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Migrant Laborers and Their Stories

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Migrant Laborers and Their Stories

Abstract

In November of 1960, Edward R. Murrow presented a documentary. It was Thanksgiving and the fame investigative reporter was thinking about food. "Harvest of Shame," focused on how Americans got food and the men of women who brought in the bountiful crops of America. Murrow's vision was less than glowing. The CBS news team interviewed the migrant laborers who traveled with the sun and the seasons, starting in Florida and working their ways up the east coast. [excerpt]

Keywords

migrant laborers, Edward R. Murrow, fruit production, fruit, Harvest of Shame, Adams County

Disciplines

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Comments

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Migrant laborers and their stories

In November of 1960, Edward R. Murrow presented a documentary. It was Thanksgiving and the famed investigative reporter was thinking about food. "Harvest of Shame," focused on how Americans got food and the men and women who brought in the bountiful crops of America. Murrow's vision was less than glowing. The CBS news team interviewed the migrant laborers who traveled with the sun and the seasons, starting in Florida and working their way up the east coast.

Adams County's apples, cherries and peaches demanded massive numbers of hands to help collect them. And an influx of migrants poured into the county every summer and fall. Dotting north Adams, dozens and dozens of camps provided temporary shelter and aid to the working poor.

Murrow's depiction of this downtrodden group of laborers was bleak. They toted everything they owned with them, modern nomads in a hostile world. Their children never were in one place long enough to get an education, never somewhere long enough to rise out of poverty to prosperity.

Adams County was trying to do something about the issues facing these latter-day Tom Joads. The year after Murrow's film showed America who picked its food, the Adams County Council of Community Services was working hard to try to make

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a dent in the bleak lives of migrant laborers. They set up a center for migrant children in Biglerville which offered children learning and play opportunity.

Rev. Joseph W. Haggler of Carlisle, who worked as an outreach minister, was working miracles with what little he had. "Now he has on 16 mm projector," the *Times* reported that August, "four baseball bats and a few balls and gloves for a recreation program that involves hundreds in the 42 large and 30 small migrants' camps in the county." But the need was immense. Haggler, "told of the need for clothing for young children and for blankets." Anything Adams County could offer would be gladly used.

Local churches were trying their hardest to fill the gaps for the parents who had to work long hours in the orchards of the county. Two daycare centers, sponsored by the state's Department of Welfare,

offered nursery school and other education for children of all ages. There was a nominal fee, but the service helped keep children learning rather than picking fruit. As soon as the second location (at Trinity United Church of Christ in Biglerville) opened, nearly 20 children were almost immediately enrolled.

Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" shone a light on a largely invisible problem in America when it aired in 1960. And in our files at the Adams County Historical Society, likewise, the lives of migrants laborers in the local apple orchards is largely missing.

The vertical files have little. The church records we have capture less. The newspapers only tell a fragmented and impersonal tale of life picking fruit. These invisible men and women were citizens of Adams County, even if only for a fleeting moment. And their stories deserve to be preserved. If you have memories or accounts, clippings or photos of migrant laborers in our county you would like preserved, contact the Adams County Historical Society. You can address the additions to me if you would like and I will make sure they make it into the record for future generations' memory.

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.