

Migrant labor episodes recollected

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is a contribution from a reader. The purpose of articles such as this one is to give a written and pictorial record of what agriculture was like a generation or two ago.

By **MARSHALL JONES WEST CHESTER**

During the depression years of the 1930's with an unemployment rate of 25 per cent, there was an abundant supply of local labor at potato harvest time. During the war years of the early 1940's this labor pool went into the armed services and defense industries and farmers were forced to find an alternate labor source. It was at this time that farmers were asked to produce more food but were faced with serious shortages of labor and machinery. These problems were very serious at the time, but after 35 years, one can remember some numerous events of that era.

The potato growers in New Jersey would bring large numbers of Negro help from Florida in trucks and buses to pick their crop in August and September. The New Jersey growers would dig the potatoes and contract with the crew leader to furnish labor for picking, grading, and bagging the crop for 10 cents or more per 100 pounds.

They were usually finished by October when our late variety of potatoes were ready for harvest.

I knew a potato grower near Hightstown, N.J. I needed about eight pickers and since he had about 30, he

said he would select the best ones who did not have a drinking problem and I could get them early in October when he completed harvesting.

On the first Sunday in October 1943 I went to New Jersey to get them.

One of the men had an old Pontiac sedan which we had to tow to get started and gas was rationed then and they had no gas rationing stamps so I bought a tankful of tractor gas from the potato grower. Four of them loaded their meager belongings in the car and I got them started on their way with instructions for them to wait for me when they reached Trenton.

Today we hear much about the OSHA regulations in regard to migrant labor. It was quite different 35 years ago. In New Jersey they lived in a cattle shed and were quite satisfied.

When we arrived home late in the afternoon I put them in a four room tenant house with a hand water pump, an old cook stove and an old radio. For some it was their first experience with electric lights, and they said it was the best housing they ever had.

There was no furniture in the house but they said they didn't mind that. Three of them filled potato sacks with straw for beds. Three more went to work on a dead tree with a cross-cut saw and an axe and the other two quickly made a table and bench from the lumber while the cook was unloading the cars. Within an hour after

arriving, the cook had a meal started on the stove.

They proved to be very good workers, and although they could not read or write, they sure knew how to count their money.

When the harvest was completed in November and the weather was getting colder they did some repair work on the Pontiac and some of them started for Florida but I doubt if the old car made it that far.

Others joined the Negro community in West Chester and went to work in the defense industries there.

The next year the U.S. was scraping the bottom of the labor barrel and large numbers of Jamaicans were imported to help with the harvest. Those for Delaware and Chester Counties were housed in the old Delaware County Prison in Media. I hauled about a dozen the 14 miles to work each day in a stake body truck with a canvas top and bales of straw for seats.

The first day there was a real trouble maker in the group and after we eliminated him they worked fairly well but not as good as the Florida group the year before.

One October morning the temperature was just above

the freezing mark with a very heavy frost. They thought it was snow which they had never seen before. They said it was too cold to work but as some potatoes were already dug I persuaded them to pick and load them on the wagon which they did with much grumbling and complaining about the weather. I took the

wagon load to the barn and when I returned to the field no one was in sight, I looked into the truck and all I saw were the straw bales which were moving. I pulled them aside and such a sight I have never seen before or since. All the Jamaicans were on the floor all wrapped around each other like a bunch of snakes trying to keep warm.

Needless to say they refused to work anymore that day and I took them back to the warm jail. I was really glad when the potato harvest was finished that year.

In 1954 there were several hundred German prisoners of war in a camp near the airport in Philadelphia.

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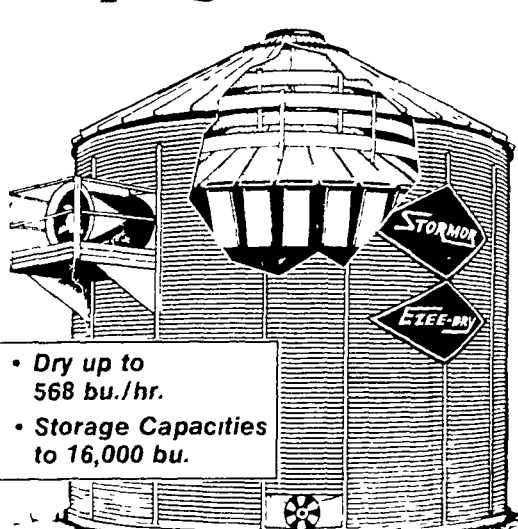
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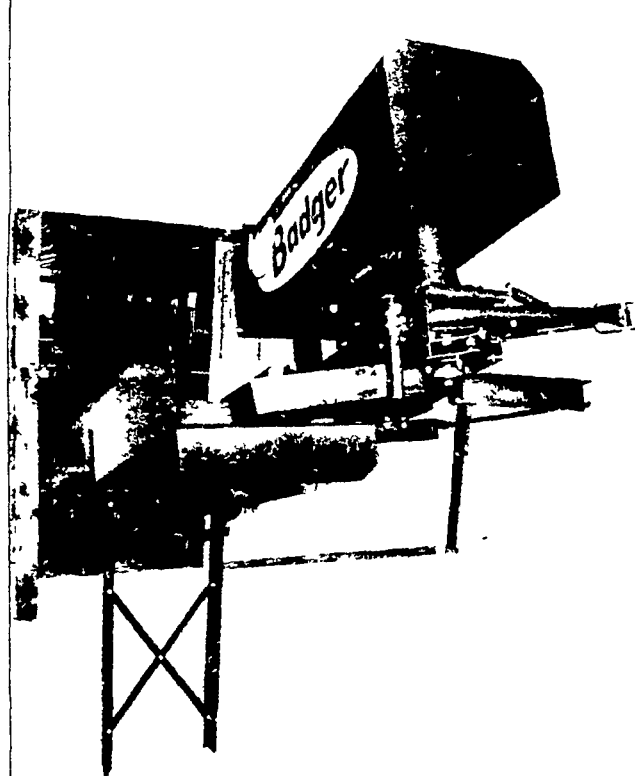
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