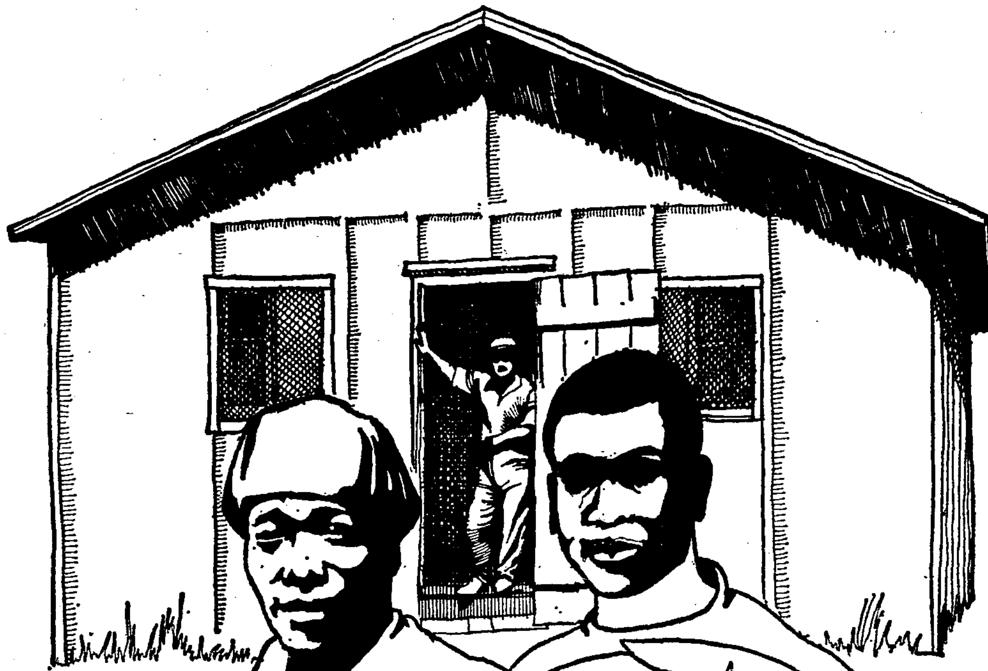

Waiting For The Eagle To Fly

With Nappy Chin, Hoppalong Geech, and Big Momma Rock...

Undercover at a Migrant Labor Camp. By Les Payne

Les Payne, a Newsday reporter, went to work as a migrant laborer June 30 on the farm of Albin Bobinski in Riverhead. He spent the week laying irrigation pipes in Bobinski's fields, living and working, eating and sleeping among migrants who did not know his true identity. He worked with the migrants, becoming a part of the subculture in which the migrant moves and despairs, laughs and loves and cries.

RIVERHEAD—I stood ankle-deep in raw garbage on the bed of the old dump truck pitching and buckling in the chilly morning air. There was a soft drowsiness about the dawn's virginal sunlight creeping into the streets in fresh moteless shafts.

It was 6:45 AM Friday, the day before the Fourth of July, the day that "the eagle flies." Payday: the climax of the migrant laborers' week. I had waited for the day for what seemed like a month. The other days had all been self-contained, each with its own strange beauty, each with its special heartbreak.

There were days during the week when we drained water from irrigation pipes, holding them over our heads like zoo keepers burping giant boa constrictors. Days when we ate pork scraps, drank wine at breakfast time, fought, and sneaked into the drive-in movie at night. The nights at camp were the same as the days, spinning in an endless swirl of smoking, drinking and fighting, loving, shooting craps and dreaming. In the musty, restless barracks, the camp's homosexual moved between the beds, peddling "her" wares with a bottle of vaseline.

And now it was the last morning—payday morning—as we rode to work on the garbage truck. Standing downwind on the rear of the truck, I straddled the rusty sidewall and faced the lee. The driver, a burly black with ham-like arms, motioned for me to keep my body inside the truck. Half of our four-man work crew stood up front where the garbage was deeper breathing fresh air with their heads leaning over the cab.

The garbage stench became almost unbearable as we drove the tangent from the traffic circle and passed through the heart of downtown Riverhead—past the police department and the laundromat, beyond the go-go club and across the tracks. Dismounting at the Suffolk Potato Exchange, we waited for our ride to the potato fields. The garbage ride had been arranged by our crew chief, who said he did not feel like driving us to work.

On the ride to the fields I pondered the strange fate that had brought me full-cycle from the cotton patches of Tuscaloosa to the potato fields of Suffolk County. I had been a child laborer in Alabama more than 20 years ago, beginning at age 8 when I earned two dollars for each hundred pounds of cotton picked.

Much has changed in the world since 1949. But little, I found, has improved for black farm laborers. I worked the fields as a child at my grandmother's side. She was a super cottonpicker and, on days when the fields were damp, she picked 300 pounds. Paid in old dollar bills at the day's end, she would tie her money along with mine in a corner of her wrinkled handkerchief and pin the bounty to her apron string. When I was 10, I picked 100 pounds of cot-

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I WORKED the FIELDS AS A CHILD AT my GRANDMA' SIDE. SHE WAS a SUPER COTTON PICK-ER. I PICKED 100 POUNDS

too, fully a fifth of which was rocks, water and sand.

As a child, I worked the fields from dawn till dusk. The sun was the only time clock that we punched. Bringing our lunches to the fields in greasy bags, we ate with muddy hands. The black farm laborer enjoys only vicariously the cool-sweet rhythm of the fields he works. For he owns not a clod of dirt he is charged to hoe. Or a single spud he nurtures as his own.

Here, on Long Island in 1970, the migrant's lot was still the same. At this camp, on Old Quogue Road, the crew chief, James Brown, rents shacks and provides laborers for area farmers. Brown is a thin man of medium height with hawk-like eyes that usually are bloodshot. He moves with a fluid-rolling stride and wears his black leather cap at a rakish cant. Himself a migrant farmer a few years back, Brown, 38, lives in a private room with his wife, three children and a color television set. By most accounts, Brown is one of the most benevolent crew chiefs in the Riverhead area.

He had not paid his men in three weeks. "He told us he gambled our money away the last three weeks," said James "Mule" Williams, 35, who has worked for Brown for four years.

When I entered the 17-man migrant camp the first day, I had primed myself to respond to my new name, "Bubba." I kept in mind my briefing on how to function and stay alive. The instructions were given to me by an ex-migrant, a hefty man with a barrel belly and a rolling, gravel voice. With passionless, staccato cadence he told me: "Drink wine wit' 'em. Shoot craps. Challenge 'em, tell 'em, look man, I'll knock your goddamn head off. Curse at 'em, all the time. But don't mess wit' their women, or you'll get your throat cut."

Lessons learned, I entered the camp that first day and told the crew chief that I was an "Alabama boy" who followed the crops. I told him about my cotton picking days in Tuscaloosa and my labors in the tobacco fields of Connecticut. Entering the camp without a change of clothes, money or identification, I was down on my luck and badly needed a job.

My first day in the camp the "boys" checked me out at a distance and one by one they came over and introduced themselves. First, there was Clarence "Nappy Chin" Terry, 26, from Jacksonville, Florida. He introduced himself as "Chin," a sweeping hand-slap—"the greatest that ever did it." Then came Termite, Joe Lewis and Thomas Jefferson, who was called "Whitey" by the crew.

After most of the crewmen had introduced themselves, they called over a thin and oily-skin black who wore his hat crimped like an old mining prospector in a Western movie. His legs were bad, the result of an automobile accident many years earlier. With gimpy stutter steps and sharp backward dips, he made his way over to me on the stoop. "I'm Hoppalong Geech, better known as the Black Shadow," he said. The Geechee, from Charleston, then retreated to the camouflage of his mixed African and West Indian accent.

After the introductions, the winebearers came, compliments of crew chief Brown. He had purchased eight-fifths of wine for 17 men and an assortment of pints to tide us over through the night. There was also beer, and for the ladies of the camp there were vodka and gin.

Remembering the briefing, I went forward that first day and claimed my half of a fifth. Termite Magwood, 35, and I were to share the bottle. It was Twister, a cheap California grape wine with an artificial mint flavor. It is 20 per cent alcohol.

"You drink wine, Bubba?" Brown asked me with a wry smile. I had seen that look and heard that tone before. It was the way the Southern black Baptist ministers used to ask, "Have you been saved, son?" Or the hustler trying to learn if a man shoots pool. I told him "yeah" and screwed the bottle cap off.

My drinking partner, Termite, having acquired another fifth from someone else, had wandered into the barracks and was rapping and drinking with a woman from a camp down the road. Nappy Chin, angered by Termite's sporting, charged into the barracks with his 8-inch switchblade knife and threatened to cut his throat.

"Man, you don't be goin' round here sportin' with my wine," Chin said. Repeating his refrain in vibrant bass, Chin cocked his arm, holding the switchblade waist-high.

When it seemed certain that Chin would strike like a sprung mousetrap, James Brown, with that easy-fluid stride appeared. The peacemaker in the war zone. He offered Chin a dollar for the wine which he refused; so the crew chief called the matter finished. "It's over now, Chin," he said. Folding his knife, Chin moved outside on his spindlelegs to the wooden picnic table under the tree.

Nappy Chin was the camp's bully. He stood 6'2" and weighed almost 200 pounds. He was the youngest man in the camp and he aspired to be the assistant crew chief. He was married to Beulah, the "strong mamma" of the migrant camp. Two hundred pounds she weighed. Her front teeth, top and bottom, were missing and the straight hair wig she wore made her look grotesque.

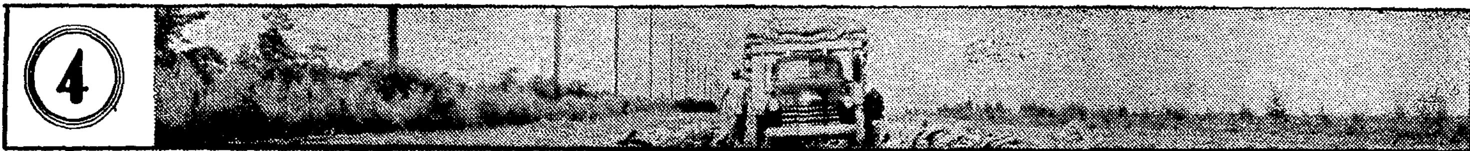
The fights at the camp were numerous. Chin, Termite and the rest belong to the group Black Panther Chairman Bobby Seale calls "Stagger Lee niggers." Black lumpen-proletarians, Southern born, who take their rage out on the nearest black. Rabbits in the outside world, but lions at home. I had been instructed by my ex-migrant friend to "be nice around the man in the field, but challenge 'em (blacks) all at the camp."

Chin's expression of manhood was demonstrated many ways during my week in the camp. He constantly "sold wolf tickets" (picked fights) and threatened the men. Once driving a borrowed car he reached a speed of 95 MPH in a two-mile stretch. He whistled and waved at every girl he passed. At the camp he was the crew chief's overseer, "the bad-ass nigger," dropping the gauntlet daily a hundred times.

The wellspring of violence at the camp was the steady flow of Twister wine, the common lifeblood of the migrant worker. Wine is Brown's chief medium of exchange, and for his men it is the standard of value. The alpha and omega of the camp.

We turned to wine out of despair, loneliness, pain, and depression brought on by boredom and the alienated life-style of the camp. By controlling the flow of wine, the crew chief controlled our very lives. He dished it out at morning, noon and night, on credit and at exaggerated prices. When the men got restless and asked for pay, the crew chief gave them wine.

A bottle of Twister costs 64 cents at the average Riverhead package store. At the cheapest bootlegger nearest the camp the price is 75 cents. When Brown gives a pint of wine to one of his "boys" he credits his account for $1.50 and sometimes even more. All of the men drink wine. They start the day with it at dawn, and drink it throughout the night. When Brown distributes the wine, all accounts are credited,



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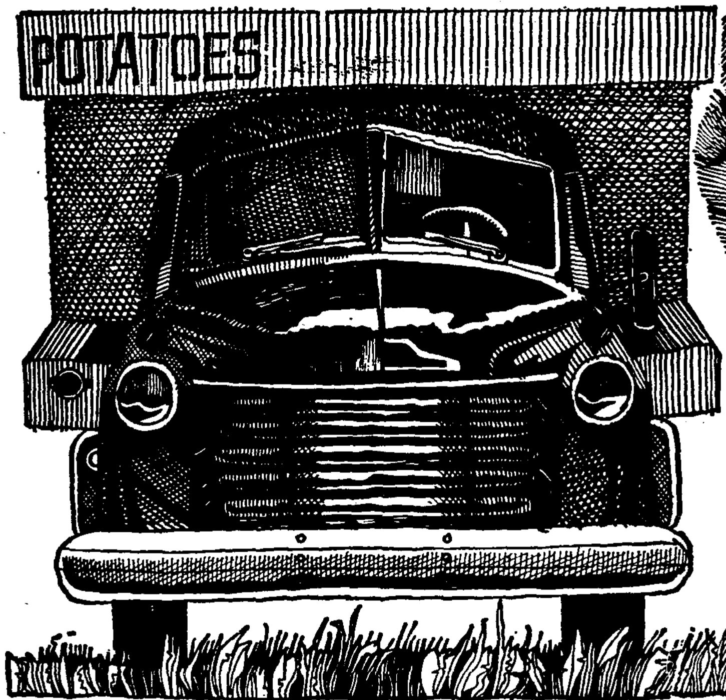

NAPPY CHIN WAS THE CAMP'S BULLY HE STOOD 6'2" and WEIGHED ALMOST 200 LBS. HE WAS The YOUNGEST MAN IN THE CAMP AND STRONG

whether the person actually gets the wine or not. That first day, Termite told me, "You might as well take some, Bubba, 'cause you're gonna be charged for it anyway."

Each migrant brings his own style to the care, handling, and drinking of the wine. Mule Williams usually drinks his down at once in hopes that he can share others' wine during the night. "A pint of wine don't last me no time at all," he said. "Maybe 10 or 15 minutes. You ain't goin' to find no contractor better than James, other contractors don't even give you wine in the morning."

Hoppalong Geech gets his wine at distribution time and hides it in the woods behind trees. During the night he gets up numerous times, stutter steps to the woods and drinks his wine in the shadows of the moon.

"Big Mamma Rock," 34, the camp's homosexual, is also the camp's super-drinker. Given a fifth, "she" drinks it all in less than half an hour. About six-feet tall, weighing 220 pounds, Mamma Rock wore a bandage over "her" throat where it was cut in New York City three weeks ago. Mamma Rock, who refers to "herself" with the feminine gender, didn't sober up the entire week.

During the night, Mamma Rock would move from bed to bed, awakening men, asking for cigarets and wine, and rubbing their arms. If one of the migrants was receptive, "she" would crawl shamelessly into his bed with "her" jar of vaseline. Disliked by the women in the camp, Mamma Rock was attacked verbally at the breakfast table each morning by the camp's fat women with their oily faces and their ruffled wigs.

The eating table in the barracks was made of wood with a tattered cloth spread neatly across its top. The food served ran generally to fats and carbohydrates. The breakfast meat was usually fat scraps; the kind that used to be melted down on farms and made into lard and soap. Not a streak of lean in sight. It was served daily with scrambled eggs and bread. There was only water to drink.

Lunches were sacked by Chin and consisted of three sandwiches of thin meat. For dinner the fat was served again, sometimes with beans at other times with corn. Occasionally, there was fish. The barracks itself was a tarpaper shack lined inside with corrugated tin. The windows had been covered on the outside with a clear heavy plastic, no doubt to keep the winter out. In July it kept fresh air from getting in.

One of the two barracks had private rooms where the married migrants lived. Called the bullpen, it had a jukebox, that stood mute most of the time. The other barracks housed 12 men, double-bunked in two dimly lit compartments. The beds had no linen, just a thin blue and dusty blanket. The mattresses uncovered, held the dirt of two generations of migrants. There were three toilet bowls, two large sinks and a three-faucet shower. All the migrants in the barracks slept in their clothes.

My fellow crewmen were mostly older men who followed the crops around the country for years. Hoppalong Geech followed the potatoes to Virginia 20 years ago. Since the automobile accident crippled his legs, he hasn't been able to work the fields. He now does mostly housework around the camp.

Mule Williams is a typical veteran migrant farmer. "I have a problem," said Mule, "I like to move around." With his muddy eyes glazed red from the effects of wine, Mule droops his head and always looks depressed. The fields have taken all of his body's starch. The zing-rustle is gone from his faded overalls.

"I've been working the fields for almost 20 years," he said. "I once saved as much as $800 and went to California. I ain't got no money now, but I could save some if I got off wine." Mule, who prefers to be called Mr. Clean, or Cleanie, has worked at nurseries and on construction jobs. "I always lose them jobs. I get drunk or run into trouble with women."

Mule and I worked in the same crew, but we never became close friends. I did become good friends with Odell Stevenson. One night six of James Brown's "foolish, foolish fools," sneaked into a drive-in by walking through a hole in the wooden fence. "Cotton Comes to Harlem," and Gravedigger Jones came to Riverhead. We sat on the fence in front of the projection booth, laughed, drank wine and "jaw-jammed."

We waited for no critics' columns, we liked the flick. "Wooooo-Weeeeeee! did you see that nekked sister? What she doin' with that white cop?" Godfrey Cambridge, who starred in the movie was called by Chin, "that nigger-detective in the gray stetson, with the Geechie eyes."

After the two movies that night, Odell and I left the theater through our hole in the fence. We parted company with the others and headed to the bootlegger's house. Two pints of Twister.

At 2:30 that morning we went back to the bootlegger's house, and bought two bottles more. High on the wine, Odell, 30, told me of the trail that led him to the camp.

After dropping out of school at age 16, Odell joined the army to get away from home in Darlington, Virginia. "I got tired of school and the South and the restrictions," he said. After two years and three months in the service, he was dishonorably discharged for a long string of AWOL's. He then lived for a while in Brooklyn with his mother and finally went to live in Richmond, Virginia.

One day, he remembers, a late model Cadillac stopped near him and a "light skinned broad," inside asked him if he would like to get a drink. They went to a bar where they were joined by the lady's mother. They talked, he said, of farming potatoes and the "good money" that was to be made there. They later drove 100 miles where Stevenson was introduced to a crew chief who ran a potato farm in Virginia.

Odell worked on the farm for a year and met another crew chief heading for Long Island so he got on the yellow school bus and arrived in Riverhead five months ago. Stevenson is known in the camp as a club fighter "good with his hands" who likes to fight. He is constantly "selling wolf tickets." He has a nasty scar around his right eye where last month he was hit with a wine bottle by a migrant named "Ugly." The time we drank all night Odell rhapsodized about his fast GTO back home in Virginia. And his "fine old lady."

Like most of the migrants, Odell doesn't know how much he is paid an hour, or the price he pays for room and board and wine. He knows that he gets wine from the crew chief, an occasional quarter for the jukebox and a pack of cigarets sometimes. As for pay he said, "James pays in streaks. It depends on the mood he's in. Sometimes we go three or four weeks without ever getting a dime. Other weeks, we make as much as $50 and $60."

On that payday Friday, I wondered what Brown's mood would be while our four-man crew worked throughout the day, Joe Lewis, Mule Williams, Lewis Loatman and myself. Having developed a system, we laid more irrigation pipe in three days than the average crew lays in two weeks. The foreman at the farm

—Continued on Page 23W.

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Migrant

—*Continued from Page 5W*

requested Brown to send us to his fields each day.

Our foreman was a 77-year-old Pole, John Szczponik. A salaried farmer, he had been working on potato farms on Long Island since 1930. He came to this country from Poland in 1913. He said that most of the farms in Riverhead are owned by Poles.

"About 50 years ago the Yankees owned all of this land and the Polish beople worked for them," Szczponik said. "We began to buy the land little by little. Now we own most of it. Back then, I used to work for $15 a month. You don't see too many Yankees around here now. There are just Polish beople, Bohunks, and Ginnies."

At 5 PM payday, Szczponik drove us back to the Suffolk County Potato Exchange. We saw Bobinski who asked us for our social security numbers for his records. After getting the numbers he decided to give us our checks. Neither of the three men in my crew had ever received their checks themselves before. Normally the money goes directly to the crew chief.

We were paid $1.70 an hour for the 26½ hours worked. Of the total, $2.16 went to social security and $.23 to disability, leaving us $42.66.

Learning that some of the migrants had already received their checks, Brown called them in one by one and asked them to sign their checks over to him.

The terror-pain of the migrants' payday rustled through each man as he left the room. Termite fought a gallant empty fight, telling Brown that he needed his money for clothes. Chin, his vibrant bass subdued, told Brown he needed money for his wife. Joe Lewis, high on wine, put up no fight. Whitey drifted in and plodded out.

Like a Chinese merchant haggling with a Vassar freshman over silk, Brown used the polished techniques of his trade. He got signed checks from Whitey, Chin, and Lewis, Mule, Odell and Wes. "Why fight him, I guess we owe him something," Joe Lewis said.

Lewis Loatman, 28, planned to buy his two children presents in Riverhead, something for the Fourth of July, so he refused to give the crew chief his check. He later had second thoughts and promised that he would do whatever I did. "If you give him yours, Bubba, then I will give him mine," he said.

Although Brown had figured the account of eight men before I entered his room, he had no pencil or pen and had to find some paper. He looked at me with his hawk-like eyes.

"What do I owe you?" I said.

"The way we work it around here is $16.22 a week for room and board." He searched for some paper and called for someone to bring him a pencil. "Let see, how much wine did you drink?"

"A half of a fifth," I said.

"Cigarets?"

"Two packs." I don't smoke.

He figured for a brief while and said that I owed him $18.50.

I told him that I would cash my check and pay him later. He stared at me, not knowing quite how to respond. I left the room.

Loatman was so surprised that, like a little child, he demanded to see my check. "That's unbelievable," he said. In a camp where 50-year-old men are called boys and acute alcoholism is accepted as social drinking, to keep one's check after a week of laying irrigation pipes is considered a feat of courage.

The crew chief later took his "boys" to town. Mule bought himself a khaki uniform. Loatman, who had never cashed his own check before, performed the act with a bit of fear and trembling. He had no identification. I cashed my check and gave the crew chief a $20 bill. He said he'd give me my change later.

My four-man work crew went to the barbershop together. Halfway through Joe Lewis' haircut, I excused myself to make a phone call.

I do not know how the black migrants celebrated the Fourth of July.

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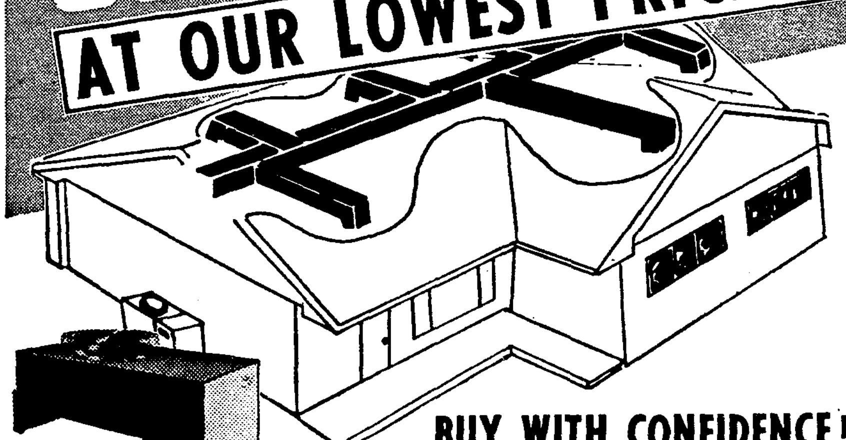

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