

FARMWORKER HOUSING; A GROWER'S NIGHTMARE

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It all started with a labor camp known as the "Bullpen. " I was out on a recruiting trip with Rural Opportunities Inc.(ROI) on a dark, September weeknight. We had previously visited another Puerto Rican camp and had finished our recruiting and data gathering. Our minivan sped onto windy Potato Road where it

came to a halting stop in front of "The Bullpen. " I was afraid and apprehensive about getting out of the car due to the terrifying story told to our class of the danger associated with this specific labor camp. It is said that a murder occurs every year in this notorious labor camp, and the farm workers are dangerous and unruly. The outside of the Bullpen epitomizes the fear that was seen on my face and the face of our professor. It is a large, octagonal building, with tiny, barred windows covering the outer walls. It looks more like a bomb shelter, than the home of human, hard working farm workers.

Agriculture is Pennsylvania's leading industry. South

central Pennsylvania, comprising of Adams, Franklin, York,

Lancaster, and Cumberland Counties is ranked fifth nationally in

their production of fruit(PAFO 3). Despite recent efforts in

technology and advancement, all of the state's main crops still

require agricultural laborers to plant and harvest these crops. The majority of farm workers are migrants who have left their place of residence temporarily to do farm work for a short period of time. Pennsylvania is now becoming a place for seasonal

workers who perform agricultural work part of the year but have

accepted Pennsylvania as their primary place of residence. The majority of the workers in Adams County specifically are "Spanish speaking persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Jamaican origins; southern Blacks, and Creole-speaking Haitian refugees." This data explains the fact that farm workers are very dependent on their employers for housing and security. These migrant farm workers need housing and South-central Pennsylvania, which includes Adams County, has one of the largest percentages for housing so many

people together in so many temporary camps (PAFO 2). The growers are essential to the complexities of housing yet, there are numerous variations in a grower's economic and social backgrounds which can alter the viewpoint regarding farm worker housing.

The role of a grower is very important in understanding farmworker housing and the agricultural business. A grower faces many difficulties in it's housing facilities due to many

strict federal regulations and state rules. The fruit growing business is very stressful and straining a farmer and their family. The

problematic existence of labor camps for a grower has been a continuous dilemma.

I enter the Bullpen complex with shaking knees, following the lead of those employed by Rural Opportunities. The interior is just as I had imagined-dark, cold and dingy. We are ushered into a cement block room which contained benches made of plywood. There are shelves along the walls with trash bags filled with sheets and labeled; "Migrant Labor." The grower is there to greet us, although he appears rugged and insensitive. I am terrified of the entire setting, including the farmer and his wife. Then migrant workers are proceeded in like cattle and ordered to sit on the benches before us. An employee of ROI leads the group in a lecture on pesticides, while the workers repeatedly turn and stare at our curious faces in the back row.

Farm worker housing has been a problem for the past fifty

years. The conditions of labor camps have improved over time, this is due to the federal and state rules and regulations which are enforced annually by inspectors from the Department of

Environmental Resources. Before the 1950's, there were no rules

and regulations for farm worker housing. The conditions were

horrendous and inhumane. The workers lived in chicken coops, old

stores and old barns. These typical places had no sewage

facilities, heat or windows.

The need for housing regulations came about due to the health risks which were a result of previous poor housing in non-humane conditions. There was an influx of investigations and debates in the late 1960's and early 1970's which allowed the issue of migrant housing to become a national dilemma. In 1969, members of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs researched labor camps in Florida. The Senators found people "were living in houses fit for chickens and pigs-but not

people." (Macriado 1,P.6) These Senatorial visits initiated

Committee sessions regarding migrant farm-worker housing. As

Senator Javits, a Republican from New York, stated that "we might shake the national conscience that something will be done, even

he migrant farm worker." (Macriado 1, P.6) These Senate

committee sessions brought the issue of labor camp conditions to the attention of the national public. In January of 1970, for the first time, the farm workers had a growing union, The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, and a strong leader, Cesar Chavez which allowed the farm workers to finally have their own control. They had labor contracts which provided decent working and housing conditions. In Adams County during the same time period, Parker Coble, a former head of migrant education at Lincoln Intermediate Unit in Gettysburg, was trying to change the attitudes of local growers. He stated in his oral history that the camps that we have built from the time we started the war on poverty are much improved over the camps that existed before, I mean, I remember when I started, some people were literally in chicken houses. (Coble p. 13) He organized meetings on housing which brought growers and farm workers together in a partnership which demonstrated to the growers that the workers are going to go where the conditions are good. These are examples of how the issue of migrant labor camps came to the public eye and how changes became more apparent and rules and regulations began emerging for the growers and owners of these labor camps.

In the 1970's rules became more apparent and various styles of farm worker housing came about. In 1973, Pennsylvania passed the seasonal Farm Labor act which was a building code for agricultural labor and housing. This Act determined the maximum number of people allowed to use certain facilities in labor camps such as one toilet or shower.

The bathrooms are open toilets without stalls or barriers between. The floor is covered with used toilet paper, not exactly a humane environment. The structure of the Bullpen is very much as the name implies, a large center room with bedrooms or stalls lining the sides of the octagonal building.

This building code brought on typified styles of labor

camps. The motel style or "horse stall" was the first. It

consisted of several rooms that were 200 square feet of concrete

block on slate. The rooms normally housed up to four people and

were lined along side each other with a common bathroom on the

end. The notorious Bullpen became popular with one main room

filled with bunkbeds, one kitchen and scattered bedrooms along the walls. This style was popular with the growers because the

Bullpen requires a crew leader to enforce in-camp rules due to the lack of privacy in this type of housing. The Bullpen was the

first housing in Adams County, PA to be built specifically for

migrant housing. The third most popular style of housing is Dorm

style which consists of a shared hallway with a double-loaded corridor of bedrooms.

The growers are strong and steadfast in their lack of respect for government control and they are determined to convince us of their humanistic efforts toward their labor camp. The lecture ends and the farmer begins lecturing the ROI

employees and ourselves about the lack of sensitivity that the government has for him and his workers. He mentions that he cares for his workers, that he recently replaced their kitchen unit for \$20,000 and has tried numerous times to place a vending machine in their camp but due to federal regulations has been unable to

follow up on this idea. The conversation ends; but my sorrow and sympathy for these workers only begins.

There are numerous federal regulations and state regulations

for migrant labor camps. The governing agency which oversees the

migrant and agricultural housing can vary from state to state, for example in Pennsylvania the agency is the Department of

Environmental Resources of the Commonwealth while in New York, the Health Commission is in charge. There are specific requirements for Pennsylvania which are separated into distinct categories such as structures, walls, floors etc. The category for structures in PA requires that the structure be exclusively for human habitation with fully partitioned room, separated by sex. There must be a water fountain per one hundred people, the toilet facilities must be separate for each sex and marked in English and native language. The beds must have mattresses, and be twelve inches above the floor and thirty-six inches apart. In the communal kitchen there must be two burners per ten persons or per two families. In the bathroom, there must be one showerhead per ten persons and no common towels. In the laundry room there must be one machine or two tubs per thirty persons with facilities to dry clothing. These are just a sampling of the building codes for Pennsylvania, the actual list of requirements includes specifics in lighting, fire safety, electricity and measurements; although these are too lengthy to be listed.

Regarding federal and state regulations, Neil Lot, an Adams

Count Grower, believes that: "a lot of them are needed. The reasons there are so many regulations was the poor housing that existed in a lot of places. I think regulations have gotten out of control, there's too many, there's too many inspectors which have too many different interpretations, too many laws. I don't think anybody can be in total compliance with everything, there's so much of it. (Lott,N)

The role of a grower is essential to understanding the problems associated with labor camps. "Growers are under pressure to produce large quantities of high quality fruits and vegetables

for consumers." (farm workers 32) Owning and operating a farm is a very stressful occupation that requires more than just cultivating land to grow crops. According to Neil Lott, an Adams County "grower "The work is one thing but the stress and management thing is another, trying to keep you head above water, its hard, real hard." Labor is an integral part to agribusiness. Growers can recruit their labor forces through the H-2A program or through a crew leader. A crew leader locates a specific number of workers for a specific grower and guarantees their employment. This makes the farmer and the crew leader responsible for the farm workers. According to the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act of 1983, "they are responsible for paying wages to workers, complying with working arrangements made with farm workers, and ensuring that vehicles used to transport workers meet safety standards and insurance requirements." (farmworkers 33)

The housing regulations are lengthy for a grower and can be difficult to maintain and keep in accordance with the rules.

According to the Pennsylvania Seasonal Farm Labor Act, if a grower housed four or more unrelated workers, he is required to have his housing inspected by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources. According to PAFO's "A Housing Needs Assessment of Migrant and Seasonal Farm workers In Pennsylvania", growers house 7,720 or 61 percent of the state's migrants; but only house 1,150, or 12 percent of the state's seasonal workers. Among the farm workers housed by growers in Pennsylvania, the majority are single men. There are several families in labor camps in Adams County although the majority aren't housed in labor camps due to the large amount of space a family can take up. Although these restrictions exist for farmers, many of these regulations and rules are rarely enforced. The Bullpen fits into the larger picture of migrant housing by demonstrating the needs of farm workers while focusing on the hardships of the farmer.

I wanted to see this new kitchen myself, to me, it was merely a standard two stove kitchen with a large amount of counter space, hardly a \$20,000 reconstruction job. On our way out the screen door, I noticed a sign stating that their pay was only fifty-two cents for every bushel and only thirty-seven cents for every bushel of dropped apples. This first visit to a labor camp made a lasting impression of the treatment of migrant workers. I believed the story of violence in the Bullpen; how are humans expected to live peacefully in a horrible, unkept environment? Why do growers provide this type of housing?

I interviewed the owner and wife of the notorious Bullpen

labor camp, two months after my first visit to their farm. My initial impression of this farmer changed dramatically from our first encounter. I met him and his wife at their home and truly saw their side of the Bullpen. This farmer has a degree in Agriculture from Penn State and went into the fruit-growing business straight from college. He is one of the only grower in

Adams County to start anew with his own money without inheriting any farmland. He has four children and when questioned regarding

whether his children will take over the farm, he simply stated "in a way, I hope not 0 And that is strange to say but I hate

to burden them with what we are burdened with right now I don't

think it's fair to ask someone to do that I but if they what to do it on their own, then I guess that's up to them." (Lott,N) This specific grower is facing poverty himself) and the bank has taken over his farm. He can never retire and has never had any type of job outside of farm labor. And believed that all growers were receiving all the profits and withholding their benefits from their labor force, but now I have seen the other side of the

Agribusiness. Although this does not hold for all growers because there are plenty of farmers who are successful, with plentiful harvests who remain discriminative toward their labor force in housing.

There are so many different types of growers in Adams County. Some of these growers are reaping financially from their fruit growing businesses while others are struggling to make ends meet. Labor camps are becoming a nuisance that local farmers are

beginning to eradicate. Farmers no longer want to deal with extra

hassles of maintaining a labor camp that is in full compliance

with all rules and regulations. The Federal regulations which began in the 1970's were necessary. The conditions of farm worker housing were horrendous, although conditions have improved due to federal and state regulation. I believe that although they meet federal regulations, there isn't any hard working American that would consciously choose to live in or own any of these facilities.

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