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FARM AND PROCESSING LABOR

VIRGINIA - 1949

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UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION COMMISSION

VIRGINIA STATE EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

AFFILIATED WITH U. S. EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

PLACEMENT OF FARM WORKERS

IN THE

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

1949

A POST-SEASON REPORT

Prepared January, 1950

By Research, Statistics and Information Division

Unemployment Compensation Commission

VIRGINIA STATE EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Richmond, Virginia

A. LOCAL LABOR:

Foregoing sections of this report have intimated that agricultural employers of this State obtained, unaided, the vast majority of their year-around and seasonal labor from sources "close to home." A similar declaration may be made with regard to processors, although the degree of self-reliance is slightly lower. Because of this established practice, and because personnel and facilities are limited, the Employment Service has applied its efforts wherever most needed to prevent crop losses when seasonal labor demands appeared beyond the means of interested employers.

The principal local recruitment and direction efforts by local offices occured in the Norfolk-Portsmouth area, the Northern Neck around West Point and Warsaw, and the Shenandoah Valley from Harrisonburg north to Winchester. These are considered good examples of local mobilization because of the substantial dimensions of the need, effective methods employed, and the satisfactory end results.

During early July the Employment Service offices at West Point and Warsaw convassed growers and processors to obtain facts about crops and labor needs, and followed with a series of meetings throughout the area. Recruitment was determined as necessary to meet needs -- for harvesting hands and process workers around West Point and for processing workers alone in Warsaw. The next steps involved the mapping of areas, establishment of commuting routes, and recruitment along them. Direct mail, personal contact by recruiters from the local offices, newspaper publicity and radio spot announcements were employed. Bus drivers, in the employ of growers and processors, also served as recruiters.

A program of recruitment, similar in many respects, was successful at Harrisonburg. Regarding this effort the Field Supervisor reported:

> "Approximately 400 workers were recruited in July, August and September to harvest and process beans, tomatoes and apples. Most of the workers recruited were women, not regularly in the labor market. One employer obtained printed posters and we distributed them throughout the area while making numerous personal contacts. Both newspaper publicity and radio spot announcements were employed with noteworthy favorable results."

Bus schedules were established by the Employment Service in cooperation with employers. Again these commuting routes were used as avenues of recruitment.

The northern section of the Shenandoah Valley did not have sufficient unmet labor demands to justify full-fledged mobilization as was the case in areas just reviewed. However, direct contact, direct mail, newspaper and radio publicity were means employed to bring needed local workers to available jobs.

Local recruitment was employed to good advantage for the second straight year in the Norfolk-Portsmouth area. These placements were made by tapping local labor aupplies after an intensive publicity campaign. Newspapers and radio stations carried frequent mention of the labor needs and directions for workers seeking such employment. Definite pick up stations were established, and these enabled the local office and employers to make an orderly daily commuting schedule. Supply sources were unemployed city residents, school-age youth, housewives, and unemployment insurance claimants Norfolk area growers said the methods used obtained a much larger number of workers than at first appeared probable and at "a defintely lower labor cost."

B. INTRASTATE AND INTERSTATE LABOR:

As indicated in the section on "Planning," recruitment in the State of Florida by representatives of the Virginia State Employment Service was the principal device used to bring out-of-state labor into Virginia.

LABOR CAMP MINISTER PREPARES HIS SERMON

No doubt the usual migratory movement would have set in during the spring and summer in any event, but the organized recruitment undertaken controlled and directed this movement, facilitated pre-season commitments on the part of employers and workers, and insured a more satisfactory selection of crew leaders and crew members.

Intrastate labor, as distinct from local workers living near enough to the scene of employment to commute from their homes, was utilized to a much more limited extent. In the Shenandoah Valley, particularly in the Winchester section, there was some tendency on the part of residents of adjoining counties to enter the principal fruit sections and to accept employment until the peak of the season had passed. It is estimated that some 1,300 workers entered the Winchester area in this manner. Perhaps another 200 came from immediately adjacent West Virginia counties.

Formal inter-area and interstate clearance procedures resulted in 3,316 agricultural placements during the year, a large portion of which were seasonal placements. Nearly 2,000 clearance agricultural referrals were made during the year, the excess of placements over referrals of course being accounted for by the fact that Virginia was primarily a demand, rather than a supply State. It seems likely that many more clearance placements were made than were actually reported. The pressure of activity and the large numbers of people involved made it difficult for the local offices to report fully on the activity.

The two information stations already mentioned -- at Little Creek, southern terminus of the ferry operating across the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, and at Cape Charles, northern terminus of the ferry -- were strategically located to contact and direct the northern movement of migrants at the beginning of the season, and their return southward in the fall. During May the Little Creek Information Station gave service to crews composed of more than 4,200 workers who sought work in Virginia; in June to nearly 7,400, and in July about 800, a total of over 12,000.

Experience of the past two years has shown that the migrants rely upon these information stations for guidance, and that the centers furnish a highly useful means of collecting information about the number of migrants and their availability for work in eastern states.

No temporary local offices were established in the State in connection with the seasonal farm labor program, the regularly established offices furnishing satisfactory centers from which the work in the field could be handled. The offices which carried the greatest burden in the program were Exmore and Norfolk, in the Eastern Shore-Princess Anne section; West Point and Warsaw on the Northern Neck; Front Royal,

DAY OF REST - A CARD GAME!

Harrisonburg, Staunton and Winchester in the Shenandoah Valley; and Charlottesville, Lynchburg and Roanoke.

In addition to the services rendered other States by the Little Creek Information Station, the Virginia State Employment Service recruited and issued border-crossing permits to about 500 tobacco curers in behalf of Canadian growers last year. In the same field of specialized recruitment, this agency arranged with Negro colleges of the State to send approximately 350 students to Connecticut for employment in areas producing shade tobacco.

C. FACILITATING SERVICES:

Housing for the thousands of seasonal farm workers represent a real problem in this State. The Virginia State Employment Service conducted a housing survey at the same time that farm labor needs for 1949 were being determined. Results of the survey were used in planning for the 1949 season. The several Farm Bureaus, fruit growers' organizations, non-profit cooperatives, and individual farmers gave wholehearted cooperation in regard to housing, both in the survey itself and in solution of problems which it pointed up.

During 1948 the farmers of Virginia, advised and encouraged by Employment Service representatives, made a good start in solving the housing difficulty. Ten farm labor camps were purchased from the Federal Government by farmer groups and operated that year at Washington (Va.), Crozet, Winchester, and at Roanoke in the western part of the state; at Exmore, Mappsville, Melfa, and Cheriton on the Eastern Shore, and at Back Bay and London Bridge in Princess Anne County.

Most of the grower organizations which bought central farm labor camps took advantage of the slack work period during the fall and winter of 1948-49 to improve the camps. This consisted primarily of replacing worn out tent tops with permanent roofing on sidewall frames. Approximately $18,000 was spent on improvements in the four camps located on the Eastern Shore alone. Ten private farm labor camps, with capacity of from 50 to 100 workers, were built in Virginia during the past year, and many farm tenant houses were improved and converted into accommodations for farm labor. Probably the outstanding private labor camp built along the Atlantic Seaboard during 1949 was the one constructed by Chesley A. Haden, fruit grower and fruit broker, at Crozet, Virginia. The Haden camp cost approximately $20,000, and is a permanent building, constructed of cinder block walls, concrete floors and metal roof. The building measures 40 by 178 feet and contains 16 dormitory-type rooms, two shower rooms, a kitchen, dining hall and stock room. Porches face both the east and west sides of the building. The site is a picturesque one, located just north of U.S. Route 250 on the side of the Blue Ridge Mountain near Afton and the famous Skyline Drive. This building could easily be converted into a tourist camp during the months of the year when not in use for the housing of harvest help. Representatives of the Employment

VIRGINIA'S BEST -- THE HADEN CAMP!

Service assisted Mr. Haden in drawing the plans, while engineers associated with the Virginia State Extension Service and Virginia Polytechnic Institute drew the blueprints. A limited number of copies of these plans are being offered to interested growers.

Despite the progress made during the past two years, much remains to be done before fully satisfactory accommodations will be available at all camps. Growers of the State deserve congratulations upon camp improvements made in a year of declining produce prices, and are being encouraged to follow up their progress during the coming season.

The Virginia Council of Churches and the Southern Baptist Church rendered valuable services to the migratory workers. According to the report of a supervisor of migrant work, representing the Virginia Council of Churches, three ordained ministers were placed in this field. These men were the Rev. Booker T. Mattox, the Rev. Lacy D. Williams and the Rev. Edgar P. Quarterman. These clergymen served on the Eastern Shore, at Back Bay and at Crozet. For the most part they lived in the camp and shared the daily experience of the workers. "Preaching was but

one of the ministers' duties," the supervisor reported. He said the minister "found that the job was never done; he was sought after at all times for counsel in personal problems."

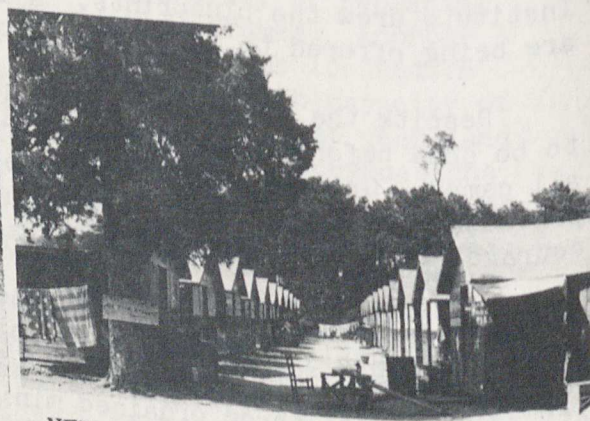
A chapel, 60 feet long by 20 feet wide, was built at Cheriton, to be paid for by contributions from the migrants, and other interested persons on the Eastern Shore. The ministry also included a strong recreational program. Volley ball and soft ball teams were organized. Two motion pictures were shown each week at Back Bay until that camp closed, after which the movies were transferred to the four camps on the Eastern Shore. A truck, equipped with books, recordings, movies and athletic equipment, spent three weeks making the rounds of the camps. Group singing was organized in each camp served. Enough toys, dolls and books were received from Sunday school classes and other church groups to make possible lending collections of both toys and books in each camp. Parties were held on Labor Day and during halloween in addition to a watermelon feast.

An outstanding accomplishment was the establishment of a child care center at the Cheriton Camp. Leaders of the community volunteered for work at this center, and children were taken once a week to a health clinic at the nearby Nassawadox Hospital. On several occasions the ministers were instrumental in getting sick migrants placed in local hospitals.

The Public Health Service gave valuable aid to the migrants by treating communicable diseases, primarily tuberculosis and venereal infections. Managers of radio stations throughout the State were most generous with facilities and programs. They publicized the work being done by the Employment Service in the Farm Labor Program, and the newspapers of the State gave valuable space to stories and pictures concerning migratory workers.

MIGRANT LABOR CAMP IMPROVEMENT

TENTS IN THE BEGINNING



NEW ROOFS AND SIDEWALLS ADDED

D. RECRUITMENT AND PLACEMENT PROBLEMS:

The more obvious problems connected with recruiting and placing thousands of workers from distant localities have been discussed, and their solutions indicated, in other sections of this report. Firm pre-season commitments between workers and growers; adequate housing; judicious direction of workers to demand areas; and awareness of the progress of each significant crop, are all necessary to a successful agricultural labor program. In the long run, the producer must feel that his crop is being properly and promptly handled, and the worker must hold the opinion that he is being well treated and fairly paid.

In a program planned as far in advance, and involving as many long-range understandings as this one, a principal hazard can be the unavoidable upsets in scheduling brought about by crop failures, partial failures, fluctuating seasons, and so forth. The task of laying out schedules that will provide steady work for thousands of migrants, and at the same time, get every grower's crops handled without delay can be immensely complicated.

The past year provided some examples of the uncertainties faced. Weather during the past season was erratic and crop yields in several areas were disappointing. Cool, rainy conditions at the outset delayed ripening of early crops far beyond the expected dates, and long, continuous heat during the summer cut yields seriously. The strawberry season was termed the worst in recent years, with picking expensively extended by unseasonal April and May weather. White potatoes did better, but there was some complaint of disease as the season ended, and tomatoes were damaged by alternate spells of dry and wet conditions. Some other vegetable crops were forced into an irregular pattern by the same conditions. All of this meant a succession of problems in keeping the workers busy and crops harvested as ready. Some of the migrants who could not be utilized in the Norfolk area strawberry crop were referred to general farm work, and other commuted to the North Carolina potato sections until the berries were ready.

At the height of the Eastern Shore vegetable season, in June and July, the situation was complicated by the unexpected arrival of many migrant crews who had no prior work commitments. During the first half of July the daily arrivals mounted to several hundred workers -- termed in local parlance, "free-wheelers" -- and a serious strain was immediately placed on housing facilities provided by grower groups. Wage-cutting grew out of the situation in some localities and for a time threatened the employment agreements of harvest workers already on the job. Unfortunately, a very small number of growers cancelled their contracts and employed the newcomers at lower rates.

To their credit, a majority resisted the temptation to call in agreements or to cut rates, and by the middle of July most of the free-lance crews had either pressed on further north or had returned southward. Later in the season fruit growers in the Shenandoah Valley refused to employ similar unexpected crews on the grounds they are a poor risk because they can not be depended upon to make themselves available for subsequent seasons.

Although the situation outlined cleared up without undue harm, it holds the possibility of unfortunate consequences for the future and requires careful attention. Loss of confidence in pre-season commitments by the more desirable migrant crews would make the task of supplying adequate labor for highly seasonal crops a very difficult one. From the farm employer's standpoint, the danger naturally is the possibility of a labor abundance at cheap rates one year and an expensive shortage the next.

PUERTO RICAN AND FOREIGN LABOR

A. Only four employers placed orders for foreign workers with the Employment Service during the 1949 season. These employers were all apple growers in the Shenandoah Valley, who had special requirements for the spot picking of fancy apples. Ninety-five Bahamians with special skills in this type of work were located by the Employment Service and brought to Virginia. These men were already in the country and had been working in Minnesota at the time of their transfer to Virginia. A Northampton County grower, who was developing a hot-frame method of propagating a special type of tomato, also desired to transfer to the State 12 Jamaicans who were doing a similar type of work in Massachusetts. In view of the special skills involved this request was approved.

B. No requests were recommended by this agency for the actual importation of Puerto Ricans or foreign labor.

C. No Puerto Ricans were used in the State. The peak number of foreign workers used, including the ninety-five Bahamians and twelve Jamaicans, was 107.

D. Experience with the foreign workers in Virginia was entirely satisfactory. Growers were pleased with the manner in which they worked. They were housed with domestic workers in the same camp without frictions or misunderstandings. The Bahamians were favored with meals featuring fish and rice, a diet to which they are accustomed. The Frederick County Fruit Growers Association, in whose camp the men were quartered, employed a manager who was familiar with their preferences. This action avoided possible difficulties over feeding.

E. The Employment Service will make an effort to replace the few foreign workers who were used this year with selected American workers. However, the foreign labor used in 1949 was so satisfactory that Virginia growers who employed them may renew requests this year. Indications to this effect have already been received.