

USED AND ABUSED

Life for black laborers improved after a heartbreaking CBS report on the Glades, but . . .

Load of 'Shame' has shifted

By CHRISTINE EVANS
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BELLE GLADE — Long before the face of the harvest was brown, it was black. In the old days, the migrant stream that flowed from Florida up through the Carolinas to Virginia and back again depended upon the stoop labor of America's poorest blacks, and some whites, too.

Theirs was a strikingly hard existence, filled with long days of uncomfortable travel, heavy labor and feather-light pay. The movable workers who picked the feast rode in truck beds, jammed together like cattle — maybe worse than cattle — and often entire families went without food and babies without milk. Children went without shelter, all so the migrants could move from place to place to pick the vegetables that landed on everybody else's dinner tables.

This was the migration.
Its genesis was Belle Glade, Fla.

Life here in the last half a century has changed greatly, at least for farm workers who carry citizenship papers. But to understand how things are now, you need to understand how things were then.

And for that, you need to meet a sweet-faced boy of 9 named Jerome King, who — quite without willing it — helped to educate a nation.

"I'm just a kid, and these white folks come to the house, start interviewing me," a grown-up King says today.

The camera crews "just caught everybody off guard."

He is 52, the father of two teenage sons. He lives in nearby South Bay, in a pleasant house where the walls and tables are lined with plaques marking his boys' academic achievements.

"Not to brag," he says. "But they're both terrific students."

Flash back. It is 1960, the day after Thanksgiving, and CBS airs what is destined to become a classic: *Harvest of Shame*, a documentary on the tumultuous lives of migrant workers.

Telling the story for the cameras is esteemed journalist Edward R. Murrow, who is perpetually seen smoking a cigarette as he narrates and interviews.

CBS producer David Lowe found Jerome in his tin shack at the local housing authority's Okeechobee camp.

If pictures do not lie, it was not a pretty place.

Jerome's mom, Allean King, 29, was picking beans the morning CBS came — and she was picking beans the next.

Out in the fields, she turned a dignified face to the camera and stated her wages for the day.

"One dollar." It cost \$2 to feed her family, and 85 cents to put the children in day care, and that explained why Jerome was home

taking care of his three baby sisters on the day the camera crews arrived unannounced.

He was supposed to give his sisters lunch, but what?

The camera panned to a deep pot, and at the bottom were some black-eyed peas. Maybe that.

Jerome had a little hole in his foot that day, from a nail he stepped on at the washhouse.

His mattress had a hole in it, too, and when the TV people pressed him, he allowed as how the rats had put it there.

That one comment gave the small boy no end of grief.

Today he will not stand by it. "I don't think it was the rats that made a hole like that," the grown Jerome King says. "Maybe they did, but I really don't think so."

"There were a lot of people living in that house, and I think it got torn up." But that was then.

If you want to know one of the most obvious ways Belle Glade has changed, visit the Okeechobee Center today. House after neat little house, with nice green yards.

The homes are strictly for farm workers. You can ask them out of earshot of any landlords, and they will tell you it is a fine place to live, all things considered.

"I don't know how they did it," King says. "But they totally changed that place over."

Much like Belle Glade — or parts of it, for the inner-city slum is still an example of some of the worst housing and living conditions in America — Jerome King raised himself up.

His line of work? Migrant farming.

He travels around with his cookware, signs on in the cornfields with regular bosses, makes sure to get himself back to Florida for the start of school.



Image from 'Harvest of Shame,' 1960

His own man: Jerome King, 52, of South Bay, appeared as a young boy (above) in CBS' famous documentary *Harvest of Shame*. The father of two teenage boys still makes his living as a migrant farm worker, but on his own terms. "Once you get used to it, it's like a walk in the park," he says.

"I've been at it 40 years," he says. "Once you get used to it, it's like a walk in the park."

That might be an optimistic view, but those who know the history of this place note the improvement, which is not to say there isn't room for more. Things have changed "quite a bit," says Hog Jones, 76, from his perch on his breezy front porch. "Of course, some changes develop too slow, in my opinion. It was Jim Crow around here for years."

"We've seen progress — but not enough," agrees Lois Monroe of the Farmworker Coordinating Council, which helps workers here stay afloat in hard times.

One of the big employers here, A. Duda & Sons, a farming conglomerate based in Oviedo, has set an industry standard by providing workers with a wide array of benefits, including housing and a day care center, run by a nonprofit group, on company land. The subject of unfavorable press attention in the 1970s, Duda now has the reputation of being a superior place to work. Unlike many growers, the company says it limits its use of labor contractors.

"We deal directly with our workers," says Drew Duda, a fourth-generation family member and a company vice president. The arrangement, he says, is one where "everybody benefits," since workers come away with an improved situation and Duda is assured a more stable work force.

A big company like Duda can offer workers benefits some smaller companies wouldn't dream of. For many farm workers, the problems of yesteryear exist today. Day after day, migrant workers troop into Monroe's office to tell her of their

difficulties. She can relate. Her parents picked in the fields, back when CBS came to town.

"My mom and her sister made sure they were never in those pictures. Camera crews came, they ran and hid."

It was the *Harvest of Shame* after all. Nowadays, Monroe says, it is the foreign-born workers — Mexicans and Haitians — who draw the shortest straw.

"Some don't know who they're working for, or what they're making. Some can't read. I try to teach them how to read their paychecks, but it's hard. A lady came in yesterday, and she had all her checks for 2002."

"She made \$2,124.40 for the year. "I said, 'How do you live on that?' She said she does the best she can."

Some people would say 9-year-old Jerome King performed a public service by educating America about the plight of migrant workers.

King would not say that himself. "I don't know what America thinks," he says. "I just know what Jerome thinks."

What he thinks is this: Today, the migrant worker's life can be a decent one, if conditions are right.

It is a hard life for the parents of school-age children.

It is a hard life for anybody who wants to stay in one place.

It is a hard life for anybody who cannot handle grueling physical labor.

Jerome King is raising his two boys up to do something different.

The stoop labor? The endless travel in the backs of rickety vans? The hunger and uncertainty? There is a new, brown set of hands to put up with that.



Staff photos by GARY CORONADO

Rugged reveille: Migrant farm workers meet at a loading dock in Belle Glade beginning at 4:30 a.m. Buses will take laborers to the fields. On farms today, it is the foreign-born

worker — Mexican and Haitian — who labors under the worst circumstances, says a staffer for a farm workers' aid organization.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

For nine months, *The Palm Beach Post* explored the roots of modern-day slavery. Reporters and photographers traveled to destitute Mexican villages, crossed the desert with a smuggler, rode across the U.S. with illegal immigrants, found new claims of slavery, uncovered rampant Social Security fraud and discovered that Florida's famous orange juice comes with hidden costs.

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TODAY

USED AND ABUSED: How migrants live in Florida

Locked up, cheated out of pay, robbed of their names, stacked 10 to a room.

MONDAY

HOW THEY COME: Desperate Journey

Driven by poverty, a crossing that can kill, a broken dream.

TUESDAY

THE REAL COST: Fresh from Florida

A favored industry, a society burdened, a deadly cycle.

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