

Migrant Labor Exploited by Delay Trick

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 scores 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.

When I found myself stranded in a miserable Florida migrant labor camp with no work for 10 days because the tomato crop was late, my first thoughts were charitable ones.

Naively, I figured a mistake had been made, that I and the scores of other workers with me had been transported 300 miles in the good faith that jobs were waiting for us.

I've never been more wrong in my life!

It wasn't the weather and the fact that the tomatoes had not ripened by the time we arrived. The simple truth was that the tomato grower and "the labor contractor" who hired us with his fat promises planned it exactly that way.

It's a favorite gimmick, I discovered, to exploit the illiterate, inarticulate migrant worker. Hang him up at a camp or a farm where he can't run and then charge him for his food and lodging.

What does a migrant do? I found that most of them, in hock to somebody all their lives, are forced to "go along" with the only rule of life they've ever known.

They stay on, run up debts to the farmer-grower

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The Forgotten People

No-Work Gimmick Planned to Exploit Migrant Croppers, Reporter Finds

or contractor and then work off their debts with sweat and toil when the crop comes in.

And at the end? They have nothing and so they move on.

I stayed a couple of days, running up bills for food and my bed. There was no work, or no pay for anybody.

So I talked to the crew boss, the "contractor" who had led me to what he called the land of plenty but which I had discovered was a land of nothing. I told him I was leaving, that I was going into town.

Threatened With Beating.

"Walk away from this camp, boy" (a term often used condescendingly in the South and one that always grates on the nerves) he told me, "and the cops in town will catch up with you and beat you half to death. And if they don't get you, I'll come after you myself."

He was a mean-looking fellow, over six feet and 200 pounds-plus. But I decided that I would leave anyway and take my chances getting into town—three miles on foot—and moving along to another stop where there was more work.

Later I heard this bully make the same threat to other restless members of the migrant crew he had gotten to the camp. About forty of them, including a dozen small children, had straggled into the camp in a motley caravan of broken-down buses and trucks. There was much grumbling and discontent over no work.

When anyone objected too loudly, he was threatened with head-whippings. I didn't see anybody get slapped around, but there was not the slightest doubt in my mind that the bossman would do whatever he felt necessary to make his point.

Men and women I had talked with on the long bus trip up from Homestead told me that getting a fist or a club "upside your head" was one of the things you expected working in the fields.

Off to Tampa by Bus.

I had seen and heard enough. And despite the threats of the crew boss, I left camp the next morning, walked three miles into Ruskin and caught a bus for nearby Tampa. I had money, of course, for travel and I was able to get away. The others stranded at the camp, stayed on and waited for the crop to come in.

On the bus, I met a 43-year-old farm worker I shall call William Lewis. He was born in a shack in a clump of trees near Oklawaha, Fla., one of 11 children of migrant parents. As soon as he was able to lift a basket of tomatoes or a hamper of beans, he had gone into the field with the rest of the family.

William had never gone beyond the third grade in school, a backwoods classroom. He never learned to read or write. With his brothers and sisters he went through his early years suffering from malnutrition.

As he put it, "We was hungry lots of the time."

The hungry years had left their mark. He wheezed and snorted constantly. His arms and legs were bent and misshapen. He shambled and shuffled along in a permanent stoop.

Long ago, he said, he had lost track of his father and mother, didn't know if they were alive. Occasionally, he



As Dale Wright learned from migrant workers, their children start work as soon as they are able to lift a hamper of beans.

stumbled across a brother or a sister in a work camp or a potato field.

One Indelible Recollection.

Stamped indelibly in his memory was the recollection of the succession of filthy shacks and camps where there never was enough food to eat or milk to drink. As long as he could remember, he said, he had been overworked, cheated out of his wages and overcharged whenever he bought anything.

"Ain't nothin' you can do about it," he said wearily. "You got to take what the bossman give you. Then, when the work is done, you move on. You gotta go somewhere else."

William told me he had worked in just about every state from Florida to Maine. In several states, including New York, he added, he had gone on relief when there was no work.

I asked him if he thought he could escape from the treadmill of migrant labor.

"Never escape," he replied. "I don't know nothing but picking and grubbing. I'll keep moving on from farm to farm until the day I die."

William's plight, I discovered on my assignment, was that of scores of others I talked with—Negro, Mexican, Puerto Rican, West Indian and poor white migrants who work the good earth but who get very little good out of it for themselves.

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