

GIVING DIGNITY TO THE PICKER¹

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To be on this symposium, I should supposedly be some sort of expert on labor problems. However, as you know, I am filling in on 3 hours notice for a speaker who could not get here. That does not make me a labor expert, but I feel it is worth mentioning that I can speak from experience. In the depths of the depression, I left home at the age of 16 and since then I have been self-supporting, my first job being that of an agricultural laborer on a Canadian farm for \$10 a month and my board. When I got a scholarship to college and worked as a student laborer, I not only got a job, at 5 A.M. seven days a week cleaning out pig pens; I also got a title. I was officially listed as "Assistant Swineherd" at 20¢ an hour. At that pay, I was fortunate not to copy the biblical Prodigal Son who "... ate the husks that the swine did eat!" So, although I am no expert on labor problems, I have 40 years of experience of observing and sympathizing with the problems of laborers and employers alike. Moreover, I am glad of the opportunity to tell of a success story achieved by some of our California counterparts and from which we can learn much.

For the last 21 years, I have been working in research on harvesting and handling fresh citrus fruits in Florida, thus my recent contacts are almost entirely in citrus and some of them in research work that has involved working alongside picking crews, riding in crew trucks, etc. while helping to develop improved harvesting methods.

"Duty" is a rather square and old-fashioned word to introduce into any discussion these days, but throughout this period as a University of Florida research worker, I have taken it as my duty to help *all* aspects of the citrus industry and that includes not only growers and packers, but pickers and other workers, and the numerous ancillary businesses that supply services or materials to the industry. We (research workers included) are all part of an interdependent whole, something that is often forgotten in these discussions.

Coming back to the labor situation, let me first stress that I have seen many improvements in labor relations over the last 21 years. Most of these

have been due to law; but a significant proportion have been due to a minority of foresighted employers. This includes private companies, cooperatives, and giant corporations. I have worked with many of these and cannot mention them all, so let me just mention a few examples. One sentence to me over the phone exemplifies the attitude of the Alcoma Packing Company. When I heard they had had a fire, I called John Updike and asked, "John, I heard of your troubles. How bad is it?" The first thing he said was: "Well, I have found work for all my people." The late Sam Banks reacted in just the same way when the Lakeland Packing Company burned down. I understand that Haines City Citrus Growers Association is offering vacation with pay to any of their laborers who will stay with them for a whole year around. The Florida Fresh Citrus Shippers Association has introduced a system of health insurance for their members' employees, seeking to include everybody from picker to manager. Many of you will be familiar with the efforts of Coca-Cola, Foods Division to set up year-around employment, permanent housing, etc. for its agricultural laborers.

Mention of this latter example brings up a major problem in improving labor relations in agriculture. This is the extremely biased positions on either side that only too often make the headlines, while progress made by men of goodwill is ignored or unknown. I was corresponding with a senior executive of what was then Minute Maid Corporation on their very progressive program for improving the lot of their laborers at the time when the N.B.C. film on migrant labor most unfairly depicted one unfortunately harsh-spoken Minute Maid foreman as typical of labor relations within that vast company. Equally unfortunate have been the employers who demand that we research workers "do away with the picker" and those employer organizations that have successfully campaigned against inclusion of agricultural labor under the National Labor Relations Act, thereby depriving us of needed legally supervised negotiation between agricultural laborers and their employers. Although it is always easier to take sides, our current problems can only be solved by cooperation, not by antagonism.

As a first step in successful cooperation and labor relations, I suggest acceptance of four basic truths.

1. All horticulture is dependent on two hands.

¹Extemporaneous remarks filling in for an absent speaker.

The hand that picks the fruit in the field or grove, and the hand that picks it up in the supermarket. If either of these fail, then all else between them fails.

2. We will never have "automation". We can strive for "mechanization" which means using machines to expand the usefulness of a comparatively small number of people to the point where their productivity is so increased that they can make a good living while giving a fair return to their employers. A successful industry cannot be built upon a broad basis of poverty.

3. We will never "do away with the picker". We may successfully make him into a machine operator, but to do so, we are going to need an intensive training and educational program to either attract intelligent reliable workers or upgrade those that we have.

4. While our problems in the field increase, the demand for better quality on the markets gets stricter and stricter, if only because of the amount of consumer packaging in modern supermarkets. One ruined fruit or vegetable means a ruined package.

My own efforts toward improving labor conditions in the grove have been minor and generally ineffective. (But we are still trying, as those who attended our Packinghouse Day program last month will remember.) The big exception was the project on bulk handling of fresh citrus that I inherited in 1952, just at the point when most of the major technical problems had been solved by my predecessors. We worked largely with 2 co-operators, Haines City Citrus Growers Association and Chase Groves, Inc. We were able to devise methods of harvesting citrus fruit in bulk that not only resulted in reduced costs, but also reduced damage to the fruit and provided considerably higher daily earnings to the picker. It would be nice if the story ended there, but unfortunately it does not.

The pickers with whom we were working 20 years ago included many who were able and ambitious and the pace was set by the "offshore labor" with whom most of the new experimental techniques were tried first. The domestic labor wanted to make as much money as the offshore crews and fell in line. However, the methods depended on very good crew discipline and pooling of their earnings by groups of 2 to 6 pickers. Since then, most of the old foremen and pickers have gone, younger ambitious workers have found year round employment elsewhere and those left have been so undisciplined and so lacking in any sense of co-

operation that these methods have *virtually collapsed*.² This is something that must be born in mind. The people with whom we are working are seldom ideal. I have encountered problems in packinghouses where the attention span of some of the workers is so brief that they could not consistently put 8 bags tagged with one color in a box consecutively. They would constantly mix the bags up; usually I think due to a lack of attention span more than anything else. Somehow, we must attract workers with able minds, not just strong backs.

Success Has Been Achieved

All this would make it seem almost hopeless to try to upgrade our agricultural labor if it were not for one shining example.³ About 8 years ago, the lemon growers of Ventura County in California were faced with a critical situation when the "bracero" labor was reduced or cut off. Picking so degenerated that they were suffering from increasing damage to lemons that often have to be stored many months or shipped great distances overseas.

Instead of bewailing their fate, they did something about it. Working with them for many years was Dr. Roy J. Smith of the University of California, Riverside, a man with a passionate interest in better work methods who acted as a very useful gad-fly, but who could have done nothing without the cooperation of the industry.

To make a long story short, the lemon growers got together to set up a system based on treating the picker as a person and making him know that he was treated as a person and valued as a person, thus building his self esteem, the first step toward being a reliable employee. In describing this program, I usually like to mention one apparently foolish fact. They have computers programmed so that any time a picker registers for work, his birthday is recorded, from there on he will get birthday and Christmas cards. I have often heard this laughed at as the ultimate in ridiculous "dogooderism". It was, however, introduced by hard-headed businessmen for the good of their industry. I think it has been just as important as the fringe

²Readers interested in a detailed and sympathetic account of the people who pick the citrus crop should read Henry Swanson's "The Citrus Bagman" available from the Orange County Agent's Office, 2350 E. Michigan Ave., Orlando, Fla. 32806.

³For a more detailed account see: "Lemon Picking: An Industrial Attitude," California Citrograph 57 (10):359-360, 372-373, August, 1972.

benefits, cover-alls, hard hats, meals, etc. supplied to these people. It was the first step in giving them dignity. Incidentally, it is very hard for people like ourselves to conceive that, at the level at which most of these laborers work, a "hard hat" is a symbol of an aristocrat amongst laborers. To be given hard hats to protect their heads against the sharp thorns of a lemon tree was immensely important. What has been the result of these measures?

1. They have vastly reduced the damage to the fruit, with consequent maintenance of keeping quality and market demand.

2. They have increased the weekly productivity per worker very substantially. This has been due, not so much to increasing the amount of lemons

picked per hour, but to increasing the number of hours the pickers work per week.

Many years ago, my boss, Dr. Herman Reitz, remarked that the problem was "How to motivate these people so they will be greedy, avaricious folk like ourselves, ready to work for 40 hours a week for monetary return." The Ventura County lemon growers look like being well on the road to doing that. It has been achieved first by a mental adjustment on the part of the employer enabling him to give a consequent new sense of dignity to the picker.

As I said when I started, I am no expert on labor relations, but I know that we need to have dignity on both sides of any successful negotiations.

HARVESTING LABOR IN FLORIDA HORTICULTURE WITH EMPHASIS ON THE CITRUS INDUSTRY

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Abstract. As the production of horticultural crops increases in Florida, the demand for harvesting labor also increases. The supply of harvesting labor is not expected to keep pace with this increasing demand. Problems associated with harvesting labor are expected to continue to plague Florida's horticultural industries in the near future. Technological innovations such as mechanical harvesting systems may significantly affect the demand for labor. Supply-demand relationships for labor as well as demographic and other types of information pertaining to the harvesting labor force are valuable inputs for the assessment of the effects of technological changes on the labor force.

The one problem presently shared by practically all horticultural industries in Florida is labor. The majority of vegetable, fruit, and ornamental crops produced in Florida tend to be labor-intensive in nature, particularly with respect to the harvesting operation.

Several factors contribute to the problems as-

sociated with harvesting labor. The seasonal nature of the demand for harvesting labor creates problems in labor recruitment. Since an adequate supply of labor is not always available in a particular area when needed, labor must be recruited, on both an intra-state and inter-state basis. The problems associated with recruitment programs have been increasing in recent years.

Although large amounts of relatively unskilled seasonal workers are needed, the supply of such labor to many horticultural industries in Florida has not been keeping pace with demand. One of the reasons may be the relatively low gross unemployment rate in Florida of 2.8 percent compared to the national average of approximately 5.0 percent. The insured unemployment rate in Florida is presently 1.4 percent (7).

These low levels of unemployment accentuate the competition for relatively unskilled labor in Florida. This competition for harvesting labor can be identified at three levels: (1) competition among firms within an agricultural industry; (2) competition among various agricultural industries; and (3) competition between agricultural and non-agricultural industries. As the demand for harvesting labor increases and/or the supply decreases, both intra-industry and inter-industry competition will increase. The demand for labor by non-agricultural industries has increased greatly