

Migrant Accepts Gyp as Part of Life

Lack of Schooling Makes Him Easy Mark of Cheat

Staff Writer Dale Wright, who spent much of his months working and living with migrant laborers on the East Coast, continues today his story of those "forgotten people" whose lives are a hopeless circle of debt and degradation.

By DALE WRIGHT,
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A migrant farm worker expects exploitation as one of the grim facts of his miserable life.

He knows he'll be cheated and he learns to live with it. He knows he'll be underpaid for his labor and overcharged for many of the things he has to buy for himself and his family.

Because many migrants never get to school—or have to leave during the early elementary school years to go to work in the fields—they are uneducated and illiterate. For this reason they are easy marks for sharp operators.

Gimmicks Described.

While driving along a country road through the fertile North Shore potato area near Peconic, L. I. last August, I picked up two hitchhiking farmhands who appealed to some of the gimmicks the sharpies use to separate a migrant worker from his hard-won wages.

James Taylor, 19, and Evon Washington, 31, both from Polk County, Fla., had been taken to Peconic last July to work at a potato grader. They had joined a traveling farm crew headed by a Virginia man earlier in the summer on a promise that they would be paid \$1.25 an hour.

(The World-Telegram is withholding the Virginia man's name at this time because of an investigation now under way.)

Both farmhands agreed that in nearly three months of work with the crew of 67 graders and loaders they had never earned more than 50 cents hourly.

At the time I gave the two men a lift they were headed on foot for New York City, 95 miles away. Between the two they had 12 cents in cash and only the clothes they wore. They had left their camp the night before, they said, because there was no chance of earning enough money to subsist.

Story Recorded.

The stories they told were so typical of the cruel swindles I had heard many times before in other farm areas, North and South, that I brought them into New York, staked them to a room at a YMCA and tape-recorded their stories.

Two days later I rounded up some shirts and underwear and helped get them jobs at an upstate New York fruit cannery through the State Employment Service.

Here are some of the things they told me—on two hours of tape:

Their crew leader deducted \$1 weekly for "union dues" for a union that doesn't exist. The men had not signed any union membership cards. They did not know the name of the "union" to which they paid dues.

The two said they were told that the deductions would be made for 20 weeks. I already knew the reason. It was one of the gimmicks frequently used by labor contractors to write off the expense of transporting migrants from one stop to another.

In their recruiting pitches in the South, contractors promise to bus or truck migrants "up the road" at no cost. But they get back the money in hidden charges.

Illegal Deductions.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Washington also declared that their crew leader deducted \$1.40 weekly for social security benefits. Mr. Washington emphasized that although he had lost his SS card he knew his number.

"Neither the contractor nor the timekeeper knew my number," he said. "They never asked me."

The deductions were illegal even if the crew leader had known the number. The maximum legal deduction is 3 percent of gross salary up to \$1800 annually. For the \$1.40 deductions to have been legal, the crew leader would have to be paid at least \$46.67 weekly. The two hitch-



Evon Washington (left) and James Taylor, migrant workers from Florida, tell their stories of being cheated to staff writer Dale Wright.

hikers insisted that they had never grossed more than \$32 a week with the crew.

On payday, the men declared, the crew boss charged his workers \$1 a pint for wine which retails for 53 cents.

Though state law requires that migrant farm workers be furnished with written statements of hours worked and wages received, both men asserted they had never received such records.

No Contracts Posted.

Another state law requires that farm labor contractors post in conspicuous places, either in living quarters or at grading houses, copies of labor contracts detailing wages and hours and charges for food and housing.

Mr. Taylor, who has completed 11 years of public school education, said he had never seen a labor contract posted and did not know the procedure was required.

These are just some of the many complaints of shoddy record-keeping and questionable payroll operations that both men gave in their interviews.

Mr. Washington said he had been paid nothing for his first week of work and that at the end of the second week he received \$4 for well over 40 hours of work. This was after the deduction of \$13.50 for 19 meals weekly and \$4 for room rent.

"Sometimes the boss would pry us whatever he felt like," Mr. Washington explained, "no matter how many hours we worked."

"Other times he wouldn't take the hours we worked as reported by the timekeeper. 'He'd tell me, 'You couldn't have worked that much time.' Then he'd pay me what he wanted to."

\$17 in Cost Week.

Mr. Taylor said that for his best week of work he received \$17, after "union" dues, social security and food and lodging.

Both men charged that there were many others at the camp who had been bilked by illegal charges.

The two men estimated they had been cheated out of a minimum of \$200 each. One of their biggest gripes concerned what they called "waiting time."

As Mr. Taylor explained it: "If we're loading potatoes off the grader and into trucks and the trucks are late, we don't get paid for waiting. But we have to work around the shed anyway, stacking sacks of potatoes for the next trucks or just moving things around."

"There's sometimes two or three hours between trucks. We're working but we're not getting paid. The time stops when the truck is loaded and it don't start until the next one comes in."

An iritense, serious young man, Mr. Taylor's summation of the exploitation of migrant farm workers mirrors the feelings of the essential laborers (about 25,000 come into New York State every year) who harvest the nation's crops:

"We're getting cheated and

we know it. You gotta take it or leave. We left."

I later made another visit to the camp, tucked away in the trees, to see for myself what the two men had left behind. There, glistening in the bright Long Island sun, I found an explanation: an expensive 1960 sedan was parked in front of the shabby quarters alongside a 1956 lux-

ury car. I had been told earlier by Mr. Taylor and Mr. Washington that they were owned by the crew leader and his wife.

TOMORROW:

Long Island—where migrant labor lives in shacks built for ducks.