Speed-Up Forces Migrants To Quit Job Before Payday

Migrant farm workers, de-Migrant farm vorkers, de-spile some protective laws, are still overworked, inder-paid, cheated mit forced to live in legrading conditions, staff writer Date Wright found after working and liv-ing with them, over a sixmonth period. His report on these "forgotten people" contimes today.

> By DALE WRIGHT. Votili-Telegram Staff Writer.

What's it like working a potato harvest? It's monotonous brutal, strength-sapping labor.

Toiling and sweating in the long potato rows, filling 100pound sacks under the blaz-ing sun, tries any man's en-durance. But working in a potato grading shed was even worse.

In my travels as a migrant laborer, I found myself in the Florida town of Hastings. With 20 other workers, I hads arrived there one morning last April in a bus. By early afternoon I was pushing a hand truck for Florida Planters Inc.

Speed Up Ordered.

As a laborer, I grew up fast in this job. My job was to wheel the truck, baded with four 100-jound sacks of potatoes, from the grader into hoxcars and trucks. Often I had to jockey the handtruck as far as 200 feet along a loading platform, then up a short ramp into the cars and trucks.

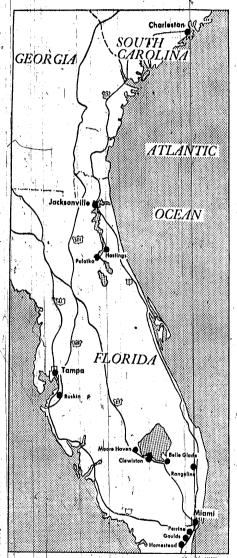
I held up well for six hours, until the grader boss ordered a "speed-up." Loaders who took the potato sacks off a moving belt and stacked them on my handtruck were told to increase the number of sacks from four to five. This meant I would have to push 500 pounds instead of 400 pounds up those ramps.

Couldn't Do It.

I have my share of muscles and I had developed new ones as a migrant laborer but this new order sounded impos-sible Once, twice, three times, I tried to force that over-loaded handtruck up the ramp. I just couldn't do it.

The grader boss came along and told me to quit "dogging it, to go to work. I told him the 500 pound load was too much for me. He laughed at me. I told him I was quitting.

I asked to be paid for the



The dots indicate the Southern towns staff writer Dale Wright visited while working and living as a migrant!

hours I had worked. The boss sneered "Boy,"

"Boy," he said, "we don't nay around here until Satur-day and that's six days away. You wanna hang around waitin' for your pay and doin' nuthin?"

It wasn't until later that I the picture. Other workers in Hastings told me that employers often make the work so tough for migrants, particularly before payday, that the men quit and move on,

Rarely do they return for the wages due them. It was obvious to me that I had contributed my share of free labor.

Sometimes, I learned, a worker will come back for the money owed him only to be brushed off again. The employer or contractor cap't remember over hiring him; or the records have been lost; or payday has passed, or they're out of cash and the worker is told to come back the following week.

These are just a few of the devices used to exploit the migrant farm worker.

So I marked off to experience the \$6-at \$1 an hour-I had earned. It was worth it, to hear the stories of the other workers who had been sy indled the same way.

Fifth at \$1.50 a Day.

I was dog-tired when I limped away from that grading shed in Hastings, What I wanted more than anything else-more than the six lousy bucks in uncollected pay +-was a place to rest my aching bones.

I learned quickly that a room and bath were not to be found. Such accommodations for migrants didn't jexist. I settled for what I could find; seedy, dirty, 10-hy-12 closet-like room in a boarding house. The bare mattress was so filthy I slept in my clothes.

The price was \$1.50 a day. Nine other rooms, including some with families and children, were already occupied in the shanty. It was an ancient, one story wood structure, supported precariously at the corners by concrete blocks.

The door to my room had no lock. It had long since been broken. To assure privacy — and to guard against theft — I Jammed a broken-legged chair against the door to keep it shut.

Women, Kids Used.

There were kitchen facilities in the so-called rooming house, but they were unhouse but they were unusable. The three-legged kerosene stove was charred a burnt black with grease. One corner of the stove was supported by a milk crate. A film of grime and grit covered the bottom of the stopped-up sink.

The bathroom was even

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Speedup Bilks Migrants of Pay

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worse. After I waited my turn – hours it seemed — I stepped inside and right into a wall of stench which turned my stomach. It was too much. I went outside.

I learned many other things. During the peak of the potato harvest in Florida, men and women are worked on the grader for as long as 15 hours daily. Some of the women told me they were paid only 40 cents an hour.

I found an 11-year-old boy who was working 10 hours a day loading 100-pound potato sacks onto trucks in the grading yard.

The Federal Labor Standards Act of 1938, I was aware, prohibits child labor under 16 at establishments producing goods for interstate or foreign commerce.

A Florida law prohibits child labor under 16 except after school hours or during school vacations. The children I saw here were working in April when the schools were in session.

Work Till Midnight.

At another grading shed in Hastings I found 9 and 10year-olds loading the 100pound potato sacks. They were working after school hours all right—from 3 p.m. until midnight!

John Kemp, owner of the ramshackle rooming house where I lived for a while,

"Nothin unusual about kids workin' down here. I gott four boys—9, 10, 13 and 14—all workin' in the potato fields every day after school until it gets dark. They pay seven cents a hundren pounds. When me and my wife and the boys all work, we can make \$17-or \$18 a day."

In Hastings, I learned, there are schools for children of year round, residents but none for children who come into town with their parents to work on the season."

So these latter youngsters, despite the laws aimed at protecting them, move from to farm with their parents and work right along with them in the fields.

It's dirty, rotten work for adults, let alone children.

TOMORROW:

If Florida was bad, South Carolina was worse!

Police Probe Migrant's Death

Suffelk County Police are awaiting a medical report on the death of a migrant farm worker whose body was found in a field at St. James, L. 1., vesterday.

The dead man was identified as Fablan Torres Diaz, 35, of Kennett Square, Pa. He had been working on a farm owned by John Beck, Hallack Rd, St. James. Police said death apgarently was due to exposure.