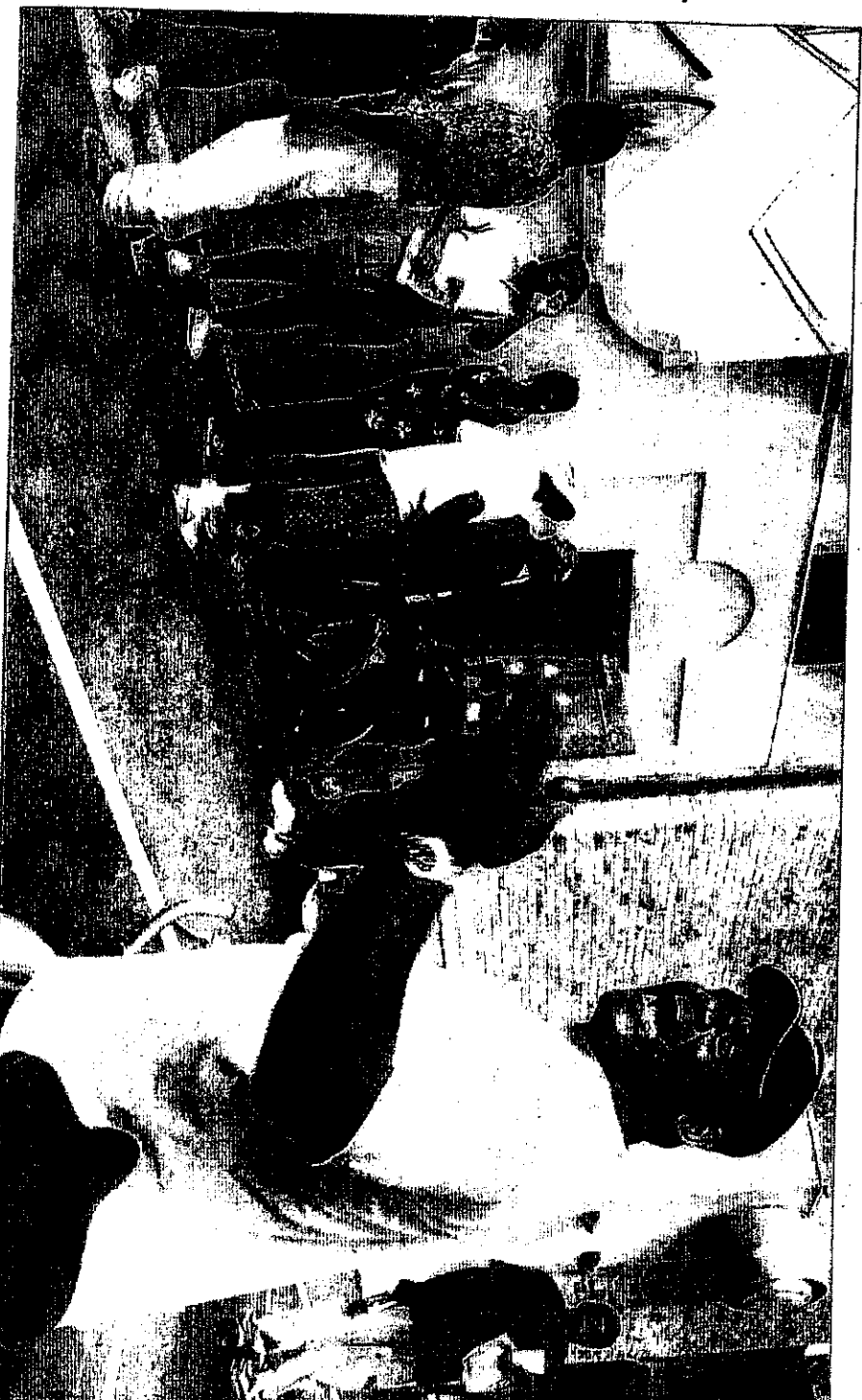


FIELDS OF DESPAIR

NORTH FLORIDA LABORERS, LURED TO FARMS
BY RECRUITERS' PROMISES, REAP POVERTY, PAIN AND EXPLOITATION



PHOTOS BY NURI VALBONA/HERALD STAFF
Below, farmhands sort potatoes.

First of three parts

BY RONNIE GREENE
rgreene@herald.com

JACKSONVILLE — The recruiters come rolling through in roomy vans, searching for a fresh crop of farmworkers from the homeless shelters, haggard parks and soup kitchens dotting North Florida's urban hubs.

They target the addicted, the vulnerable, the desperate with promises of good pay, cash upfront, cold beer. Some talk of crack cocaine and ready sex.

Step inside that van, say those who have, and journey straight to hell.

Florida is America's second-richest agricultural state. But for the farmhands who labor along the lowest rung of the food chain, the riches are a mirage.

Their world is filled with sweatshop hours, shun housing, poverty pay and criminal abuse. At its extreme, it includes modern-day slavery in a state where oranges adorn license plates and tourists pull in for a free cup of juice when they cross the border.

The brutality in North Florida has an unusual, bitter twist, a Herald examination has found. While most

▶ PLEASE SEE FARMHANDS, 24A



HERALD INVESTIGATION'S KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Poor black Americans are routinely recruited from North Florida's homeless shelters, then ferried to isolated fields and farms, and forced to work for scant pay.
- ▶ Many are lured by recruiters who promise cash aplenty and, sometimes, parties rife with enticements.
- ▶ Once trapped in squalid housing camps, they encounter a life of long work hours, overwhelming debt, even abuse.

▶ Living in unsafe housing, 26A

- ▶ An owner backs his crew boss, voices contempt for workers, 26A

▶ PHOTO ESSAY: MINOKALEE'S WORKFORCE LARGELY MEXICAN, FOODS, 1L

Laborers find that promises are empty

By FARMHANDS, FROM VA

farmworkers in Florida and nationwide are undocumented Mexicans who have trekked through the desert in search of fortune, the laborers who toil unthought in hamlets like East Palatka and Hastings are mostly poor black Americans.

They are recruited by crew-chief contractors who serve as middlemen between the farmers who grow crops and the laborers who pick, package and sort them. These bosses can control nearly every aspect of the workers' lives: their housing, their food, their transportation and even their paycheck.

In interviews with The Herald farmworkers told harrowing stories of life in a hot stretch of North Florida farm country that welcomes passersby with signs saying "Jesus is Lord, Welcome to Hastings" and "Florida's Potato Capital."

Many were recruited from gathering spots for the homeless — soup kitchens, parks and shelters in Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa. They say they were lured with vows of good pay, sprinkled with promises of partying and \$15 in cash when they reached the farm.

What they didn't know: They would live in squalor, work long hours for scant pay, and in several cases, have to pay back \$1 of interest for most every \$1 loaned to them to buy food — including the \$15 that first lured them into the van.

Poor, isolated, without transportation, these men said they became slaves to the boss and their debts. One said he was beaten about the face this year when he couldn't repay his "debt." Two nights later, he slipped away at midnight and walked for hours to escape.

CASES INVESTIGATED

Foes is on recruitment by farm labor contractors Federal prosecutors are now examining cases in which North Florida farm labor contractors recruited from homeless shanties — only to exploit the laborers who stepped into

those vans. Investigators confirmed the inquiry, but would not elaborate.

"We've been contacted about this situation," Douglas Molloy, managing assistant U.S. attorney in Fort Myers, said last week.

One former worker, Angelo Jennings, said a Hastings crew boss lured him from a scraggly lot across from the Clara White Mission in Jacksonville, a lot where birds sump at dirty bread and shopping carts and beer cans cover the grounds.

"This is when he catches you at your lowest point," said Jennings, a recovering drug addict working to reform his ways. "If you have any good sense, he doesn't want you. He wants you where he can use you."

"If you're tired and hungry, they'll go out and buy some food and a six-pack, and put it on ice."

Then, almost as an afterthought he said, "Just like a rat trying to get some cheese."

The mission's chief executive officer, J. Coby Pittman, said: "They go from shelter to shelter and prey on them."

Such tactics became so routine, and the promises so hollow, that Pittman once posted a sign: "Do not get in the van."

But the vans still roll through here, through Tampa, through Orlando, on the road to farm country.

A BIG FARM STATE

Abuse is an unseen element in Florida's No. 2 industry

Agriculture is a huge business in Florida. The state produces three-fourths of the citrus harvested across the United States each year, and it leads the world in production of grapefruit. In 2000, the top 10 vegetable growers in the Southeastern United States were based in Florida. Across the country, only California boasts a richer agricultural crop.

Yet behind the sunny image of Florida's No. 2 industry, abuse abounds, and it is not limited to one rough boss or one patch of hard-hack laborers. "It's incredibly wide-

spread," said prosecutor Molloy, who has previously sent bosses away for enslaving farmworkers. "There is someone who has been making money off the misery — and other people."

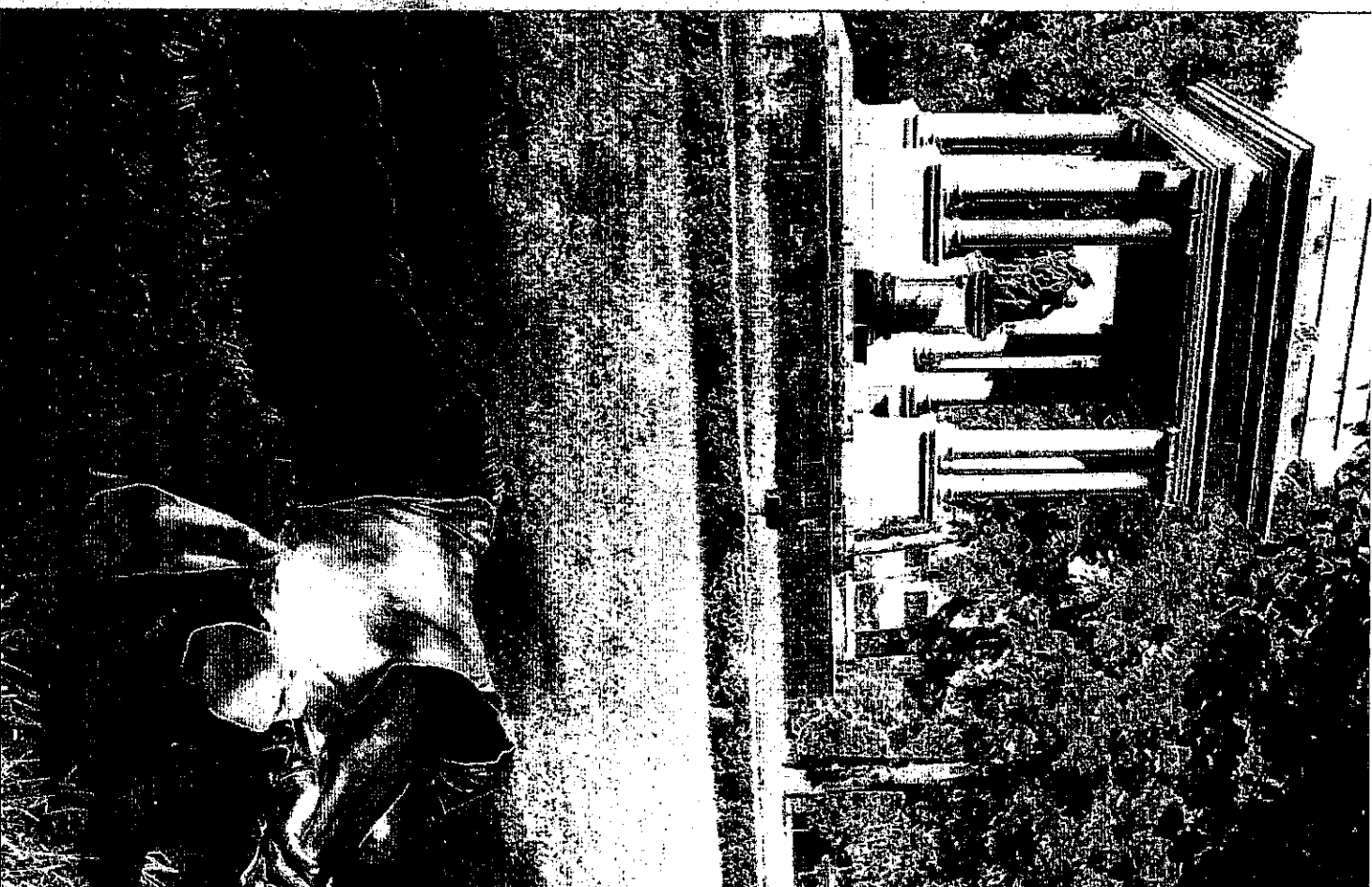
At the bottom rung of the system are the 200,000 seasonal farmworkers who harvest crops from outside the state's urban hubs to its dusty corridors.

"You've made a job so bad that the only people who are

going to do farm work are undocumented aliens or crack addicts," said Gregory S. Schell, a Lake Worth lawyer with the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project of Florida Legal Services. "That's a tremendous indictment of the agricultural industry."

His criticism is not of the workers who harvest Florida's bountiful crops, but of the industry enriched by their sweat labor.

Most pickers in Florida and nationwide are undocumented



"I felt like being a slave, just working to support his family."

ISIAH BROWN, 43, a farmworker, speaking about the boss who controlled him

foreign workers, and many native farmhands have had run-ins with the law. "There is a reason for that worker profile, advocates say. Crew bosses hire the vulnerable because they can exploit them. The laborers, hungry for a fresh start, are quick to take the job. Florida is home to more crew-chief contractors than any state in the nation, with more than one in three — 3,027 of 8,832 — based in the state. Florida also leads the nation in the number of crew-chief contractors and assistants currently stripped of licenses to work because of labor violations, with 43 percent of the total. The Herald has found. They have relegated workers to shabby housing, cheated them of pay or otherwise skirted federal migrant worker laws.

For a glimpse inside this world, follow Lisa Butler, a Florida Rural Legal Services attorney representing workers who fled their contractors' employ in far North Florida.

Butler does her legwork at night and in potentially dangerous environs. Visiting housing camps to pass out fliers letting workers know their rights. More than once, she has been confronted by crew chiefs or their workers.

"There is a pattern up here of severe violations," Butler said as she wheeled through Hastings and Spuds and East

Palatka, on a cramped hon function of it lets crew let pay."

The picture images of A days.

"I felt like working to support his family."

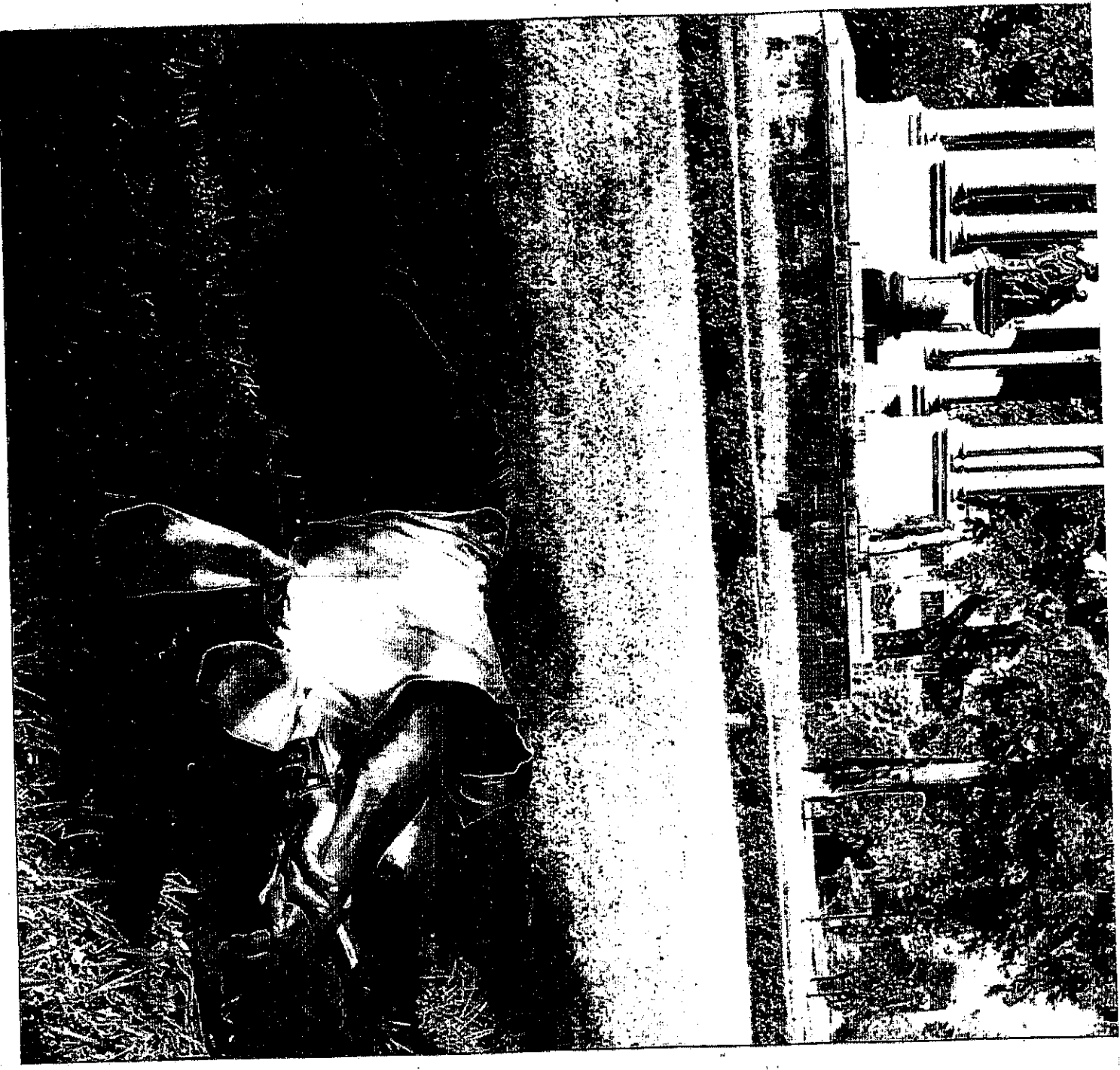
That boss, is a six-foot homeworn through low Cadillac Esc cash he gets 100 miles a neighborhood where he ut squatted, the

THE SERIES

MONDAY: Farmworkers in North Florida find themselves in a state of limbo, like modern-day slaves.

MONDAY: Elsewhere in the state, workers have been beaten, cheated and abused. Only a dozen people have gone to prison since 1996 for the crimes.

Tuesday: Powerful growers and farmers have donated millions to the politicians who control migrant worker labor laws.



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'I felt like being a slave, just working to support his family.'

ISIAH BROWN, 43, a farmworker, speaking about the boss who controlled him

Palatka, on her way to the next cramped housing camp. "It's a function of how this industry lets crew leaders control the pay."

The picture she sees evokes images of America's darkest days.

"I felt like being a slave, just working to support his family," farmworker Isiah Brown, 43, a native of South Carolina, said of the boss who controlled him.

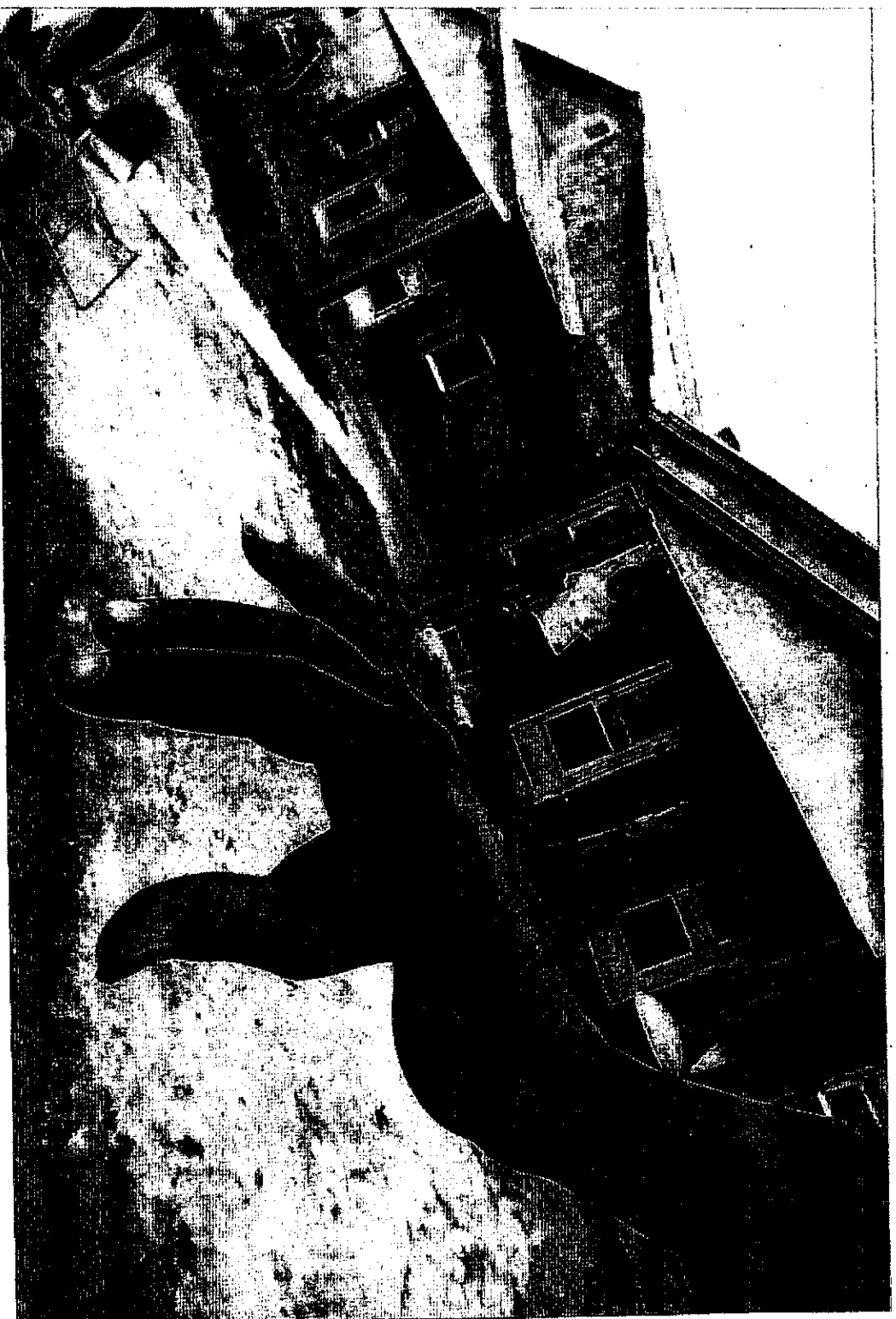
That boss, Ronald M. Jones, is a six-foot-four, 250-pound homegrown son who spins through town in a muscular Cadillac Escalade and flashes cash he gets from Florida farmers to employ laborers at the lowest, dirtiest rung of the chain. He did not respond to multiple interview requests.

START OF A JOURNEY

Promise of work and pay is irresistible — and elusive

Brown's journey to Jones began on a Sunday in Orlando, when another farm recruiter approached him as he lounged in a park. There's work up north, the man said. Honest day, honest pay.

Brown hopped in, traveling 100 miles to Hastings and neighboring East Palatka, where he ultimately lived in a squalid, illegal hellhole for



AT LABOR CAMP:

Neglect compounds the problems of farm laborers. Richard Williams, above, a picker for nine years, had to have a finger amputated because of an infection that he believes began while he was picking cabbage in North Carolina.

MAKING CONTACT: A farm labor recruiter, second from left, talks with a group of men outside a Jacksonville gas station before moving on to a soup kitchen to make a pitch there.



farmworkers operated by Jones and stood for long hours sorting potatoes for a few dollars pay. Brown came to the job poor and said boss Jones made him food and supplies, but demanding \$1 in interest for most every \$1 loaned. With no car and little cash, he was captive to the debts — struggling to work enough hours to pay back the 100 percent interest. Five former workers said in interviews that Jones forced the same arrangement on them.

HIRING OF FARMHANDS

Like Brown, Oglesby had been recruited where the homeless congregated, at Confederate Park in Jacksonville. "Most of them were easy targets," he said.

He said he wasn't homeless but needed work. "They told me I could go with them today eat," Brown said. "This farm thing, you put in the work, but the money just don't match the work."

In East Palatka, he slept in a decrepit trailer along with nine other farmworkers in a trashy compound that housed up to \$300 by sorting potatoes and packing them into trucks, his two dozen workers. His trailer had no running water and no air conditioning.

When workers returned to the camp after long days, areas showed \$154.51. But Oglesby — his pay stub from Jones 10 p.m.

His pay stub from Jones showed \$154.51. But Oglesby — like Brown — said even the pay stub did not reflect what actually went into his pocket. To understand how that could happen, follow the money.

"Everybody makes money off farmworkers," he said at a Bulls-Hit Ranch after fleeing. "It seems like when farmworkers come to town, everything goes up 20 percent."

Crew leader Jones was employed by Bulls-Hit Ranch was responsible for paying workers from that bounty.

Lee said he told Jones not to what he pays the crew.

Lee said he told Jones not to make any loans at Bulls-Hit, since such transactions on farm property could reflect upon the farmer. "I told him that whatever he did off my property was his business," Lee said.

Critics say this arrangement is ripe for abuse. When crew bosses control the cash, they are more apt to cheat the workers below them. Simply put, every \$1 they shimp from workers is an extra \$1 in their pocket. Jones' former workers

say they were cheated of those "He pays them, I don't," Lee said. "He has a daily record of

Contrary to the figure on his pay stub, Oglesby said he got \$35 in cash shifted into an envelope at week's end. Brown said he pocketed \$32.06 one week.

The men say Jones did not pay them for all the hours they worked. They say he also docked from their pay the loans and interest he charged and billed \$30 a week to Bulls-Hit. He said Jones zeroed in on his weakness at that place to be.

Once he was in Palatka, Jennings is working to get ready visitors to the housing camp — at a cost. "They would come there and smoke crack," he said.

Ministers in Jacksonville, the program supervisor, Cornell Robinson, said: "They find your weakness and they force this on you."

The city is a ready target for farm recruiters. The Jacksonville/Duval County hub is home to nearly 15,000 homeless people a year, according to a recent study by the Emergency Services and Homeless Coalition of Jacksonville.

For the homeless who turn to farm work, the cycle can become brutal. Many become

hungry."

Jones, 46, is known in these parts as "Too Tall." He did not reply to written questions another of Jones' properties, a house in Hastings. With an elderly man sitting on a porch placed with his wife, Sylvia.

Jennings, the Jacksonville man recruited near a homeless shelter, said he lived at another Jones compound in Palatka back to the house, out of sight of the man in the chair. "That housing is unfit," he said, saying he was billed \$30 a week to live there.

Two months later, by chance, The Herald ran into the worker outside a Jacksonville housing, plentiful food. "Nothing was true," he said. "It's a death trap. You can't get out of there."

He said that Jones loaned him money each day, and that a Jones associate loaned him cash each afternoon. Both demanded 100 percent interest. The debts got so heavy, he said, that one week he pocketed \$1.08 for six days of work. "It keeps you in a hole you can never get out of," said the worker, who asked that his name not be used.

He said the Jones associate beat him when he didn't have money to repay the debt, hitting him in the face two or three times and knocking him

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WILLIAM ANDERSON, who spent four months as a farmworker and left with \$90

"You might as well owe them your soul, because where can you go?"

In late May, The Herald encountered a Jones worker at another of Jones' properties, a house in Hastings. With an elderly man sitting on a porch placed with his wife, Sylvia.

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PLEASE SEE FARMHANDS, 26A

At one site, a catalog of pain

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM HARRIS

"Hell, no!" came the reply. Some of his crew members declined lifts from Butler as Lizzie wanted. Lizzie refused a request for an interview.

Another nearby complex housed a catalog of pain. To one side of that squat blue building, Butler inspected as he picked winter cabbage in North Carolina in 2001.

"By the time I got here, it was too late," he said. The fungus was rampant. Butler took his information from another potential case at a swamp going booze and misery. She took his story and

DANGEROUS WORK

Injuries and illness are part of the woes some incur

Misery in North Florida

isn't limited to Jones camps,

and poverty pay and slum

housing are not the only

abuses. Many workers, strug-

gling when they start their

farm duty, quickly find them-

selves in dangerous condi-

tions. Injuries, or worse,

become part of the trade.

In January, a migrant

worker at the nearby Lizzies

Labor Camp in Elikon was

stabbed to death with a

butcher knife after a dispute

with another laborer.

Three months later, attor-

ney Butler went to the camp to

hand out flyers telling workers

of their rights. She was not

well received, nor were jour-

nalists who accompanied her

for this report.

Ron Lizzie, the burly crew

boss, became angry when a

photographer started snapping

pictures. He had little patience

for Butler either. "Does anyone

want to talk to these people?"



A MATTER OF LAW: They didn't want us there, Lisa Butler, of Florida Rural Legal Services, said after visiting a labor camp with those on workers' rights. Crew chiefs object, but she persists.

his picture.

Nearby, Richard Williams, 53, a picker for nine years, worked without a tight forearm.

Wearing a T-shirt that said

"Nature Can't Be Restocked,"

to four interview requests, nor

respond to written questions.

"A van rolled around,"

Anderson recounted. "They

said, 'Are you looking for

work? ... We've got a swim-

ming pool.' When we got there,

it was more like a slave camp.

After he gets you there, he's

got you."

At night at the camp, next to

the dinner line, more goods

were for sale. "You get your

cigarettes, your beer and your

drugs. Everything was there on

the camp," Anderson said from

an upstate shelter, to which he

turned after leaving.

"A couple of guys said they

owed \$10,000. You might as

well owe them your soul,

because where can you go?

"I'm not going to sugarcane

fields, your cigarettes and

your beer, your cigarettes and

your drugs."

After four months of work,

he left with \$90 in his pocket,

he said. "I've been down and

out. Right now, I'm sleeping

wherever I can."

Tammy Byzer, executive

director of the St. Francis

House shelter in St. Augustine,

Fla., said,

THE ROAD TO FARM COUNTRY

North Florida farm recruits often seek laborers from the urban centers in Tampa and Jacksonville, Tampa and Orlando, then take them to large farm hubs to work.

Orlando

Jacksonville

Altoona

Hattiesburg

East Palatka

Granda

Tampa

50 miles

MEMPHIS / HERALD-LEADER

which provided a road and job

computing for displaced work-

ers like Anderson, said that

the father's salary know

what's going on

"Don't ask, don't tell" was

how she described the probl-

ing attitude as volunteers pro-

vided 600 sandwiches daily

ated daily to area

farmworkers.

"Somebody needs to come

up to the plate."

Herald research editor Lisa

both Donovan contributed to

this report.