

Undercover at a migrant camp,  
the air thick with danger

**BY LES PAYNE**

# Journalist

**“HEY, BUBBA,** I hear you’re from Tuscaloosa?”

“Bubba,” was the name I’d taken as a Newsday reporter working undercover on a Long Island migrant farm. The tall stranger, with shoulders like Volkswagen fenders, had just broken from a huddle with the crew chief on the steps of the wooden barracks. My four-man work crew was whiling away the rainy afternoon, drinking cheap wine and signifying.

The sharp tone of the tall stranger bolted me sober. I confirmed my hometown. “Do you know where Tooson Service Station is?” he shot back.

“Yeah” I said, gathering myself. “It’s on the corner of 20th Street and 30th Ave.” My mind raced back home to recover every detail about the place where I’d lived till age 12. As the prologue unfolded, a menace flickered in the eyes of the stranger as his backup looked on from 20 yards away. The interrogator’s voice was soft, purposeful and so even that my crew didn’t pick up the grilling in their midst.

“What’s the radio stations in Tuscaloosa?” he said abruptly.

“Let’s see,” I said, wrinkling my nose, “WTBC, WJRD, and...oh yeah, they’ve got that black one now, WTUG.” Oddly frustrated by my answers, the stranger didn’t seem to know how to proceed.

“Alonzo Tooson is one of my brother’s best friends,” I said finally. “We used to watch the Friday Night TV fights at Tooson Service Station. Pabst Blue Ribbon sponsored ‘em, back in the early ‘50s.” He threw other names at me. It turned out he knew my uncle, Deadwood Dick. This notorious goat in my Baptist family of God-fearing sheep was a hard-drinking skirt chaser, as fierce as his namesake, a black cowboy of 19th-Century fame. When a jealous suitor jumped my uncle with a knife one night, Deadwood shot the man dead two blocks from our house on 22nd St. Charged with manslaughter, Deadwood’s



HARVEY WEBER/NEWSDAY

**Workers in the potato fields of a Long Island migrant camp, the brutal conditions of their lives endured with helplessness and rage, 1961**

# on the Edge





The last of a passing era of migrant farm workers in the Long Island potato fields, are potato graders Jimmy Wilson, Frank Singleton and Oliver Burke, September 2004

“Each time my eyelids closed my head snapped up alert. I had never been so pleased to greet a new dawn.”

acquittal only added to his legend.

The reputation that had so embarrassed my family in Alabama stood me in good stead in Riverhead. It tinged the scowl on my antagonist's face with a grudging sense of respect. The puzzled crew chief, James Brown, was leaning against the barracks now.

It was my fourth day of working the potato fields at the camp with black laborers up from the South. Newsday had written several stories about the terrible conditions under which the migrants lived and worked. Reporters had interviewed health workers, farm owners, Vista volunteers, and other caregivers who visited the camps. As a rookie reporter, however, I had noticed that our stories never quoted the migrants themselves. The camps were on private property with guard dogs and some of the crew chiefs were armed and kept reporters away!

New Journalism was all the rage in the early 1970's. Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, and Hunter Thompson had kicked it into rollicking, high literary gear. Lesser talent at New York Magazine and elsewhere had a fling with it also. Many of my generation had gotten into the journalism racket not so much to bring down a sitting U.S. President but to write the Great American Novel.

Instead of boring readers with tired, homogenized, newspaperese, the new form allowed writers to express their observations more artfully. In the Summer Journal of Morton Pennypacker, Newsday

Editor Dave Laventhol had created a perfect vehicle.

The experimental weekly magazine was edited by young journalists without interference from the factory managers of the old journalism at the paper.

I seized upon the migrant story as a chance to flirt with new journalism.

First, I had to gain access to the Long Island migrants without disturbing their routine. It would not be free of risk, or danger. So my wife and child packed off for the week to my parents' home in Connecticut. I hitchhiked to Riverhead in a t-shirt and jeans and was hired on as "Bubba." I had picked cotton in Tuscaloosa, shade-grown tobacco in Windsor, Conn., and thus was no stranger to dirt crops.

At the camp on Old Quogue Road, crew chief Brown had rented tarpaper shacks to house the migrants he hired out to local potato farmers. My 17-man crew of mostly older men slept double bunks in an open barracks lined inside with corrugated tin. There were three toilet bowls, two large sinks and a three faucet shower. The beds all had bare mattresses, no linen, and a dusty blanket bearing the dirt of two generations of migrants. The men all slept in their clothes.

There were days during the week when we drained water from the aluminum irrigation pipes, holding them over our heads like zoo-keepers burping giant boa constrictors. Days when we ate pork scraps, drank cheap wine at breakfast, fought each other bloody, and, after nine hours in the field, walked through the rear fence of the drive-in movie. Day blended into night at the camp, spinning in an endless swirl of smoking, drinking and fighting, working, shooting crap and dreaming. In the wee hours of the musty barracks, the camp's homosexual, one "Big Momma Rock," would move between the bunks, peddling "her" wares with a bottle of Vaseline.

Among the uneducated "Stagger Lee" lumpenproletarians, I tried to conceal all traits that would blow my cover. I concealed my notes, spoke very little around the bosses, took my full share of Twister wine (that was charged to our account at exorbitant rates) and gave as well as any with the cursing and the

fighting. My four man crew was molded into such efficiency that by the third day, the white foreman had taken to requesting us by name each day. This slip coupled with others caught the attention of crew chief Brown. Several times I caught him sizing me up and nodding in my direction to others.

Finally, Brown had located a Tuscaloosa native and dispatched him that day to check me out. It is not clear what the crew chief suspected but he sensed something. I had neutralized the initial probe by the stranger but I suspected more was in store. Still, I could not leave before payday, the "day that the eagle flies."

The crew chief locked the barracks doors for the first since I had lived in the camp. The walls were closing in. From my top bunk, I cracked open the window for easier egress. Each time my eyelids closed my head snapped up alert. I had never been so pleased to greet a new dawn.

I had waited for payday for seemed like a month.

Our crew chief hadn't paid his men in three weeks. Word in my crew was that Brown had gambled their money away. "Brown pays in streaks," said James "Mule" Williams. In a camp where 50-year old men were called boys and where cigarettes and cheap wine were charged to their accounts at twice the going rate, to keep one's check after a week of laying irrigation pipes in potato fields was considered a rare feat of courage.

I secured my check from the crew chief with all deductions. When my crew went to the barbershop, I excused myself and phoned my buddy, Bill Nack to come pick me up. My 4,000-word migrant story, "Waiting for the Eagle to Fly" created a sensation in the office and even influenced the county government to improve migrants' living conditions.

After exhausting all means of gaining access to the migrants, I had reserved this last resort. The story, I felt, was too important to be denied by farm owners and armed, self-important crew chiefs. I don't recommend going undercover for a story – but it worked for me.

I never again encountered the four-man team I befriended – or our chew chief, James Brown. ■

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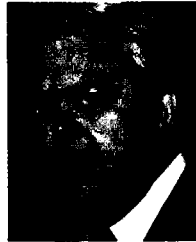
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**Correction:** In a photo essay about Hurricane Katrina, the armed guard on page 12 of The Journalist has his finger on the stock of his gun, not the trigger. This information was incorrect in the 2005 edition.



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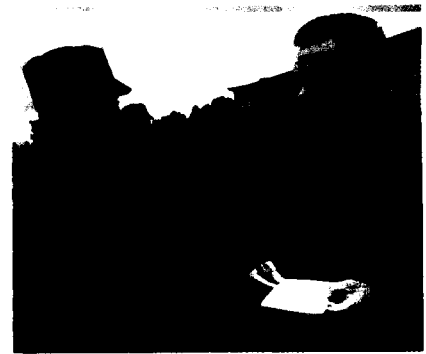
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**EDWARD WONG IN IRAQ**

PHOTOGRAPH OF WONG BY SHAWN BALDWIN