingers, the nimble fingers touch, pluck; the strong brown fingers tug heavy baskets to the row-ends.

Beneath the frayed straw hats, under

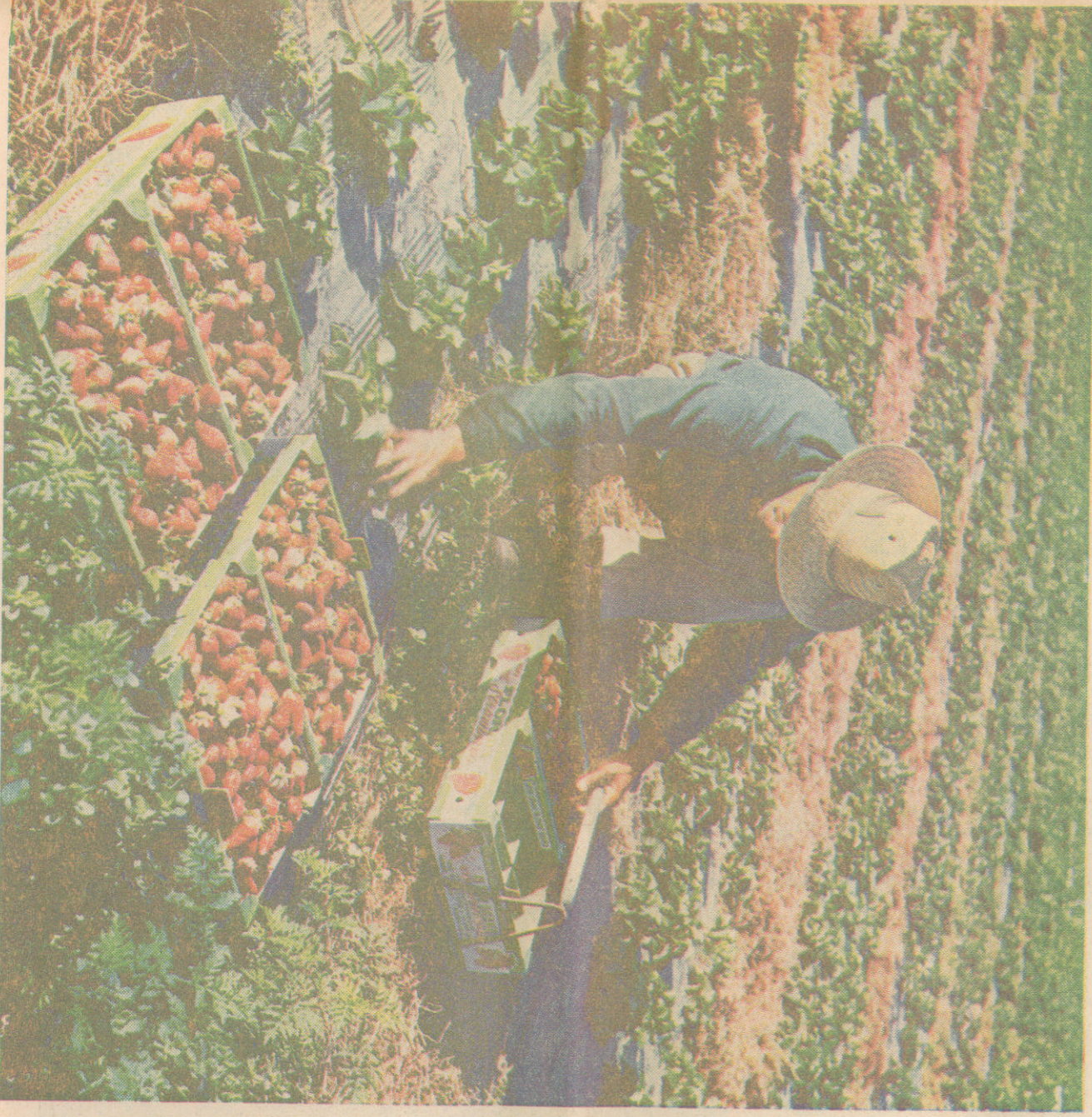
the knotted kerchiefs, the eyes squint up to measure hours.

The sun sears slowly down the open sky. It flashes on the tourist cars, the highway noise too far away to hear.

Into the weary buses, into the darkened trucks, the workers climb and sit down slowly. They bounce along rutted roads while the sun clutches the rim of the world.

These are the tourists nobody sees.



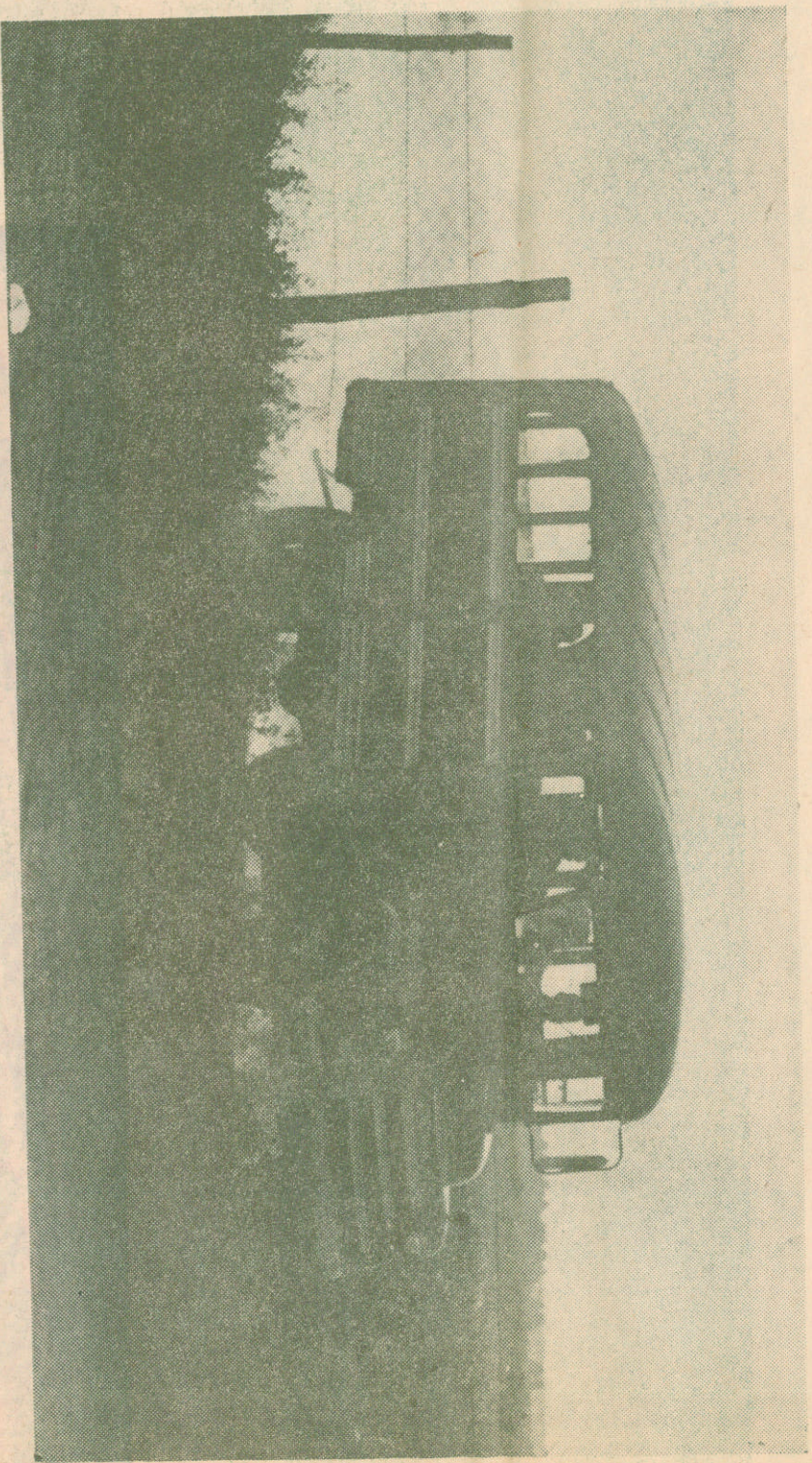


# The Migrants

## The fields lie ripe and waiting, waitin

**J**HEY call it the Atlantic Stream, this river of humanity. Dade County is its headwater. Its beginning,  
Homeless, restless, far-traveled as wild geese, the migrant workers gather here each fall to form the stream anew.

When frost blankets fields in New Jersey; when the apples are all picked in New York; when the work plays out in Michigan and the leaves are turning, they begin their homing flight south.  
Thirty miles from Miami Beach, on the back-



# for the battered buses to pull in

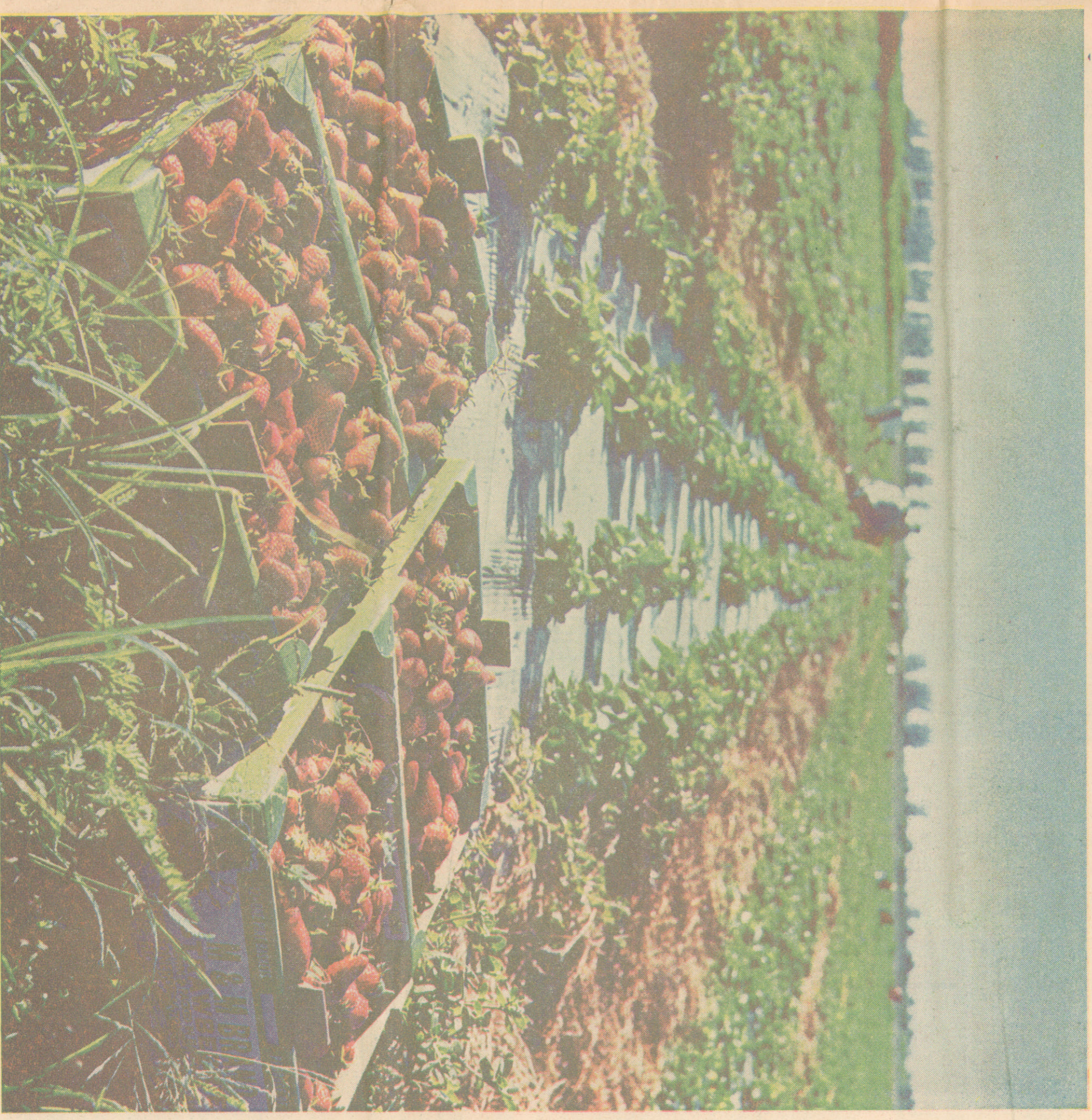
roads that the well-heeled hotel-dweller never sees, the winter beans and corn and squash, tomatoes and strawberries, are waiting for them, depending on them.

Road-weary, with the dust of a thousand miles behind them, the bug-splattered buses pull

into the labor camps at Homestead, Goulds, Naranja.

Ten thousand strong, they move into the squalid shacks, the rows of barracks rooms.

Here they live out the days of winter, bent beneath the Florida sun, until the warming weeks of spring nudge them northward.



# The Migrants

## Children stir under bare bulbs, breakfast sizzles on Sterno stoves

7 HE rows of one-room cabins, each alike, lie silent under moon and stars. The doors and shuttered windows barricade the night. The quiet is so intense the street lights spotted through the camp shine yellow noise instead of light. They cast long shadows on the rocky, unpaved streets. Between the houses, the evening's wash-hangs limp. A shirt spread-eagles, waiting for the day. A rooster crows.

The dogs beneath the trucks and buses yawn and twitch. Somewhere a front door slams.

A shadow lurches to a pipe-stemmed faucet, spreads his legs and leans to drink. Water slaps the hard-packed earth and splashes noise around the sleeping shacks.

Inside, children bedded on dingy pads against bare plank floors smile in their sleep and dream.

Outside his front door in the morning dew, a man goes through his coughing fit. He spits.

Lights blink on here and there. A skinny youngster strains to haul a water pail back to his shack. It slops out and his elbows ache.

"Lord, Jesus, here I is beside this bed," a graying Negro mumbles, kneeling by the rusty army cot. "Just askin' for one more day, Lord 'sall I ask, Amen."

The edge of the sky is faintly pink, the line of clouds against the glow like mountains at the end of open plains.

A crew leader lifts the hood of his aged, paint-caked bus. He gently touches wires with his flashlight, hoping it will run until the week-end.

Breakfast sizzles on hotplates and Sterno stoves. Beneath bare lightbulbs, the children lie awake and listening.

In an aqua satin dress, a dark-haired school-girl skips up to the line of open sinks, her tooth-brush in her hand.

A man sits in the middle of his cot to drink down half a can of beans left over from the night before. He rubs his mouth with his sleeve and tosses the can under the bed.

The sun puts a crack in the horizon. A bi-plane with its pilot's head outlined against the dawn takes off and skims the rooftops with a load of bug spray for some distant field.

School children with their books begin the walk together to the school bus stop.

Drainage ditches, cut across the camp for rainy days, slow the creaking buses with their lines of dark-skinned faces at the windows.

The melody of Spanish voices drifts out from canvas-covered trucks.

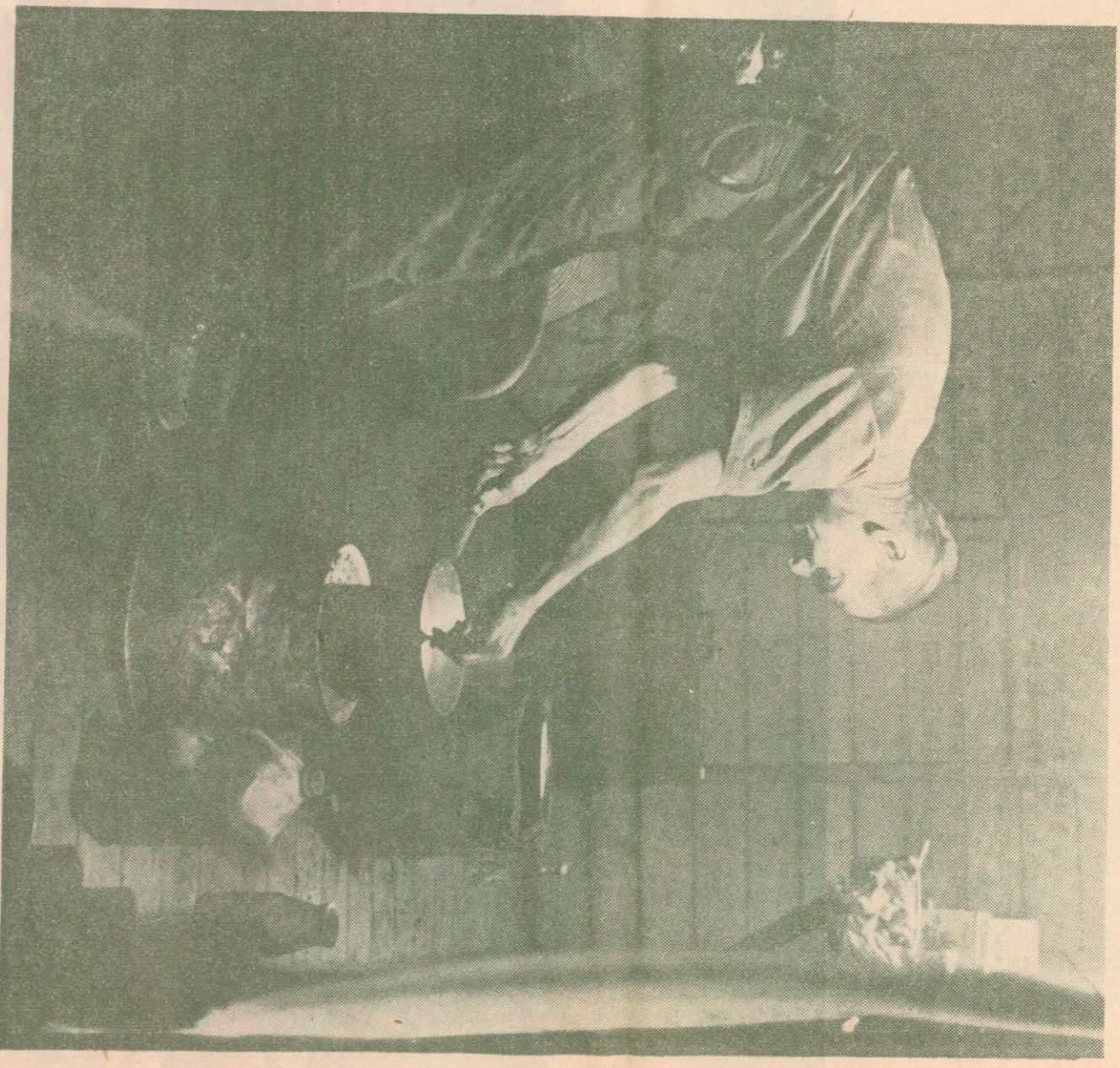
The bouncing trucks and buses lift a mist of dust that hangs like morning fog. It swirls around the pickers walking to the store to see if there is work today.

Up by the store, the children pass the slouchers propped against the wall. A bottle passes openly from mouth to mouth. A woman in a red handanna, trousers under shirt, dances away with a laugh. "I'll get you tonight," he says, unsteady on his feet.

"I got tomatoes. Thirteen cents," a red-nosed white man chants among the crowd, looking for pickers to fill his bus.

The workers' buses and trucks pull out down the road in a stream of dust that follows out of sight. A dice game builds intensely, a day's vacation hanging on a number.

A white man with a face carved out of tallow leans against a truck and grits his teeth. The deep ruts in his face change only when he begs for work. Crew leaders shake their heads and turn away. The crowd is gone. He fishes paper and tobacco from his shaggy coat. He rolls and licks and lights and settles down against the wall to face the day.



and the trucks lift dust like a morning fog. The camp is awake.





**If the field  
is good, you  
can make \$15  
a day.  
If it's bad...**

**J**EXAS Mexicans, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, a few whites. These are the migrants. The picker, America's nomads. They move from farm to farm, field to field, day to day. The Atlantic Stream.

In a few weeks now, the tide will begin to flow north again. Corn and celery around Lake Okechobee. Tomatoes at Ruskin. Peaches in Georgia. Apples in Virginia.

The migrant never knows the man who owns the field he labors in, the camp he sleeps in, the commissary where he buys his food and clothing, the tavern where he drinks and forgets.

The system keeps migrant and farm owner far apart. The crew leader is the only boss the migrant knows.

"There's good crew leaders and bad crew leaders," Andrew Anderson says. "A bad one can take advantage of his workers. I try to look after my people."

With his neat khaki clothes and white straw

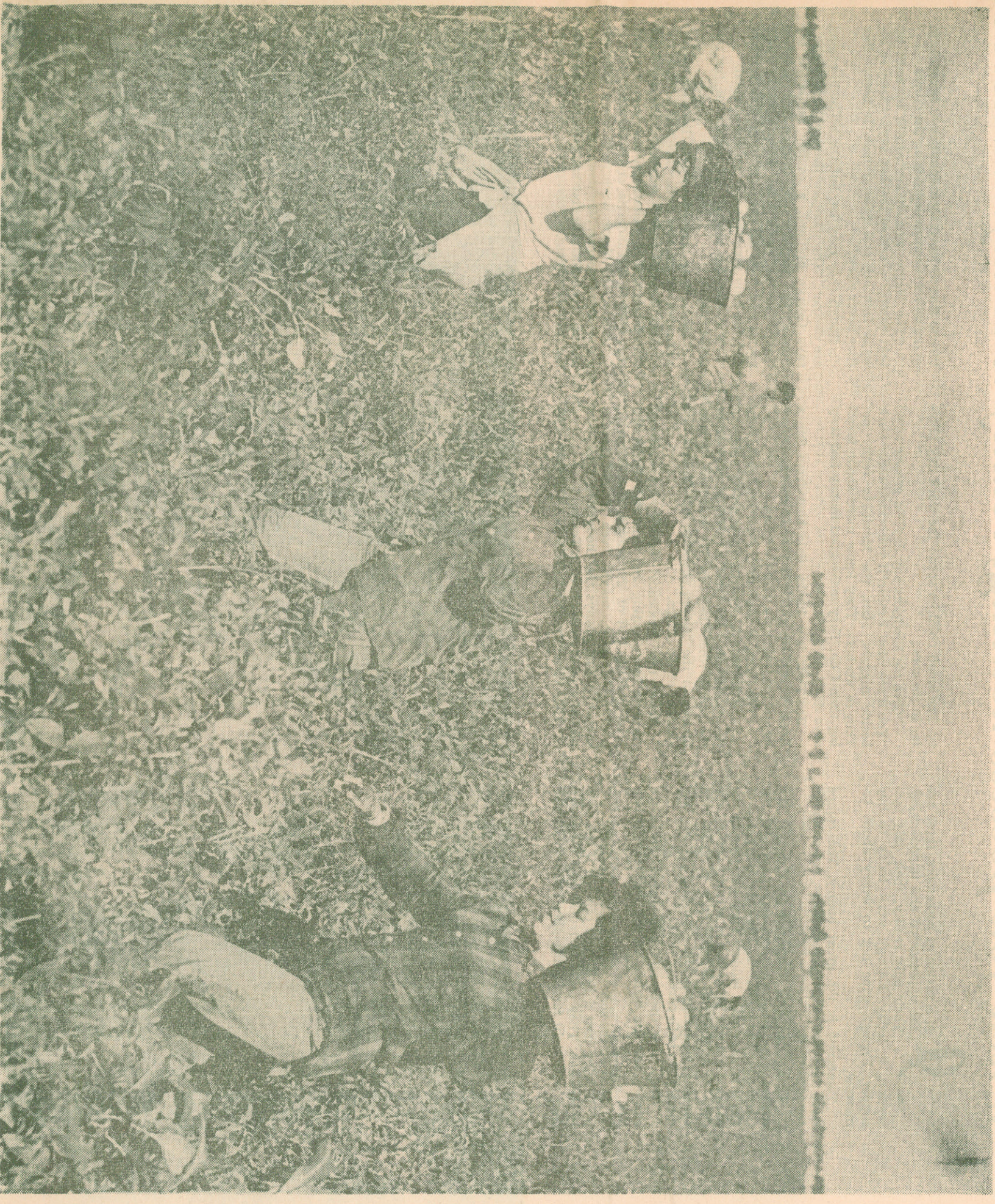
hat, Anderson stands out in a crowd of dirty shabby-dressed pickers. His wife and children are in Arkansas. He wants to see his daughter finish high school there before his wife joins him on the road again.

The crew leader provides the pickers' transportation, arranges their housing, and finds them work. The grower pays him so much a basket or a box for everything his crew harvests. Sometimes the grower is another step removed, and the crew leader deals with a contractor, who in turn is hired by the grower.

A good crew leader with several trucks can sometimes make \$15,000 or \$20,000 a year. If everything goes right.

The grower may pay the crew leader 25 cents a bucket for green tomatoes, delivered to the packing house.

The crew leader in turn pays his pickers 15 cents a bucket and provides the trucks to haul them out of the field. He may charge the farmer for transporting his crew to the fields, then charge his pickers for their ride. He sometimes makes a profit, too, on the



camp housing he finds for them.

With some crews, there is strict discipline. Others are constantly changing. A crew leader keeps his pickers by finding good fields where the baskets fill quickly, and by knowing when it's time to move on to the next harvest where prices are higher.

"You pay 13 cents a bucket," a Negro crew leader complains. "And the first time somebody pay 14 cent, they'll jump to another crew. Then, when they ain't got nothin', they come lookin' to you."

If the field is good, a fast, strong picker can make ten or twelve or fifteen dollars in a day.

There are stories of those who make 25 and 30 dollars in a very good field in a very good day, but this is like winning the twin double.

There are bad days, too. Days when it rains and the camp becomes a quagmire of mud and wet clothes. Days when the market is bad and the farmer stops the picking at noon. Days when the market is so bad the crops rot in the field, unpicked.

Nobody knows what the average wage is.

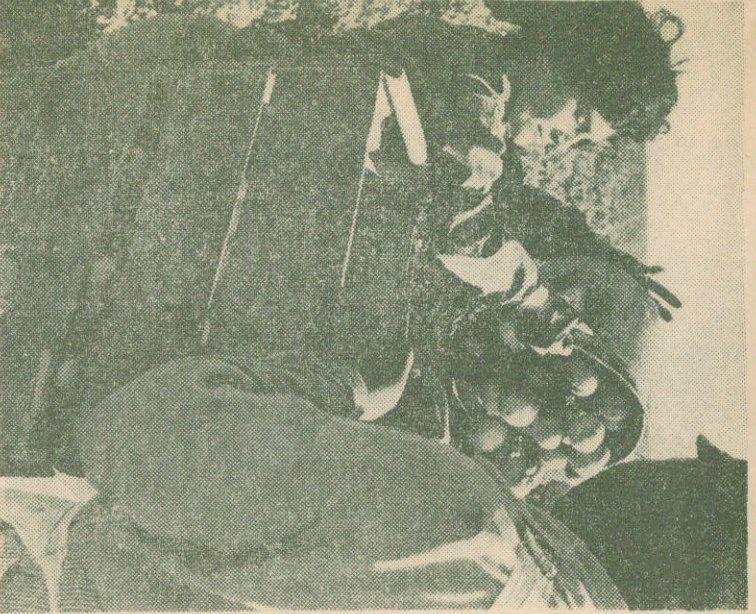
Al Aquet shrugs his shoulders when you ask him for figures. Aquet is the farm labor representative for the Florida State Employment Service. In his office at Princeton on U.S. 1, he works with the migrants every day.

"I can tell you there are 50,000 acres of vegetables and 11,000 acres of tropical fruit," Aquet says, "But there is no way to tell what the pickers make in a year."

In most cases, the minimum wage laws don't apply. If foreign pickers are imported, they must be paid at least 95 cents an hour. Any domestic laborers working for the same employer have to be given the same hourly minimum.

This year, the Secretary of Labor has forbidden growers to bring in Mexican or Bahamian pickers. There are too many unemployed Americans who need the work, Willard Wirtz, the labor secretary, says.

So farmers pay by the basket or the box and hours don't count. Because so many migrants are paid at the end of each working day, enforcing Social Security regulations has been almost impossible.





*When you possess nothing, reality is today. Tomorrow*

**I**n a nation of possessors, these are the unpossessed and unpossessing. Their only reality, their only possession, is today. Enough work today to buy supper. Enough wine not to worry about tomorrow.

Tomorrow is the great luxury. The camps have the scars of many yesterdays, not promises for tomorrow.

A few can look tomorrow in the eye. The whites from Kentucky and Arkansas and the Carolinas. The hillbillies. They are at the top of the migrant social ladder. They get jobs in the packing houses. They live in a camp run by the City of Homestead where there is grass and space between houses and a nursery for the toddlers when both parents work.

They own their cars and dishes and extra clothes and the houses sprout television antennas.

Next on the social scale are the Mexicans.

Driving past a field, you can tell if the crew is Mexican. They come in trucks and their own cars, with tight family discipline and tribal loyal-

ty. The small children spend the work day playing in the cars.

"Give me Mexicans any day," a grower says. "You'll see what I mean if you watch them work beside niggers. Man, the Mexicans really go. They're workers. They know more about farming than I do. They make good money and they save it."

Joe Pena is a husky field boss from Santa Rosa, Texas. He got in a year of college before he started travelling with the crops.

"The living conditions are getting better," he says. "The health department is pretty strict on the camps now. My crew is getting away from the camps when they can. We still have to rent houses in the colored sections, but it gets the kids out of the camps."

With the Mexicans' family organization, there is less fighting and drinking. There are plans for the end of the season. A new car, a washing machine, maybe even a refrigerator, someday. And always the thought of their own plot of ground somewhere in Texas. Then come the Puerto Ricans — all men. The

Puerto Ricans leave their families at home. Life in the all-male camps depends on the crowd.

"The Negro women are afraid to walk by that camp," a school teacher says. "They're always fighting and raising hell. It seems like they never sleep."

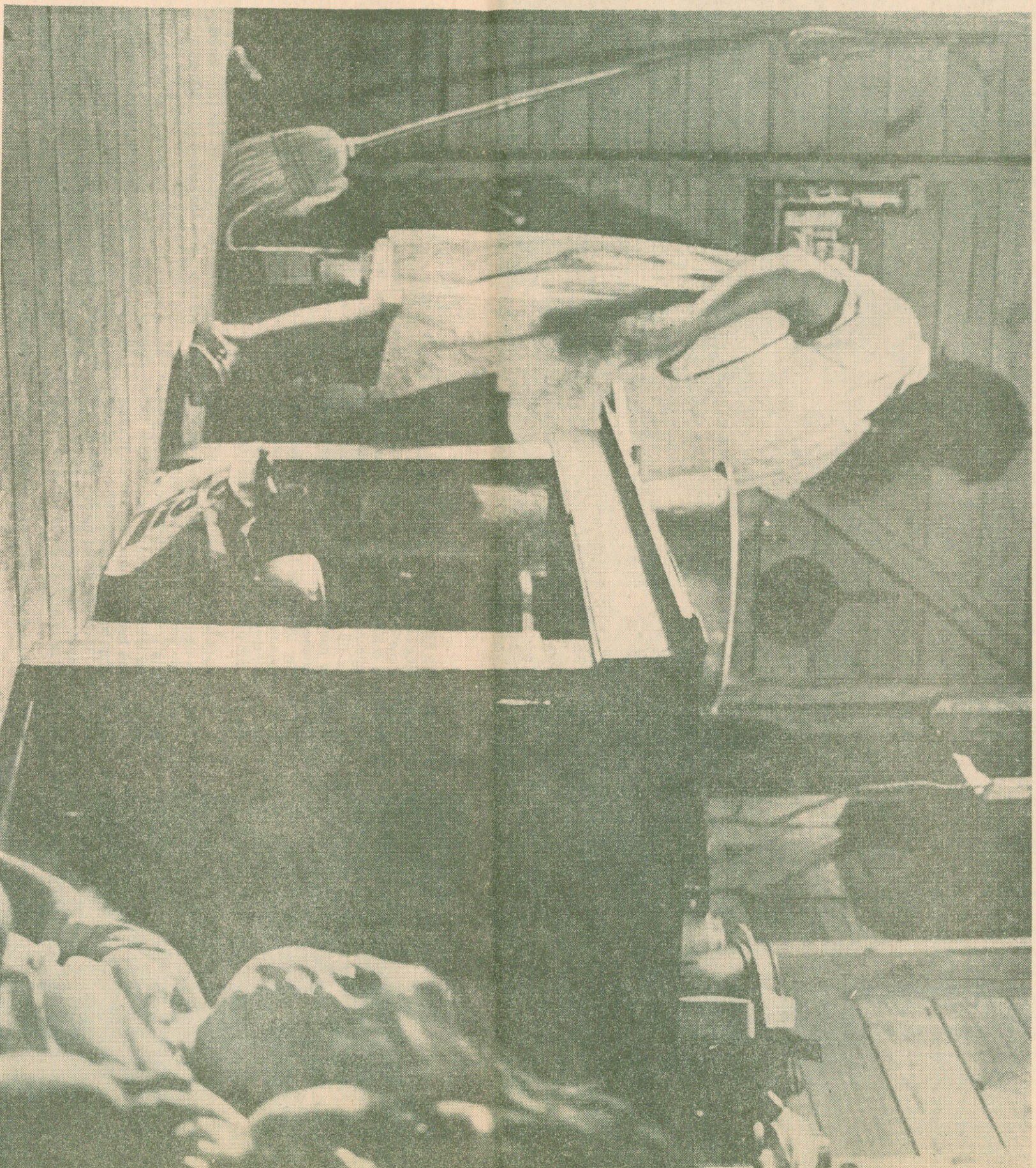
Rough they may be, but the all-male camps are cleaner. "The men are there only at night," says George Folliard, a county sanitation official. "The women and children are in their camps all the time. They keep pots in their rooms and they tell the kids to go empty them, and the kids just throw it on the ground."

The Negroes are at the bottom of the migrant ladder.

"They sleep here one night, there the next," a camp manager says. "They live like animals."

The Negro crews travel in second-hand school buses. The pickers can carry everything they own in a bandanna or a blanket.

Among the Negro workers in every field are a few white pickers. Men down on their luck and sliding toward a skid row somewhere. Men hiding from their past.



# is a luxury for the few.

"I live with the colored people," a young white man with three days' beard says. "I don't have no trouble. I get along fine.

"I used to drive an ambulance in Minneapolis. I made ninety-five, a hundred a week. But it took it all to live up there. I like the warm weather. I haven't been cold all this time, since I started picking. My main trouble's the bars. I get one drink and there's no stopping me.

"I could make a lot more, doing something else, if I wanted to. Maybe I'll get tired of this and move on to something else. I don't know."

**7** FIFTEEN years ago, there were 80 camps in Dade County with rows of tents, split trench latrines and pitcher pumps. The workers cooked in open fires.

Today, Florida law requires a weatherproof, screened building, electricity in the cabin, a limited number of beds per square foot, and commu-

nity toilet and shower facilities. The regulations have cut the number of camps to 30.

There are no camps in Dade County with indoor plumbing for each cabin. The electrical outlet provides a bare bulb for light and for the well-to-do, a hotplate.

The favorite cabin style is a duplex arrangement, so that a large family can rent both sides. When two families rent the cabin, the door between the two rooms is covered with whatever they can find.

Sometimes burlap is the only privacy between rooms. The floors and walls are generally bare, unpainted planks. Families with 10 and 12 children can live in one two-room shack for \$8 to \$10 a week. The children are bedded down on the floor.

The big camps have a general store and a bar, and sometimes a barber shop. If a grower owns the camp, he gets back much of what he pays the pickers. The prices are usually comparable to those at a drive-up, 7 to 11-type store.

The community toilet, sink and shower

houses are generally newer concrete block buildings. They replaced outhouses after newspapers and television pointed up the need for better living conditions among the migrants.

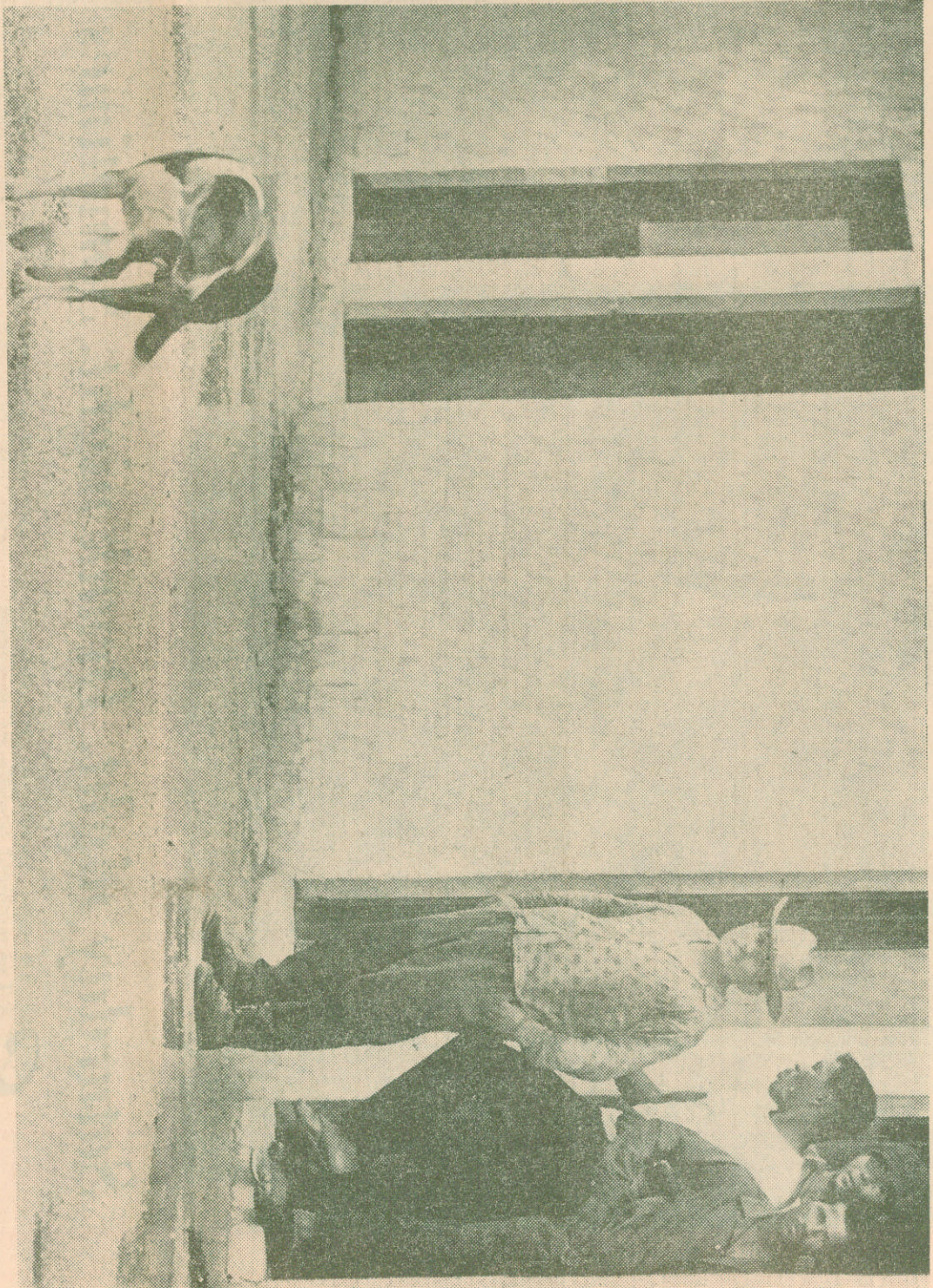
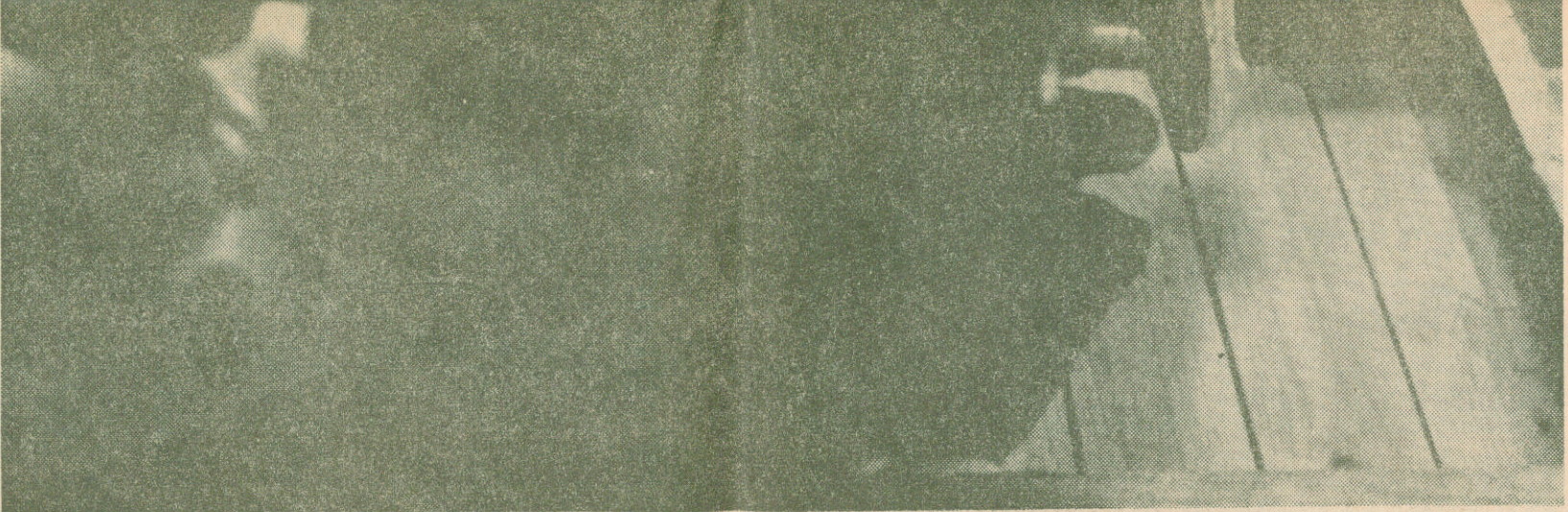
"A new camp would have to live up to the letter of the law," says Sanitation Inspector George Folliard. "That's why there are so few new camps."

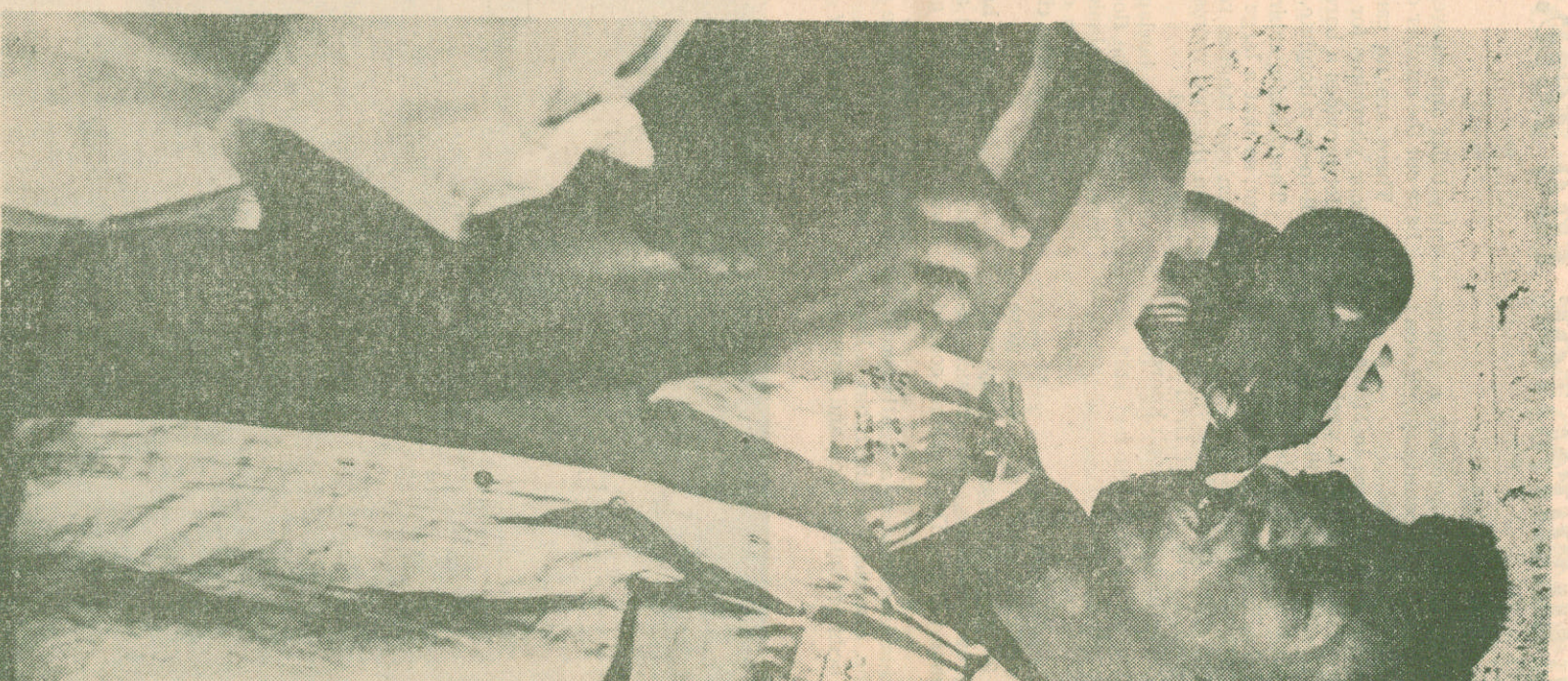
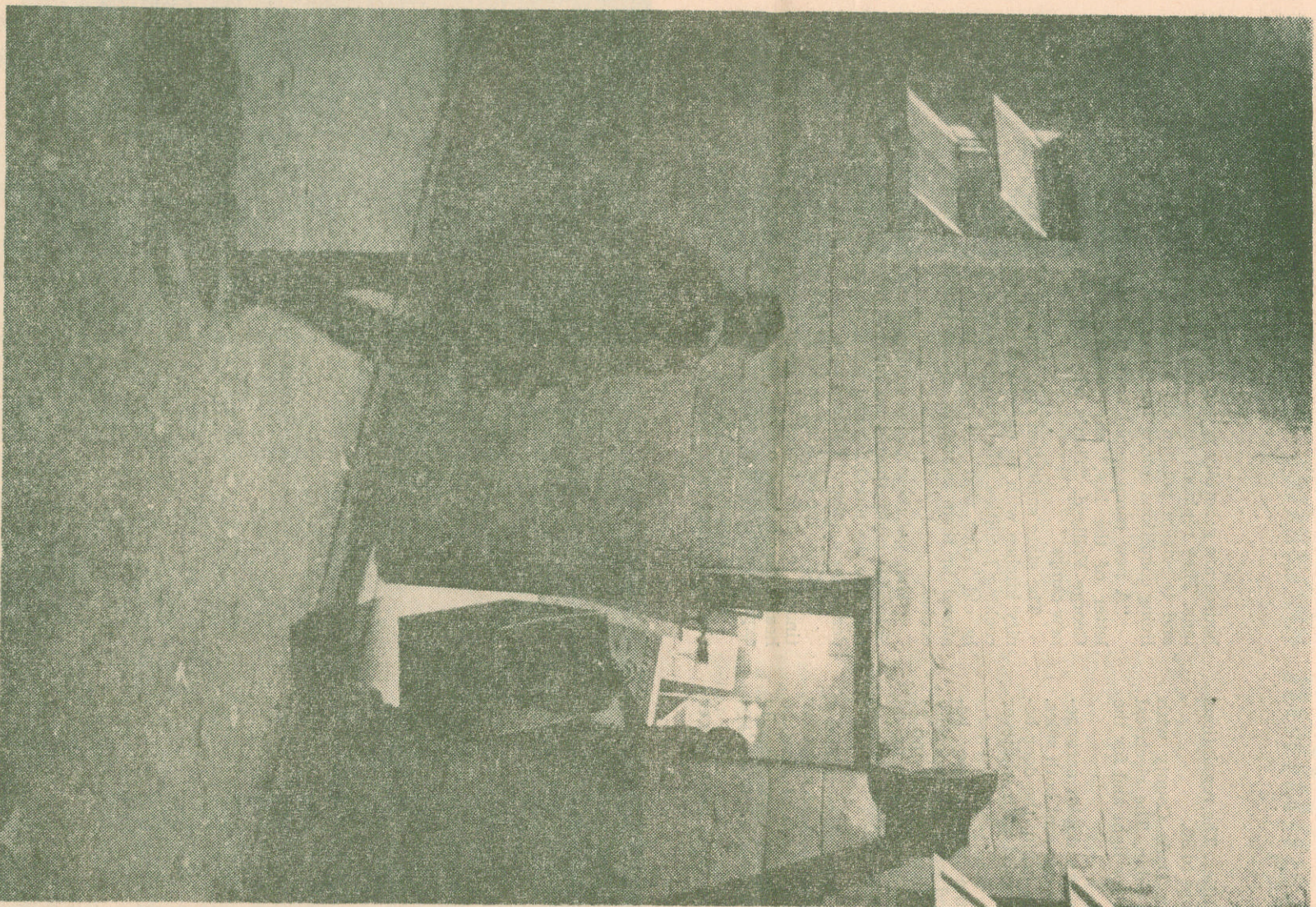
The state sanitation code requires a community kitchen with an operating refrigerator and cooking facilities. The refrigerators are generally old relics that are never used. Any food stored in them would be stolen before it had cooled.

"They get these places equipped and the first Saturday night there's no money, the workers tear out the plumbing and sell it to some junk dealer for a dollar," Folliard said.

Tests on the drinking water at one camp continued to show traces of contamination. The health department ordered the owner to install expensive chlorination equipment.

Every night, the pickers chopped the chlorine lines. They didn't like the taste.





## *Saturday night. Drunk night. Sometimes they shoot.*

**S**ATURDAY is payday. Drunk day. By dark, the pickers plod like zombies in their stupor. The juke box in the camp tavern blares rock and roll. Slow-footed staggers pass for dancing.

A woman with her dirty blouse unbuttoned stands in the center of the floor, her chin nodding against her chest. A teenage boy moves obscenely against her while the crowd watches, laughing.

"She's always drunk," an old man cackles with a bottle in his hand.

From a table in the corner, a Puerto Rican drags a white man from his bench and flings him to the floor among the dancers.

The dancing stops. The kicks and screams are muffled in the juke box roar. One set of friends pulls the Puerto Rican off. Another set drags the loser out the door. The dancing starts again.

A woman who has left before comes back to find another partner. Beneath the cigaret and beer advertisements on the wall, the serious drinkers sit at the tables and empty bottle after bottle.

One man's head falls forward and he slides under the table. His bottle is quickly passed around.

Outside, two Metro policemen arrive for their weekly off-duty work.

"Walk!" they shout at a wobble-legged man who stands weaving at the door. "Get on home, now, before I run you in. You've had enough. Git!"

Patrolling after midnight, they walk between the cabins with their arms before their faces to catch low-hanging clotheslines.

The migrants warming around a burning tire get quiet as the uniforms come in sight.

"No shots tonight," one of the officers says.

"It's been a bad week. When there's money around, they buy pistols. No sense having a pistol if you're not going to shoot it. They're always shooting them in the air, just for kicks. And once in a while, at each other."

In the crossroads settlements, the Negroes gather on the long front porch of the general store.

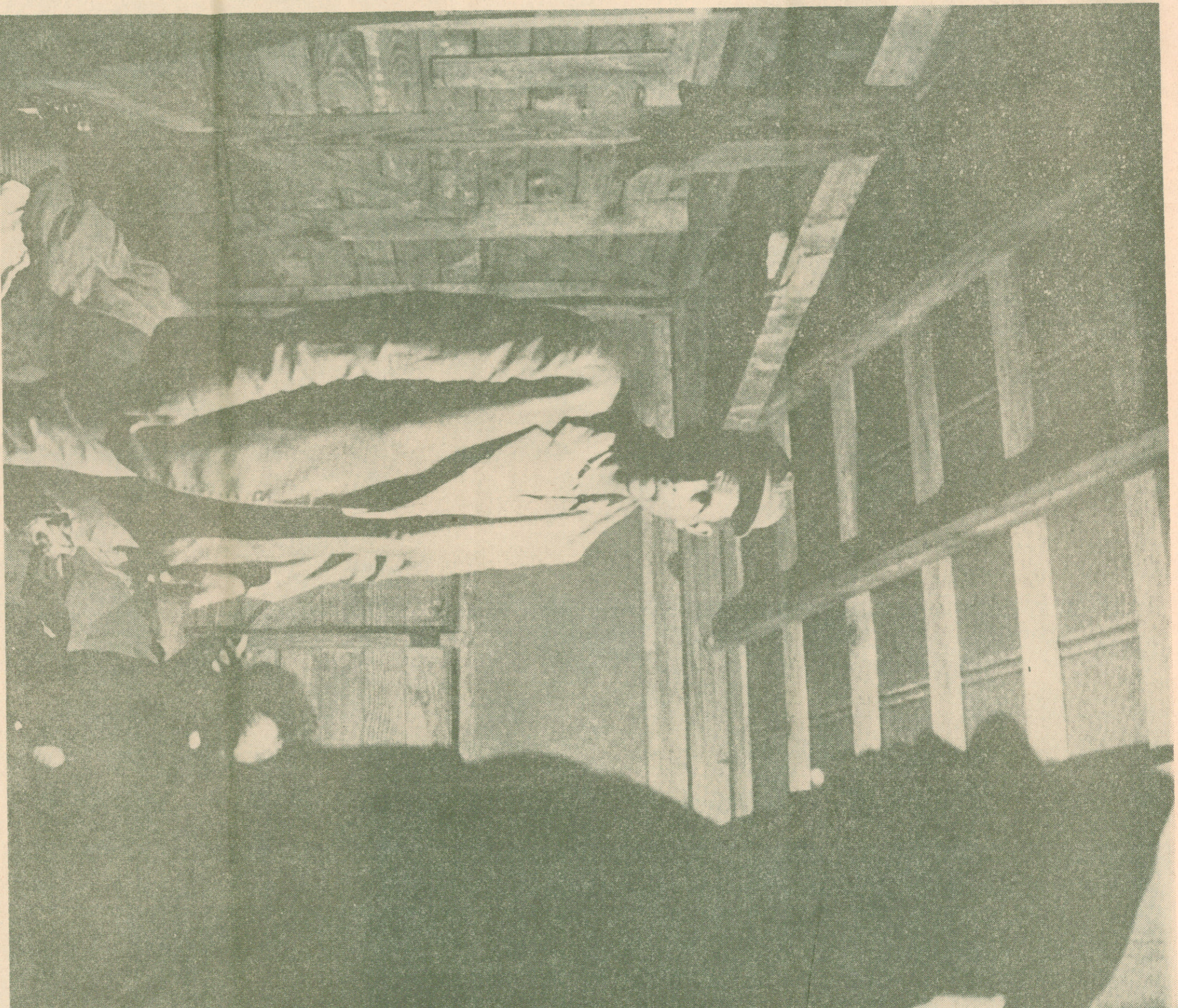
In front of the pool hall, a bright-skinned hustler with long sideburns rubs his hands and looks for suckers. "Who's gonna play me tonight? I dreamed last night I beat Jackie Gleason."

The barber keeps his clippers hot. Hair piles up around the chair as he tries to make up for a slow week.

On chicken wire over charcoal, slabs of spare-ribs sizzle. The sweaty dancers from the corner tavern drift out to have spare-ribs with their beer.



# The Migrants



**O**N WEEKENDS, when the police are patrolling, they listen for the click of the dice on the bare boards. When they hear the rattle, they edge up to the door and peer through the crack to watch.

WHAM. They kick the door open and the players scatter, leaving quarters, dimes and nickels on the floor.

"We's just playing pee-wees, just pee-wees," one of the Negroes whines.

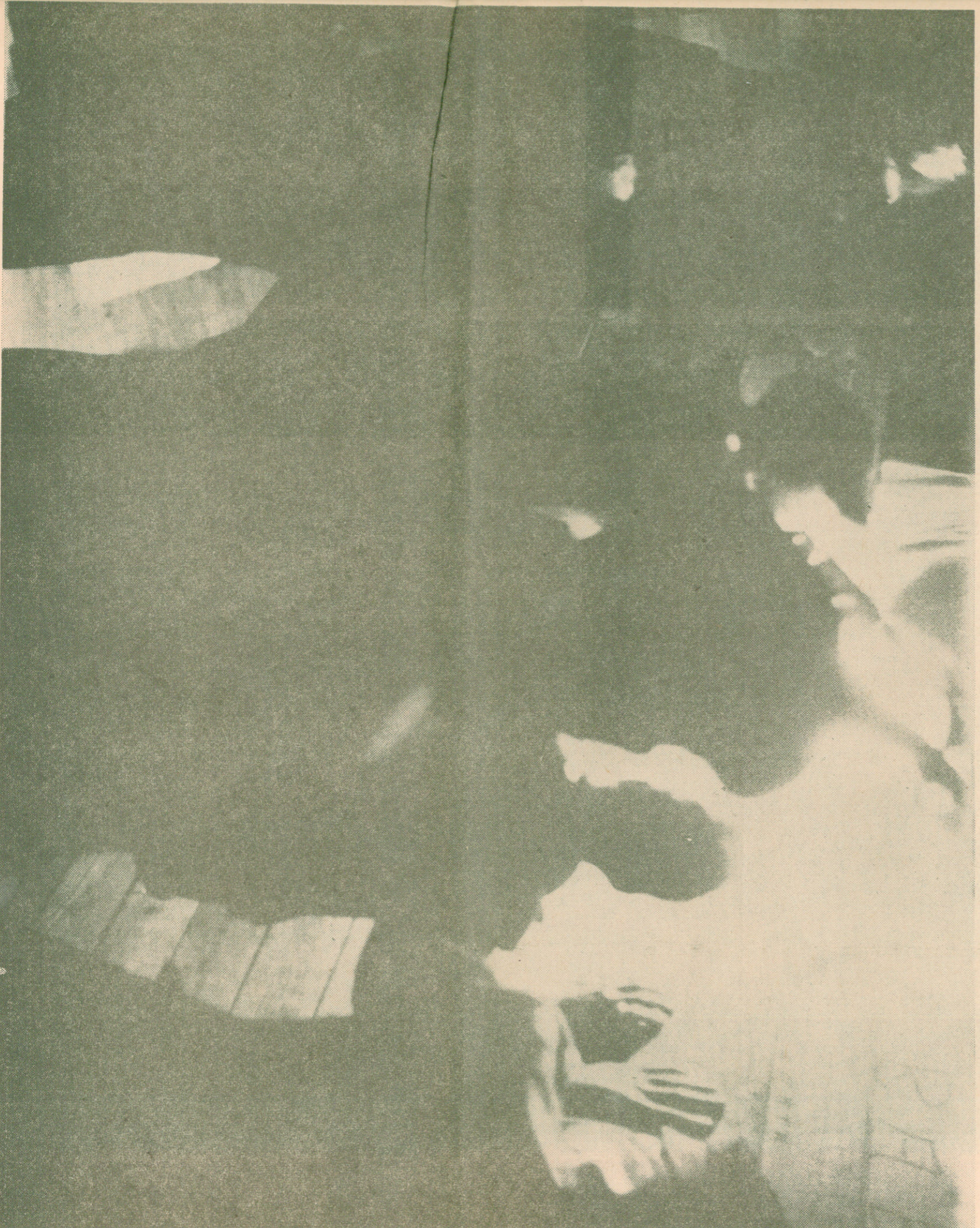
"Come on, up against the wall. You been shook down before, hurry it up," the cop barks roughly. They line up at the wall and have their pockets emptied.

"I better not find a switchblade in here," the officer says. "Naw, just a little old piece of a knife."

"OK, you're clean. Get your money off floor and get to sleep. You haven't got enough money to gamble it away."

"Thank you, sir. Thank, you sir."

Walking up the row, the policeman chuckles. "Some of 'em put blankets on the floor, to file the noise. But they can't be quiet. We always hear 'em."





## *The future? Perhaps a better life through education*

**C**HANGES come slowly. Why? "Many of the migrants have lost their dignity," Cordie Pearson says. "They accept things as they are. The hearing into camp, in the crowded buses. You don't hear many complaints."

Pearson is one of the county school system's visiting teachers. In the old days he would have been called a truant officer. He spends all his time with the migrants' children.

The school buses roll up to the camps each morning now. But schooling is always hit and miss as the migrants go from town to town, school to school. Pearson last year compiled the only detailed records on the migrant children.

Of the 1,322 who passed through 15 local schools, only 38 had reached the eighth grade or higher. Florida law requires children to go to school until they're 16.

"It's a big job," Pearson says. "We don't have nearly enough people to keep up with them. We probably do better than most school systems, because we're so large and have so many facilities at our disposal."

"Even so, we know there are many we never know exist. They come and they go and the children never see the inside of a school."

The dropouts come in junior high school. "Younger children accept each other," Pearson explains, "Unless there is tremendous pressure at home."

"Then they get to junior high and become social beings. A girl from a migrant camp won't have nice clothes. She won't be able to go to the beauty parlor. She becomes an attendance problem, and then a dropout."

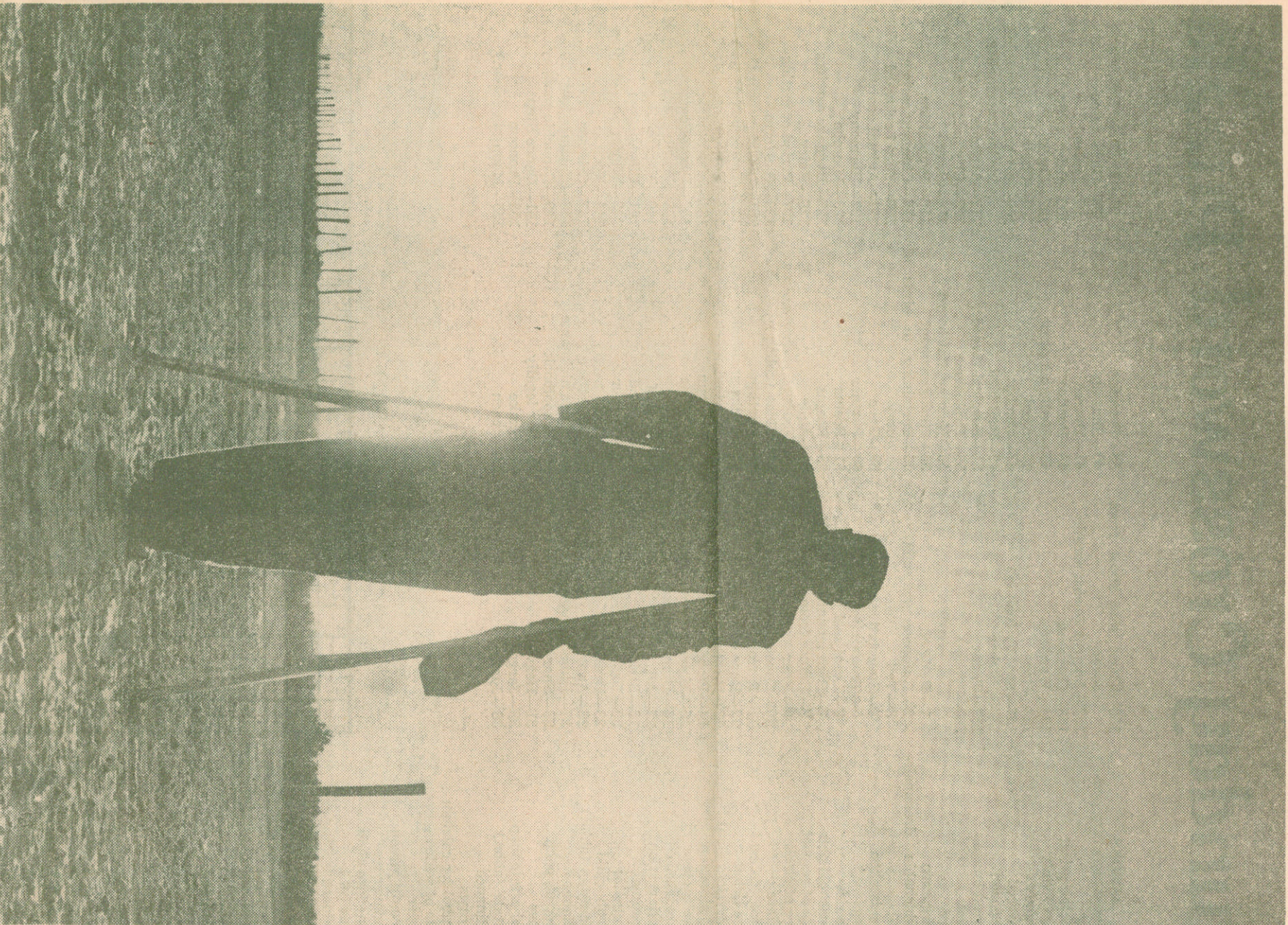
On cold days, attendance plunges at schools

with large numbers of migrant children. They stay in bed until the middle of the morning so their body heat will keep them warm. Then they try to find a car that has been sitting in the sun, where they can sit and enjoy the heat.

"We're not trying to educate them out of the fields," Pearson says. "We're educating them to enjoy a better life in the same line of work. People will always be needed in agriculture. Harvesting machines will eventually come. The machines will create new jobs. The same workers that pick can be taught to operate the machines and fix them."

New federal laws will safety-check migrant trucks and buses this year, and try to record what the pickers earn.

Meanwhile, the stream flows on and stops and flows again. A child peers from a battered truck and wonders where he's going.



## Epilogue

**Y**

OU tell your son to go to school. You tell him there are men whose backs are straight. Whose shirts are white. Whose hands are clean. Who use their heads instead of sweat. No worry where their next meal's coming from.

You tell your daughter, find a planter man. a farmer man. A man to take you from the fields your papa put you in. A man to save what youth there will be left from buckets of tomatoes, beans and squash.

The sons, they smile and say, "Yes, Pa," then slick their hair and long for shiny cars and girls to love, come Friday night.

The girls, they nod and say, "Yes, Pa," and mean it, with a glance at Ma. How worn she looks, come Friday night.

A few, too few, so few can ever reach the dream.

"No sense in wastin' time at school," the son announces late one day. "I'm 16 now and old enough to boss myself."

You shake your head, remembering your own lust for life, and wishing you were young again.

"I got to tell you somethin', Pa," the girl announces late one day. "I think I've got a baby here inside. He'll make a good man for me, Pa. I know he will. You'll see."

You stare away and feel your years and wonder where they went. A generation come and gone.

Time to put old hopes away. New babies get new dreams.

## The End