

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.

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



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.

a searing sun for less than the prevailing—or promised—pay.

Under conditions inferior to those afforded cattle

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Reporter Lives Shame of Migrant Worker



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

Photo by Ford.

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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-



Photo by De Maralco.

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.

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 workmen to have his cries heard.

TOMORROW: The survey begins.

Staff writer Dale Wright's experiences in the labor pools of Florida.