

## The Forgotten People

# Migrants Exist in Duck Sheds

Today staff writer Dale Wright concludes his first-hand reports on the life of migrant laborers, those "forgotten people" who are still underpaid, overworked, cheated and forced to live in degrading conditions. On Monday he will summarize his experiences working and living with them and offer his recommendations to improving their tragic plight.

By DALE WRIGHT

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A 30-page, slick paper booklet published earlier this year by the New York State Migrant Labor Committee boasts proudly that the state "marches forward" in long strides in its handling of itinerant farm workers.

Photographs of smiling laborers and their children beam from its pages—at work, at play, in school and in church. The committee booklet spells out step-by-step the regulations under which more than 25,000 transient crop pickers who come into the state every year live and work.

The publication lists rules for the supervision of crew leaders, growers, packers, processors and labor camp operators. The work of seven state agencies is exhaustively outlined. Impressive statistics tell what has been done to improve the lot of the migrant

farm worker in the past 40 years.

It is true that forward steps have been taken. They can be seen in Eastern Long Island and other farm areas. Yet here, in perhaps the most enlightened of all of the 50 states, many migrant farm people still face poverty amid plenty. They are neglected, exploited and left hopeless.

The squalor side of the state migrant labor picture can be examined in all of its shocking clarity in and near Riverhead, L. I., just 83 miles from Times Square.

I've been there. I've seen and talked with the migrant farm worker at two bottomland squatter communities called Griffing's Path and Tin Top, both within Riverhead city limits. The people I've seen there don't appear in the committee booklet.

### Many on Relief.

At a place called Warner's Duck Ranch, about three miles from the center of town, some 200 Negroes and a few Puerto Ricans exist amid alluring misery and degradation. In many weeks of traveling, working and living with migrants I was prepared for anything. But Warner's Duck Ranch bowled me over!

Most of the ranch tenants are migrants. Others are former migrants brought up from southern states in labor crews, for potato, corn and bean harvests. Because of poor crops—or poor crop prices—and poor wages, they

are now stranded with little or no funds.

Many families who live on the ranch are on welfare, swelling the relief burden borne by Riverhead taxpayers.

The ranch, operated by Hollis V. Warner, is run like a pre-Civil War plantation. Mr. Warner was at one time the world's leading duck raiser. He went out of business in 1957.

"The politicians," he told me, angrily waving his hands, "boosted feed prices so high that they ran me right out of business."

Although Mr. Warner got out of duck raising, he did not abandon his ranch. Instead, he converted it into a private housing project and replaced the ducks with people.

### Hidden Behind Trees.

He partitioned the long, flimsy uninsulated wooden sheds, which only three or four years ago housed ducks, into separate units. Today they house human beings, including many families with small children.

The ranch is, typically, off the main thoroughfare and hidden behind a clump of trees.

Mr. Warner charges \$10 to \$15 a week rent, tenants said. Each of the converted duck sheds contains two or four rooms. There are almost no indoor toilets. Tenants must use outhouses in the rear of each shack.

Because of the lack of a

drainage system, it is common for housewives to dump dish and washwater through the front or rear doors into the dirt street.

"This is no place for humans to live," said Louise Davis, a three-year tenant in one of the converted duck sheds. "Why, even the ducks couldn't make it here. But there's no other place for us to go."

### 'Stuck for Good.'

"Mother of two small children, Mrs. Davis said she migrated to Riverhead from Florida three years ago with a farm labor crew.

"The potatoes were late," she recalled, "and when my babies started coming, my husband left. Now it looks like I'm stuck here for good."

Mrs. Davis said she had been on welfare most of the time she had lived in Riverhead and received \$61.50 weekly. Her relief check is boosted to \$64.50 during winter months to pay for coal for cooking and heating. She added that many of her neighbors are also on welfare.

Edward Delaney, 62, a bent, toothless man from Durant, Miss., complained: "I can't earn enough to get out of here." He said he paid \$15 weekly for a two-room waterless and toiletless shanty.

He arrived in Riverhead with a labor contractor and a crew in July of last year. Like many others, he could not find work enough in the po-

tato fields and grading sheds to earn the fare back home.

It was the old story of over-recruitment of farm laborers so they could be worked for the lowest possible pay.

Mr. Warner, who operates a general store in one of his converted duck sheds, has a different view of his tenants. He was one of the few persons to whom I revealed my identity as a reporter.

I asked him how he could justify charging \$40 to \$75 monthly rents for such miserable living quarters.

### 'Everybody's Happy.'

"These people," he said, shaking his fist menacingly, "are all happy here. They're all satisfied. I give them a place to live and something to eat. Nobody else will take them."

Mr. Warner moved closer and as he spoke I watched over his shoulder as a tiny girl, naked about 3 years old, played with a ragged doll in the dirt. Scratching in the same patch was a flock of dusty, a nemic-looking chickens.

The little girl was one of Mr. Warner's "happy" tenants. She lived in one of his duck sheds.

She may die in one of them.

## MONDAY:

Summary and recommendations.