

The Forgotten People— Migrants Live Horror Story In Job Travel

Last April the World-Telegram assigned staff writer Dale Wright to see if the desperate plight of the migrant laborer had been eased by recent protective laws. After working and living as one of them in dozens of locations from Florida to Long Island, he found these "forgotten people" still overworked, underpaid, cheated on every hand and forced to live in filthy conditions degrading to human dignity. His report continues today.

By **DALE WRIGHT,**
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

The transportation of migrant workers within a state such as Florida is a horror story.

I was in Florida last spring riding with and working with the thousands of migrant laborers who follow the harvest of crops for their miserable livelihood. Travel, for a migrant and his family, is a nightmare anywhere. In Florida, and other states which don't regulate migrant transportation, it's worse.

Item—The federal statutes decree that drivers of interstate migrant carriers must pass physical fitness tests.

I rode in a bus with a labor crew of 17, including a young couple with a 4-month-old infant. The trip from Homestead to Ruskin, Fla., covered 325 miles. The driver, in a moment of sleepy candor, told me he was subject to violent epileptic seizures.

Item—Federal laws say that rest and meal stops must be made at least every six hours.

Our crew traveled 13 hours before the first stop was made. The driver stopped for gas but not for people. The infant had to use for toilet purposes a filthy rag salvaged from the bus floor. As for the men and women, their experiences must go undescribed.

Item—Every state requires that bus and truck drivers be properly licensed.

The driver of the ark-like vehicle I rode in admitted that his license had been lifted because of a conviction for drunken driving.

Item—Most state laws require that migrant car-

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This is everyday practice in transporting migrant labor in Florida—men and women packed in more closely than the law would allow cattle to be shipped.

The Forgotten People

Traveling Between Jobs Is a Sad Story Of Horror to Migrant Farm Workers

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riers he maintained in reasonably safe and operable condition.

But on our antique bus, windows were cracked or broken. Seats had collapsed. Floorboards had long since broken away from mountings and been removed. Both rear wheels, with their smooth, whirring tires, were visible from inside the bus. The owner admitted to me later that the bus had not been inspected in the five years he had owned it.

Baggage and trash barred access to the rear emergency exit door. And, because the door catch was broken, it had been bound firmly shut with baling wire.

Never Stopped by Cops.

And thus we migrants—I was one of them by now—rolled along Florida's roads. We passed—and were passed by—several state troopers and local police patrol cars. Not once were we stopped.

Our destination was Ruskin, next stop on our journey to the never-never land of plenty. We'd all been promised "top wages," good food, "a real, nice place to live."

The crew boss' name was David Tuten Jr. of St. Petersburg, Fla. He made it sound real good.

"Every man and woman of you will make \$15 a day. And nobody takes nothin' out of your pay."

An old man sitting next to me muttered "Amen," which gave me a pretty fair idea what was coming.

When we arrived at the camp outside a big farm about three miles from Ruskin, we had been travelling—with just one stop—for 18 hours. Everybody was tired, dirty, hungry. And then we got the bad news.

The tomatoes were still green and not anywhere near being ready for harvest.

"Sorry to tell you this," said the grower, "but there'll be no work for at least 10 days."

This, I learned from friends I had made on the bus, often happens when that "land of plenty" is just around the corner of the winding road. It meant just one thing, that the workers were there on their own to wait until green tomatoes turned red.

It also meant that, at the mercy of the tomato farmer and the crew contractor they would run up big debts for food and lodging to be paid for later when they trudged out into the fields.

Few Shouts of Protest.

There were a few shouts of protest but not many. This had happened too often before, just as it will happen too often again.

I looked around the camp. There were no toilet facilities whatsoever. There was no kitchen equipment in the barracks-like living quarters. There was no food that I could see.

The only available water came from an irrigation pump. Adequate provision had been made to water the tomatoes—but not the people. Some of the migrants washed themselves and their clothes in a muddy irrigation ditch.

The crew boss explained, without apology, that he hadn't known the crop was late or that the grower hadn't installed facilities for his workers. Nobody said anything. We were all too tired.

A man who had brought his wife and child along finally broke the silence.

"We got here broke," he said mournfully. "Everything we got is tied up in this bundle." He pointed to a tattered bedspread tied up by its four corners. "And now we're even worse off than before 'cause we got to start borrowing money to live on."

The man then walked away with his family and slowly dug a hole in the ground. Then he set up a makeshift stove by placing a piece of sheet metal on four empty cans and built a fire under it.

I watched as he tramped off into the fields. In a few minutes he was back with a small cabbage and a can of water—from the irrigation ditch.

He and his wife boiled the cabbage over the can stove. It was the first meal that they and their child had eaten since leaving Homestead 18 hours before.

TOMORROW: Contractor's Cruel Gimmick.

The truth about the "green tomatoes" and what it meant to the migrants.