

Migrant labor - one worker's story

BY MONTIE TAK
Staff Correspondent

If you want to know about a farm worker's life, ask Joseph Allen. If it grows, he's probably picked it. Over 20 years ago Allen emigrated from the island of Grenada to Florida. "I go to plenty other states since then," he says. During his travels, Allen picked corn in Wisconsin, apples and cherries in Michigan, tobacco in

Connecticut, oranges, sweet peppers, tomatoes and strawberries in Florida, and apples, peaches and tomatoes in Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina. He spent eight years as a crew leader, supervising and directing the workers' labor for growers. A Chambersburg resident, Allen is chairman of the local advisory board for Pennsylvania Farm Workers Opportunities. Over the

years he has seen a lot of changes in the ways farm workers are treated. "Back then we didn't have these organizations for legal help. We didn't know anything about how migrants could get help, like if you had an injury in the field, picking. Now we know the growers are responsible for workmen's compensation. "We have the facilities to know what we have a right to know."

Workers are entitled to know the type of work involved and the per hour wage as well as the amount of work available. Much of Allen's volunteer work is to educate farm workers to their rights. One of the most essential things Allen sees about grower-worker relationships is "to get one-to-one with the growers. You can share with one another and air your complaints. Twenty years ago they just knew you as a worker and not to be heard. "Now you are heard and not just to complain." A source of potential misunderstanding is the relationship with the crew leader. Because of the size of some farms, workers may never actually meet the grower. The crew leader acts as intermediary.

"The crew leader has tremendous power," points out Allen. "The way he operates is like partnership with the grower." Crew leaders, he adds, should not take advantage of the people or be overgenerous. If there are labor difficulties, the workers may not know what the grower and crew leader discuss behind closed doors. Difficulties can also result from federal or state camp inspectors who might accept a payoff to close their eyes to certain conditions. Allen also sees a conflict between federal and state standards relating to living conditions in the camps. "Asking for two different requirements, state and federal, can make conflicts," he says. "There should be just one set of standards."

Alternatives to migrant labor?

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According to Lawrence McMillan, there is a viable alternative to traditional migrant labor living in camps on the growers' property. McMillan, a member of Farm Workers Opportunities, advocates busing workers to farms each day and returning them to their own homes in the evening. He feels this plan would eliminate the potential for abuse of farm workers' rights in migrant camps. He says there are 75 qualified workers "or more" right near where he lives in Allentown. All of the workers need transportation to farms and McMillan wants to get these workers and the state's growers together. Most of the workers he represents the Florida pickers who remained in the north after previous picking seasons instead of returning south. "These are good people," says McMillan. "They know how to pick. They know how to climb

trees. Now they are on the food stamp program just waiting for an opportunity to work. "A lot of people would love to do this work," he continues. "Our office is overflowing with people now. We are trying to place as many as we can." Additional advantages he sees are that workers could work year-round for the farmers, doing pruning and maintenance in the off-season. He says the people he represents have ability and could offer their loyalty to the growers. And a long-range advantage to everyone's benefit would be the alleviation of state programs as capable people went back to work and in their turn became taxpayers. "It is to the workers' advantage not to live on the farm. It is to the farmers' advantage to eliminate the middleman and to eliminate providing lodging for the workers," McMillan points out. "There are more advantages to the grower than disadvantages."

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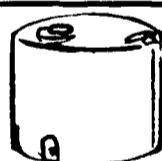
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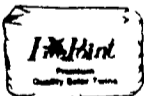
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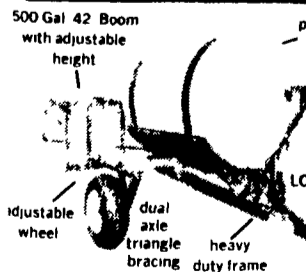
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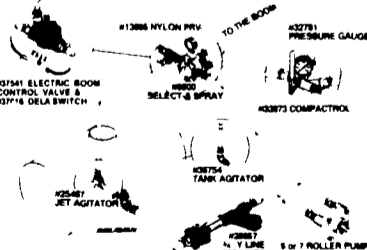
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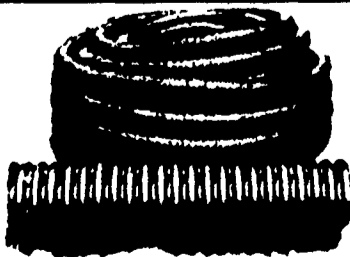
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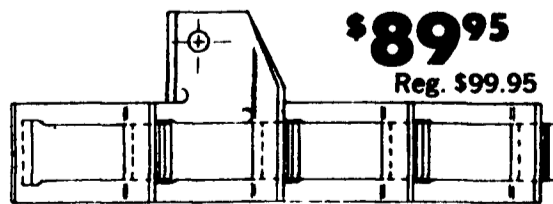
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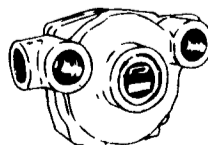
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