

# *The Agricultural Labor Problem*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

While the author of this report must assume responsibility for appraisal of the findings, credit for interviewing the farmers and much of the early planning must go to Mr. Wade McMillan. He designed the questionnaire and did the interviewing of employers. Interviews with hired workers were conducted by Hugh Denny, temporary research associate of the department. Mr. Denny also deserves credit for obtaining the photographs of living accommodations to be found in this publication.

This particular study was intended to be the beginning of a more comprehensive analysis of the farm labor problem. The original plan was to make similar inquiries in the other type of farming areas of the state. This particular report covers only Area 2, the extensive meat production area of Northeast Missouri. This area comprises about one-fourth of the crop land of the state. Most of this area is devoted to small grain and pasture crops with somewhat less emphasis on corn production and the fattening of livestock than in Area 1, covering Northwest Missouri.

While emphasizing the specific information obtained in 1950 and covering the years 1949 and 1950, the report really includes information from farm records and enterprise analyses that have been accumulating for several years. This supplemental information was used as the basis for many of the observations embodied in the general discussion of the farm labor problem.

We have deliberately avoided areas where migratory labor is a serious problem and have concentrated on a region where most hired labor is employed by the crop season or calendar year. It is this type of farm labor that seems to be the center of the labor problem for most employers throughout Missouri except perhaps for the cotton counties or other highly specialized areas.

—O.R.J.

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## GENERAL NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

About three-fourths of the supply of labor used in agricultural production in Missouri, as in the whole United States, is furnished by farm families who own or operate their farms. Therefore the fact of self-employment is an important consideration in examining the labor agricultural problem. These workers have employment assurance which has in the past been of considerable importance. Farm folks, until recently, have labored under the impression that if we want income we must expect to work for it. Today they have observed and actually experienced the phenomena of receiving income for which no comparable additional work requirement has been made.

They know it will be necessary to "plow back" a considerable part of the year's income into the farm business that has provided the employment. Likewise, they have been accustomed to wide fluctuation in income unrelated to the amount of work done or the volume of output. As a result, some years have been lean and some fat from the standpoint of wages realized. Thus, it is natural that dependence on the farm to furnish a place to live, as well as a considerable though minor part of the food requirements of the family, has been a conspicuous feature of the wage situation in the case of farm labor. These conditions are in rapidly increasing contrast with those of most non-farm workers. This contrast would seem to justify a close look at the farm labor situation both from the standpoint of its present competitive position and its longer time prospects.

The fact that most farm workers are self-employed does not save employers in agriculture from having to compete with other employers for the additional labor needed. Young men and women from farming communities are aware of the continuing demand for workers in non-farm employment. Money wages have considerable appeal to these young people who have been accustomed only to self-employment without specific wage assurance. The contribution of the farm toward their living has been accepted by these young people as a matter of course. Too often they have not appreciated its significance until confronted with the necessity of meeting all living expenses with cash from the contents of a pay envelope.

Nor have farmers fully appreciated a labor supply from which they may draw on short notice day or night—and without payment of regular and over-time wages at the union scale. Farm family

workers have often waited for months, or even years, to receive compensation for work which they have done.

There must be a great difference of worker attitude when the worker has both a laborer's and an owner's interest in the outcome. That same worker has his attitude still further influenced by the knowledge that the wage itself is contingent on *how well* his job is done and what the product *brings* when it reaches the market place.

This worker lives with the job the year around. He is his own representative at the bargaining table. He may actually occupy two seats at that same table. He may be both the employer and the employee. He is also forced by circumstances of employment and the job itself into exercising the duties of a manager by making decisions on the job because he often works alone and is expected to use his own judgment in carrying out many of the details of the tasks at hand. Usually there are several ways of performing a particular task. He may or may not have been instructed on what the employer regards as the best way of doing a certain job. Conditions often change on short notice or without any advance notice. He does not have a book of rules or a foreman to tell him how to act under these circumstances. Furthermore, he deals with biological forces and the weather which he must not only understand but with which he must cooperate if he expects the result to be satisfactory.

His hours must be regulated by circumstances and not by wage laws or union rules. At times he will work long hours because the work must be done at that time. At other times his work day is shortened.

He faces another set of circumstances which, with those just mentioned, may almost prohibit the satisfactory functioning of policies and rules common with industry, where all circumstances surrounding the worker and his job may be subject to almost complete control. This is because of the great variety of tasks which any farm worker must expect to perform and the varying productivity of those tasks. Some jobs which he must do can afford a very high rate of pay. Others are well worth doing but could not be paid for at regular rates justified by more productive tasks. Illustrations of extremes would be, in the first case, harvesting a wheat or hay crop or spending hours with the breeding ewes at lambing time in severe winter weather. The other extreme would be such items as repairing fences, mowing the lawn, or other odd-time chores.

Another factor which enters into our understanding of the farm labor problem is that most farm laborers are young men who will someday succeed their fathers or other farm operators in managing farm units. These young men not only help get the work done through



the year but they are acquiring useful knowledge and training under the supervision of their employer, training which will someday pay off in making them better managers when they themselves have the responsibility of making decisions. This may well be a major contribution to the real income of the farm worker. It certainly is in great contrast to the position of the worker in industry where only a small per cent of such workers can ever have a prospect of joining the management forces as an *entrepreneur*.

#### Changing Labor Requirements in Farming

Great improvements have been made in reducing labor requirements for many farming operations. As recently as 1925 it often required as much as 20 hours of man labor to produce and harvest an acre of corn. At the present time one-third of that amount is ample on many farms. In the case of small grain the improvement is equally striking. When we used the grain binder and threshing machine it would require from 10 to 15 hours of man labor per acre of wheat to grow and harvest a crop. Today four hours per acre is considered a reasonable expenditure. With many other farm crops except those which require large amounts of hand labor, the contrast is equally impressive.

We have not yet learned how to harvest strawberries or many of our tree fruits without using large amounts of hand labor. Vegetable and fruit production may be charged with responsibility for the migratory labor problem because of our inability to invent ways of reducing hand labor on these crops as we have, for instance, in substituting the corn picker for husking the crop by hand. As consumers we need to keep these facts in mind when we enjoy our strawberries and cream, our raspberry pie, and our other delicacies which may seem to be a bit expensive.

With livestock production, a considerable improvement has been achieved though not to the extent that we have mechanized our field crop activities. Self-feeders and waterers, improvements in sanitation for young animals, milking parlors, loafing barns, and pasture feeding systems have measurably reduced labor requirements for livestock, but we still must sit up at night with the brood sow at farrowing time or the ewe in the lambing season. We have substituted clean pastures and movable living quarters for permanent pastures and colony houses in a good many cases. This enables us to use power and machinery where hand work was formerly required. We have more effective disinfectants and other controls of animal diseases and parasites.

Such improvements have reduced the labor load wherever they have been made. There are still many farms that have not, for one

reason or another, adopted such improvements. On some farms we still have field work performed as it was 30 years ago. Also on many farms the labor of handling livestock is about the same as it was in that earlier day. Some farmers still use the old time methods and practices in keeping their animals clean and healthy.

Some of this reluctance to adopt new ways may be attributed to the conservatism of farmers. Much of it must be attributed to lack of money for buying the necessary facilities. On too many American farms the net income has been inadequate to provide a decent level of living and at the same time permit modernizing the farm business in ways which will result in labor saving.

Another deterrent undoubtedly lies in the "seasonal" nature of the farm business. Farmers know that there will be seasons of the year when labor demands are not pressing. Consequently, when they compare the cost of a labor-saving device with the labor cost of doing the work in the old way, they choose the old way when there is not much other work that the worker could do. Frequently farmers retain practices of this type because they would rather continue with the present system and have their limited capital surplus to use for other improvements which they have long wanted.

On such farms, if any modern labor savers are bought, the choice logically goes to the machine that saves labor in the peak season.

All of this has important implications when farmers face the problem of providing regular employment and a regular income for the entire labor force. This is very hard to do on many farms. Unless other productive work can be found for seasonal workers it becomes necessary to pay sufficiently high wages during the busy season to carry the worker through slack periods or he will be forced to leave the farm and seek more regular employment elsewhere. This problem does not apply too directly to family labor, but it does apply to the hired labor force on the farm. There is reason for the tendency of the farm family to furnish all its own labor or by exchange work with neighbors in order to avoid employing seasonal wage help.

Family labor, even only partly employed, does protect the farm cash expense account. It does give the farm operator some advantage over industrial employers. It certainly enables farm families to perform many tasks on the farm which they could not afford to hire done. But the situation is unsatisfactory from the standpoint that we should expect reasonably full time productive service from our whole labor force. Irregular employment, or under employment, is a cost to our economy even though it may be an important means of providing leisure.

We shall need to give serious thought to the inevitable result if we continue our efforts to extend industrial labor policies and

practices to all farm tasks. On the other hand we might think a little about the benefits derived from having this great supply of unpaid family labor to perform the "high-pay" tasks and still be willing and ready to take on the "low-pay, house-keeping" jobs when high-pay work is not available. The ultimate goal of every farm manager is to use his labor force as much as possible on the high-pay jobs and use low-pay work as a "filler-in". This does not accord with the ideas of modern industrial labor groups. It would be a real gain to our whole American economy if more employers and employees would regard annual wages rather than wage rates per hour as the more significant goal.

### **Machines Reduce Labor Requirements**

Mechanization has contributed materially to simplifying some aspects of the farm labor problem, with tractors and large tools substituting for work animals and smaller tools. It has been possible for the farm operator and his family to greatly expand the number of acres they could farm with their labor force. It has also reduced materially the portion of the time of this labor force which under former conditions was used for work which would not result directly in income. The accounting department would call such work maintenance labor.

It required a considerable amount of time to keep work animals in good working condition, to feed and otherwise care for them morning, noon, and night. Also the rate of travel of work stock going to and from the fields and, while actually working in the field was for most operations considerably less than the rate at which modern equipment moves. All of this shift had the effect of increasing the productivity of the time each worker gave to the various tasks.

The benefits of the change from work animals to mechanical power are even greater than this. Farmers spent a considerable amount of time in growing feed for work stock. With the substitution of power equipment the labor of growing feed for work animals has been saved and can be used for handling more acres or more livestock. The acres that grew that feed are now used to provide either cash crops or feeds for other classes of livestock.

There has been a considerable increase in the necessary investment in power equipment. An outlay of one to two thousand dollars in the "work stock" age would provide power and machinery on a moderate sized farm. With power equipment and the expansion of acreage necessary to allow its full use the investment in power and machinery has increased to something like eight times that originally required.

In addition to increasing materially the amount of work one worker can accomplish in a season, this modern mechanical power and equipment enables farmers to do their work more thoroughly. Furthermore, it can be done so rapidly that they can start and complete the job at the right time, giving the crop the best possible chance to grow and mature in the optimum season. They also tell us that in addition to timeliness they can actually do a better job of seed bed preparation.

This leads to still an additional advantage. Many farmers use rotations which, if seeding and harvesting are done promptly, will allow an additional crop to be grown on the same acreage in a season. With high powered mechanical equipment many farmers are now getting two crops from an acre where formerly they obtained only one. This has been particularly beneficial in those parts of the state where supplementary crops make up a part of the cropping system, thereby expanding considerably the supporting capacity of the land.

A still further gain is realized. Fifty years ago boys and girls twelve to sixteen years of age could hardly be expected to go to the field with a set of equipment and do the work of an adult. Now, when not in school, with power equipment they can do the job as well as a mature man would do it.

One additional factor should be mentioned. The labor force, from the farm boy to the hired worker, generally prefers power equipment as compared with horse power in getting farm work done. The worker today is usually accustomed to driving a car. He likes the speed and the power that tractors provide. He dislikes the chore labor which goes with the use of horse power. Consequently, his mental attitude is more likely to be one of satisfaction and optimism if he is furnished with tractor equipment than if he is asked to do the work with work animals.

This development has no doubt been largely responsible for whatever success farmers have achieved in keeping the boy on the farm and in competing with industrial employers for needed hired help. They have not been 100 per cent successful, but have come nearer to complete success in competition with industry than would have been possible had it been necessary to content themselves and their families with "horse and buggy" techniques of production.

#### **Working Conditions Require Attention**

The influence of industrial policies on the farm labor situation has been considerable. While employment rules, generally well suited to industrial efficiency and commonly accepted by both employers and employees, are difficult to apply in agriculture, these rules and

the rates of pay associated therewith, increase the pressure of competition for the labor supply. It is quite likely that attention should be given to the "working conditions" aspect of farm labor, considering the emphasis placed on this phase of employment in industry.

There seems to be no real difficulty in the way of applying some of our industrial "working conditions" standards in agriculture. Two or three points in this connection should be mentioned. Farmers are notoriously careless in the realm of accident prevention. More safety rules are needed in connection with agricultural labor, either family or hired labor.

There is also considerable need for establishment on farms of more acceptable living conditions for workmen. Specific evidence in this connection will be presented later. Here we can only indicate that employers of agricultural workers are increasingly disinclined to keep workers in their homes. This used to be a common practice, but is no longer so. Also many present day potential farm workers have families and consequently need living accommodations for their family if they are to accept farm employment. Most of our farms do not have a second house which can be furnished to a hired helper. On farms where a second house is available, the house is frequently not very livable. Good farm workers cannot be expected to live in hovels. There are numerous exceptions to this situation, but the common experience is not too satisfactory from the standpoint of working conditions.

There are definite limitations to the application of industrial rules to agricultural employment on diversified family farms. Some of these have already been indicated. Work in agriculture is seasonal. There are critical periods at many points in the production and harvesting of crops and caring for livestock. There are slack times and rush times. Frequently the work day is unavoidably long and again there will be days where highly productive employment is unavailable.

On most farms, demands on farm labor are diverse, making impracticable the development of a high degree of specialization. On only a small percentage of our farms is it possible to develop departmental or specialized segments providing full time employment for specialists.

The unique nature of farm work and environment has tended to make it almost necessary that an efficient laborer on all but the large departmentalized farms be farm reared. An understanding of breeding, fertilizing, soil management, sanitation, combating animal and plant diseases of all kinds and many other kinds of specialized information is necessary if a worker is to be of most help in

farming. In other employment, most workers are supervised by individuals who have the technical information, but on the farm the worker is often "on his own", and must assume considerable responsibility, make decisions, and act on his own initiative and with his own knowledge.

None of this implies that the farm worker is unaware of industrial regulation of hours, rates of pay, and other non-wage concessions which are constantly being added to the real wages of many non-farm workers. It is also quite likely that employers of farm labor have not utilized these non-cash kinds of pay as fully as might be advantageous to the employer. With the increasing cost of living, finding suitable housing in cities, and the cost in both hours and money of traveling to and from the job, it becomes evident that farmers who can provide their year-round employees with reasonable living accommodations, gardens, meat, dairy and poultry products, fuel and other perquisites, may have very strong inducements to prospective workers beyond the money wage which they feel they can offer. It also suggests that the present lack or low quality of workers' housing facilities on the typical farm could well be given attention wherever current incomes have been relatively favorable. Farm employers who do provide these facilities definitely possess a competitive advantage which is of increasing significance.

A further development which is affecting the farm labor situation is our changing standard of minimum educational requirements for children in our public schools. Today, farm boys and girls are expected to be in school nine months of the year. In addition, those at the high school level are encouraged to join in group and other activities which require considerable time outside of school hours. The farm boy of 14 or 15 no longer expects to take the place of a farm hand as soon as spring work begins. The work he used to perform as a matter of course in spring and autumn must now be hired or performed on a custom or exchange basis. There is no question but that from a human standpoint these changes must be regarded as a great improvement over former practices, but they are also factors in the complexity of the farm labor situation.

#### **Types of Farming and Labor Requirements**

Without attempting to present detailed developments in types of farming as they affect the need for labor in the various type of farming areas in Missouri, it still seems appropriate that brief comment be made that Missouri farming is moving more in the direction of specialized activities. While the typical farm is still a diversified family farm, close examination of this farm will reveal that basic changes are occurring.



For the livestock enterprise, animals feed themselves more commonly than ever before. On most of our farms where beef cattle, hogs and sheep are kept, greater use is made of pasture and rough-ages. This reduces labor requirements not only in actual feeding, but in providing the feed supply. Most of the operations are highly mechanized.

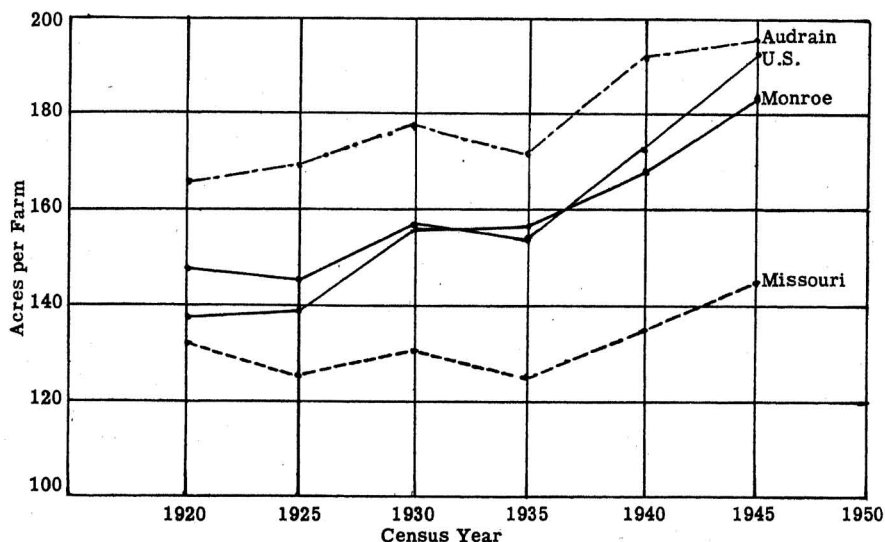


Fig. 1.—Trend in size of farms, 1920 to 1945, in the United States, the state of Missouri and in Audrain and Monroe Counties, Missouri. (Data from U. S. Census.) Farms covered in this study were three times the average size of all farms in their counties.

Improvements have also been developed in handling dairy and poultry enterprises. While it is true that on a good many farms, methods have changed slowly in the last 15 or 20 years, there are increasing numbers of instances where the work required in caring for these enterprises has been reduced materially. With modern arrangements for handling the dairy herd, the operator can take care of three times as many cows as he once handled. Even greater improvements have been achieved with the poultry enterprise.

While these improvements have reduced the peaks of labor required, they have not solved the problem of furnishing regular employment for hired labor throughout the year. Seasonal labor peaks still prevail on farms in those type of farming areas where a considerable amount of crop production is maintained. It suggests that

crop production and livestock enterprises are facing further segregation if labor costs continue to rise. This is in line with industrial findings, but not in accordance with the past experience of farmers.

It is increasingly evident that family farm operators are seeking farming combinations where the proprietor and his family can perform most of the labor. This means that he is more nearly a livestock specialist than he used to be. If he devotes his time to taking care of his livestock, he depends on the other farmer, who must have a large crop acreage to justify modern equipment to assume both problems of hired help and of providing adequate inventories of machinery to get the crop work done.

#### Farmers Are Reducing Labor Requirements

In trying to solve the problem created by the growing tendency of adult workers to seek the higher cash wages of non-farm employment, and of farm boys to spend their time in school, the diversified farm operator is striving to reduce labor requirements on his farm rather than openly compete with other employers for the labor supply. In surveying this situation in a rather prosperous livestock area in Northeast Missouri, evidence was found indicating that the practice of depending on year around help has been practically abandoned. While farms are expanding in acreage, this expansion has not kept pace with the increase in effectiveness of a man's time in handling those acres. Operators of those farms where year around help has been maintained or where it at least is attempted, were deliberately chosen for this inquiry. The farms which met this requirement are more than twice as large as the average farm in the area. Figure 1 shows the trend in size of farm for the United States and the state of Missouri, also the trend in size for the two counties to which this study was confined. The average size of the farms of the operators interviewed in this labor analysis was 677.5 acres.

Farmers have never been accustomed to pay the rates which industrial organizations are maintaining for their employees. Past

TABLE 1--TREND IN SIZE OF FARMS, 1920-1945 (U. S. CENSUS)  
(For Missouri, Audrain County, Monroe County, and United States)

Area	Average Size of Farms (in Acres)--By Census Periods					
	1920	1925	1930	1935	1940	1945
Missouri	132.2	125.3	131.8	125.9	135.6	145.2
Audrain Co.	166.1	169.2	178.1	173.6	193.5	197.3
Monroe Co.	138.6	139.3	156.0	156.4	170.0	186.3
U. S.	148.2	145.1	156.9	154.8	174.0	194.8

experience of farm operators seems to justify this attitude. While the gap between money wages on the farm and in non-farm occupations may be justified on a real wage basis, it is still true that workers are influenced more by money wage comparisons. And farm employers, when they think of their own money wage incomes, have difficulty in convincing themselves that they should pay hired labor two or two and one-half times as much money wages as they themselves realize for their year's work. They seem willing to pay high rates for custom hire for the urgent jobs in order to avoid paying higher money wages for hired help than they themselves are realizing for their own efforts.

#### **Living Accommodations for Farm Laborers**

Another problem which has appeared only in the last 20 or 25 years faces farm operators in employing hired labor. A half century ago, farmers could employ the sons of their neighbors as regular farm hands from March 1 to December 1. These neighboring sons were often treated as members of the family. They had their own rooms in the proprietor's residence, ate at the table with the employer's family and were otherwise accepted as regular family members. This is probably the chief reason why farmers who normally employ help the year around, or for most of the year, have never provided living accommodations outside their own home for hired workers. Now that neighboring farmers' sons are no longer available as all-season farm hands, the employer not only finds himself unwilling to take available workers into his home, but unprepared to provide these workers with an acceptable house and other living conveniences.

A careful examination of accommodations furnished to hired labor in the area covered by this study indicates that there is a wide variation in quality of living accommodations of hired help. In a few instances, the house provided for the hired worker was as good or better than that occupied by the owner. In most cases, facilities for housing employees were anything but satisfactory. In some cases no facilities were available and employees were asked to live in the nearest town, driving back and forth to work each day. This is not a good arrangement for at least two important reasons. The first reason is that the cost of renting a house in town for a hired worker is high. Second, often such accommodations are not available. This but emphasizes the need for the employer either to provide reasonable living accommodations for workers or to so adjust the farming operations that regular workers are not required.

A further difficulty which may be of temporary significance is that most available and satisfactory employees are married, there-

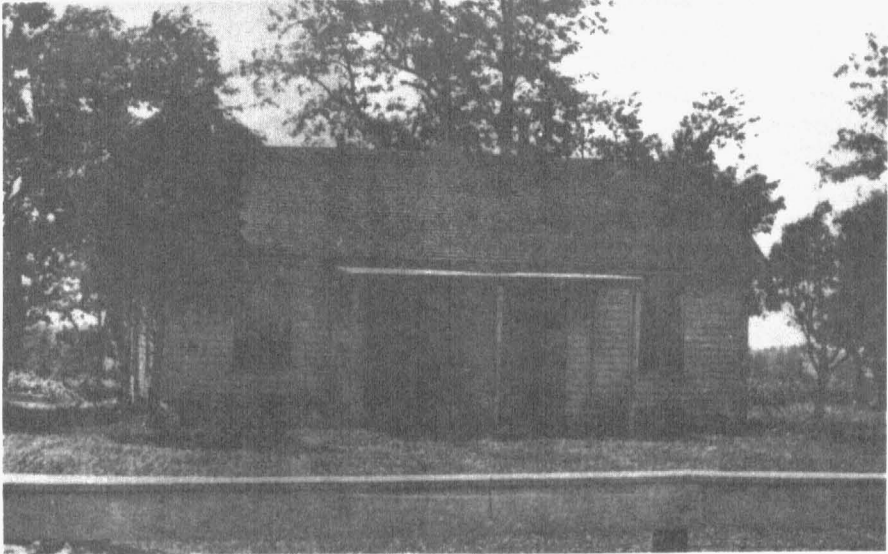


Fig. 2.—Living quarters for the farm laborers interviewed varied greatly. Some were very small and in poor repair, yet most occupants were satisfied with their jobs and the accommodations provided.

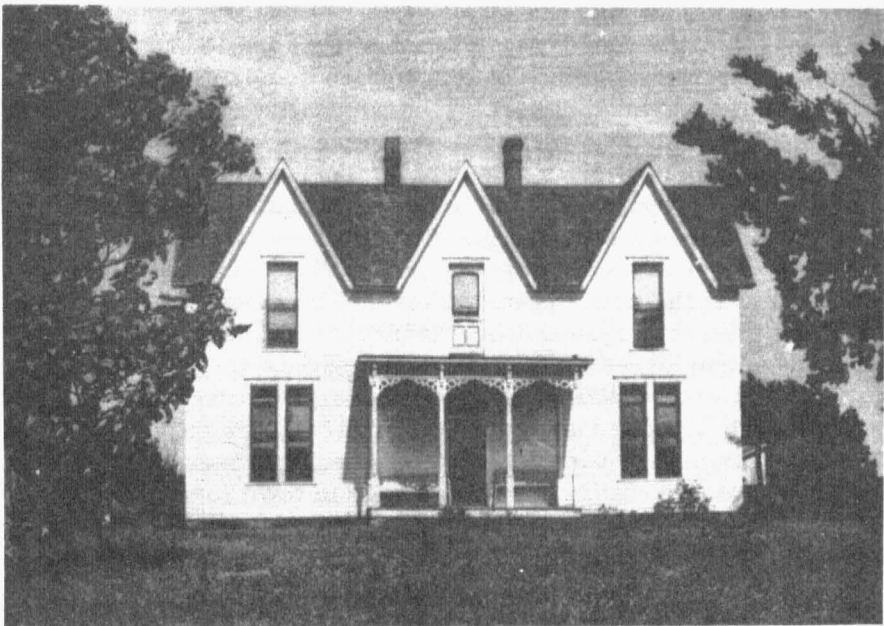


Fig. 3.—Some workers lived in houses even better than those occupied by their employers, though the opposite was true in most cases.

fore they need living accommodations for the family. It is practically impossible to provide quarters for the hired man and his family in the proprietor's home.

It should be obvious from this review that the employer faces a serious question in deciding whether or not he should provide living accommodations for his employees and adjust his system and scale of farming to furnish more nearly year around employment or whether he should so modify his system of farming that hired labor becomes unnecessary, except for short periods of time. Many proprietors in diversified farming sections of Missouri can dispense with hired labor by using custom help for some crop operations.

### THE LABORER'S POSITION

In order to obtain first hand information on the laborer's situation and his reasoning, 60 farm laborers on Audrain and Ralls County farms which normally depend on hired help the year around, were interviewed in the summer of 1950. Their employers had been interviewed in the preceding summer. Two-thirds of the workers were 30 years old or older. Fifty-five per cent of the workers were married and had families which averaged just over four persons in the household. Eighty-five per cent of the workers were farm reared. Seventy per cent of them had parents who were either laborers or tenants. The average number of years of farm experience was fifteen. Thirty-seven per cent of them had been farm laborers for 20 years or more. Three-fourths of the workers had been on the present farm three years or less. Only one-tenth had been on the same farm for ten years or more. Five-sixths of the workers had gone no further than the eighth grade in school.

Both workers and employers gave it as their impression that the number of farm hands employed in these two counties is shrinking and these workers are being replaced by improved machinery. Both owners and laborers also indicated that the number of young farm workers is declining.

In this area, the farms tended to be large and to emphasize livestock. Much of the land is pasture land. In order to have enough field crop labor to justify an effort to maintain year-round hired help, it is obvious that the farms would need to be fairly large. The average size of farm was one section of land. One-sixth of the farms were of 1000 acres or more and 60 per cent of them were of 500 acres or more. Only five per cent were under 250 acres. The average size farm in these two counties was 192 acres. Four-fifths of the farms kept no work stock. Only one farm in 20 attempted to do all of the work with work animals.

### Perquisites Supplement Money Wages

The estimated money value of perquisites furnished to farm workers is given as a footnote under Table 2. This table shows, first of all, the 1950 rate of pay received by farm laborers in the area. Wages were made up of cash payments and accommodations furnished the worker. The cash wage for the worker for whom a house was provided was almost exactly \$100 per month, on the average. Most of the cash wages varied from \$80 to \$100. A few cases where this wage was considerably above \$100 caused the average to be nearer the \$100 limit.

For these workers the farm contributed almost exactly one-half as much in accommodations as the worker received in money wages. The most important item under accommodations was the house provided. The estimated rent value of houses varied from no rent value up to \$50 with the average approximately \$25 per month.

The next most important item was the milk furnished the hired worker's family. This amounted in total value to \$205 per year. In most cases the employer furnished the worker with a cow and the cow was fed from the farm feed supply. In the remaining cases the employee was given milk from the farm supply. A common rule followed by the more thoughtful employers is to furnish one quart of milk per day for each member of the worker's family. This provision has some advantage over the practice of furnishing the worker with a cow.

However, there are some advantages in being provided with a cow. On most farms a good milk cow provides more milk during the spring and summer than a laborer's family needs for consumption as whole milk. Consequently, they sometimes make additional income from making butter or marketing the excess. Some workers' wives like this additional possibility.

For the employer it probably means that furnishing a cow is more expensive than furnishing the worker with a quart of milk per day per person. Usually an employer will not allow his laborer's family to go without milk so he not only furnishes a cow, but provides milk during the season of the year that the cow is dry.

The next most important item in accommodations is furnishing the employee's family with meat. Eight employers out of ten provide the hired worker with one or two hogs for meat. These hogs were butchered in the regular butchering time for the farm meat supply. If a worker had a good sized family the employer generally furnished two hogs, if it was a small family one hog was provided. On a good many farms the laborer's wife is permitted to keep a small flock of poultry. In this particular area only two instances of this



sort were encountered. Consequently, no tabulation was made for the poultry enterprise.

In most cases the employer allows the worker to cut wood on the farm for his winter fuel supply. This will depend on there being in the area a wood lot on most farms. Where the farm does not supply the fuel, the laborer is usually required to provide his own supply of fuel. Whether or not he does this work on his own time is a highly variable matter. About one-half of the time the workers would do it on their own time. Otherwise the employer furnished them with a truck with which the fuel could be hauled, and allowed the worker to obtain this fuel on the employer's time.

**TABLE 2--THE FARM WAGE SITUATION IN AREA STUDIED (AVERAGE WAGES PER MONTH, 1950)**

(1) Hired worker, furnished house		
-- cash wage	\$100.33	
-- accommodations*	50.58	\$150.91
(2) Hired worker boarded		
-- cash wage	\$ 93.08	
-- room, board, and laundry (est. value)	48.16	\$141.24
(3) Value of Employer's labor (Estimated by himself, as if hired)		
		\$149.25
-----		
* Accommodations included, for one year:		
Milk . . . . .	\$205.00	Garden . . . . . 4.00
Meat . . . . .	71.00	House . . . . . 302.00
Fuel . . . . .	25.00	Total . . . . . \$607.00

The smallest item, from the standpoint of the employer, was the garden plot provided along with the house. The average amount of ground furnished for the garden was four-tenths of an acre. The employers estimated that this ground should be worth \$10 per acre rent, so the value of \$4 for the rent of garden plot is allowed in the figures given in Table 2. When the value of these accommodations is added to the cash wage it gave the average worker on farms where the laborer is furnished with a house and other accommodations, a monthly wage of approximately \$150.

When these data were being obtained the employer was asked to estimate what it would cost if he hired the work done which he himself did on the farm. The average of these estimates is given in Table 2, and is surprisingly close to the actual computed cost per month of the labor of a worker who is furnished with a house and other accommodations. The employer had no way of knowing what

the final figure would be for hired labor cost per month when accommodations were included. This indicates that the employers were doing a pretty good job of estimating the value of their own labor on a hired labor basis.

#### Boarding Workers in the Home

The other item of interest in Table 2 is the cost of labor where the worker is boarded in the home. As was indicated earlier, only a small percentage of the laborers from whom records were obtained were boarded in the home of their employer. The employer was asked to estimate the room, board, and laundry value of these services furnished. The average value, as estimated by the employer, was approximately \$48 per month. Room and board were given as one item. The most common figure given by employers was \$50 per month or \$600 per year. On a minor portion of the farms employing labor in this manner, the board item was estimated considerably below this figure. Laundry was valued at \$4 per month or \$1 per week in all but two cases.

It is obvious that there is little saving by boarding the worker in the home even when allowances are made for the board, room, and laundry for the worker. Most employers think this is too much to pay for having the family circle broken by providing a home for their hired worker.

Direct observations were made concerning the quality of the accommodations furnished. Workers were asked whether they were satisfied with their jobs, the rate of pay, and accommodations furnished. A summary of these observations and inquiries includes the following:

The average worker's cottage had 4.7 rooms. Seven-eighths of the houses had electric lights. Water in the house was available in only one-tenth of the laborers' dwellings. Only one farm out of 16 had fully modern laborers' cottages. The estimated rental value varied from \$50 per month in one of the best homes to no rent value for one house described as a shack. On one farm, the laborer's house was regarded as a better dwelling than that occupied by his employer. Figures 2 to 5 give an idea of the variable appearance of dwellings provided for farm labor.

Most workers were satisfied with their employment. A few were using this employment only as a stop gap until they could get employment in non-farm work.

Money wages received by workers varied from \$80 to a little more than \$100 per month. The average wage for all full-time hired workers, including perquisites furnished, was approximately \$140 per month. Wages for single workers, when the value of board and



Fig. 4.—Need of repairs and paint oftentimes marred the appearance of old houses that were fairly adequate in other respects.

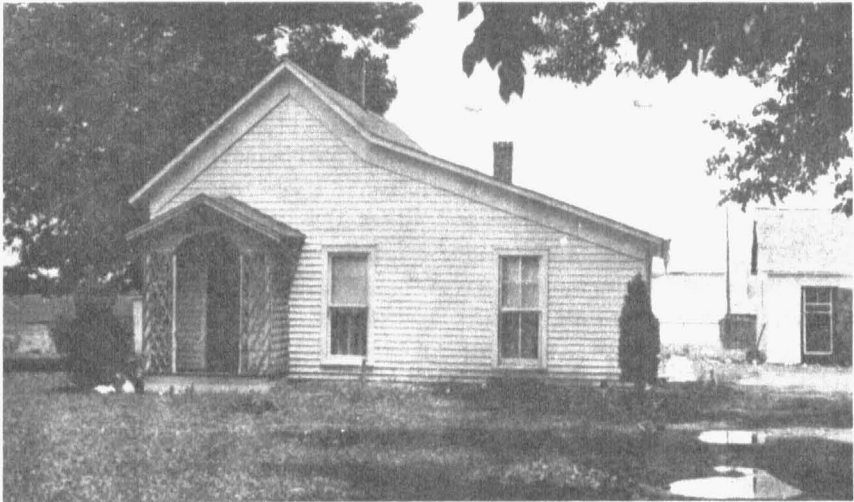


Fig. 5.—In many instances modest accommodations for hired labor had been made comfortable and attractive by thoughtful attention to repair and beautification.

other accommodations furnished are included, were very little different from those of married workers who were furnished with dwellings. Most single workers were provided with board and laundry in addition to their room.

According to the reports of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, wages in agriculture are rising as they are elsewhere. It is difficult to get valid comparisons between farm and non-farm wages because of the difficulty of obtaining comparable worker qualifications. In this part of the state, as in most general farming communities, worker capabilities vary greatly. In some cases, one will have young farm boys just beginning to earn wages and working under circumstances where a good many allowances are made for the youth of the worker. The boy may be anywhere from 15 to 20 years of age. At the other extreme will be found very old men who are almost in the category of pensioners. A number of these were found in the study. These men received very little money wage and were scarcely worth more than their keep. They were usually given a modest cash allowance to keep them in overalls and tobacco. They frequently did nothing more than chore labor and sometimes not all of that.

One worker interviewed was a displaced person. He was unhappy on the farm mostly because there were none of his nationality in the community with whom he could associate in his leisure hours. He was frankly just marking time until he could be provided with employment in a city where others of his nationality could keep him from being so lonesome. As a matter of fact, he was a well trained mechanic and probably deserved to be in a mechanical trade.

Most farm workers were saving some money. Very few of them had an ownership interest in any of the enterprises with which they were working.

#### **Working Time and Other Conditions**

Working time for farm labor in this area normally means six days a week and 10 hours a day. A few worked seven days and some worked five and one-half days. Likewise a few worked more than 10 hours and a few worked less. On most farms, the work day is longer in spring and early summer. It is much shorter at other times of the year. There were no specialized dairy farms in the sample area studied.

More than one-half of the workers were allowed sick leave. A few were docked for time lost and only one individual was allowed vacation time with pay. Few farm laborers were asked to work on Sunday. In cases where they were, they were paid an average of \$5 per day extra for Sunday work. Only one worker was furnished with a house off the farm. One worker out of each eight was dissatisfied with his employment and living circumstances.

The average work day for farm laborers varies with the season. Just how much this variation amounts to is shown in Table 3. For

TABLE 3--THE FARM LABORER'S WORK DAY, WITH COMPARISONS

Work Season	Laborer	Employer
Jan. - Feb. (2 months)	8.6 hours	8.9 hours
March - May (3 months)	9.2 hours	11.6 hours
June - Aug. (3 months)	11.8 hours	13.9 hours
Sept. - Oct. (2 months)	10.6 hours	11.8 hours
Nov. - Dec. (2 months)	9.1 hours	10.0 hours
Average work day (weighted)	10.0 hours	11.5 hours
Average hours worked on Sunday	2.0 hours	3.4 hours

purposes of comparison we have given the work day for the employer; it will be noted that the hired worker averages a shorter work day than does his employer. An average work day for the season was a 10-hour day for workers, but 11½ hours for the employer. The variation in length of work day is very similar for both the worker and his employer. Naturally the winter months of January and February provided the shortest work day, and the months of harvest provided the longest work day. The amount of work done on Sunday is on the average just enough to take care of the livestock on the farm. On some occasions farmers do a considerable amount of field work on Sundays, but that is unusual.

#### Problem Is Difficult for Employer and Employee

The dilemma faced by both employer and employee on Missouri farms is a perplexing one. The solution seems to vary all of the way from a straight pay envelope situation to one of joint interest in the earnings of the business. The trend in industry seems clear. The pay envelope is the answer there. Although it may have shortcomings, it is obviously the trend. Workers, or their spokesmen, seem to prefer to have no responsibility for the conduct of the business.

When we try to impose this system on the farm, many difficulties are encountered, some of which have already been mentioned. Undoubtedly the simplest procedure would be to determine daily or at frequent intervals the amount of assistance needed and to contact a labor office or a labor broker to provide this assistance, taking no responsibility for the living or subsistence of the worker and settling the entire pay question with a pay check. This can be done in some parts of American agriculture. For reasons already stated it does not fit too well in the farming system based on the family farm. While most farms have some commercial enterprises, this is only a part of their total activity and their total need. Farms are scattered and even with modern conveyances it is inconvenient to have

employees away from the farm outside regular work hours. Consequently, adapting to the farm a system of employment similar to that used in a manufacturing plant has not yet been done in any very satisfactory way.

Every employable person with a family requires some minimum annual income to provide any sense of security. A worker in town can, within a few blocks, find other employment if one job is finished. In the country, the geographic distribution of employment opportunities is such that one cannot go very far in search of better paying or supplemental employment. Consequently, year around employment is almost an essential in agricultural communities.

Technology which has out-run the adaptation of farm units to this change may be responsible for the present dilemma. The answer seems to lie in one of two directions, joint interest in the results of the year's farming operation or re-designing the farming system to provide year-round employment at commercial wage rates. This second alternative can be used in only part of the cases. The tendency now is to pay more attention to the first one. In this, it is obvious that prospect for gain is substituted for contract money wages. This means of course, sharing in decision making, and in investment responsibility and taking a chance that rewards for management and risk sharing will make up for regular cash wages somewhat below the non-farm standard, because activities in the off season could not support commercial wage rates. This situation not only promises stability of occupancy, but for the employee it may be the beginning of a business of his own. It should be, and no doubt is, a stabilizing procedure.

Radical changes in our interpretation of welfare seem to be involved in the resolving of this dilemma. In non-farming professions and vocations, success seems to be measured by the size of the pay envelope rather than by the amount of goods, services and privileges which it will command. As long as the content of the pay envelope is increasing in dollars regardless of what those dollars will purchase in current or durable consumer goods, or in security, the worker seems to be fairly well satisfied.

Farm workers and employers dealing more directly with goods in their primary forms appreciate the importance of volume of these goods, but developing equally effective methods of converting these goods into dollars or purchasing power in terms of other goods has not been achieved. On the other hand, they have a definite advantage in ownership of property, for it gives some defense against inflation and loss of employment.

There can be no question but that the differentials between money incomes of those who work and produce in agriculture and



those who spend their lives in non-agricultural occupations is offset in part by the non-money rewards in agriculture. This brings us to the final consideration of the increasing significance of perquisites enjoyed by both employee and employer in agriculture. The farm operator's home goes with his business. His job for the year is guaranteed, his physical production is largely guaranteed if he does his part and takes advantage of the many free sources of protective information available.

Today there is considerable economic advantage to the farm operator who can offer a prospective employee comfortable living accommodations on the farm. The appeal of these perquisites to the employee more nearly approaches the higher cash wages offered by urban industries. The attractiveness of the opportunity is enhanced when the sharing idea is introduced into the farming operation. It may not be too much to expect that within the next generation, a farm worker who is only a wage earner, and who lives on the farm, will be the exception. The work is most likely to be done either by the joint efforts of a father and son or an older and younger man working together.

#### SUMMARY

On most diversified farms where it has been the custom to employ one or more workers through most of the year, the labor problem becomes increasingly serious. Most employers have difficulty competing with industrial employers on a cash wage basis. Rising wages and more or less regular employment the year around attract young potential farm workers away from the farm. Part of this attraction may be attributed to lack of satisfactory accommodations for workers and their families on the farm. Since World War II a larger percentage of farm laborers have been married men, thus making it more necessary that farms have living facilities for such workers.

The very nature of farm work makes considerable variation in the urgency of work and in the amount which the various tasks can contribute to farm income. Consequently, workers are worth much more at some seasons of the year than at others.

Farmers have difficulty in trying to eliminate rush periods and periods of semi-idleness. They find it practically impossible to avoid having long work days at times and very short work days at other times.

Most proprietors in the area used for this study are attempting to modify the farming system so as to eliminate the need for hiring labor by the month or year. They either use custom hire for rush

seasons or acquire an unusually heavy investment in power and equipment for the amount of use they actually have for such equipment in order to be able to do all the work themselves.

Workers interviewed were not too well satisfied with farm labor. Their average wage was about \$150 per month when the value of accommodations were included. The money wage was from \$80 to \$100 per month. Workers were furnished with approximately \$50 of products and house rent, along with their money wages. Most of the houses furnished were not modern. Some were very well equipped and comfortable. Some were very poor.

Most workers are not using farm labor as a means toward becoming farm operators. Young men of the type that used to follow this procedure are now seldom found in the occupation of farm laborer.

This study was deliberately chosen in an area which does not have any significant migratory labor problem.

Two major results may be indicated as conclusions from this study. The first is that most operators of medium and smaller farms in diversified farming areas have concluded that it is better economy to modify the farming system so that they do not have to employ regular hired help. Irregular additional needs they expect to meet by custom hire, labor exchange with neighbors, or the elimination of the enterprise responsible for that unusual demand.

Farmers operating on a scale larger than this medium group must expect to have reasonable living accommodations on the farm for a hired worker and his family if they expect to obtain high quality workers. They find this increasingly desirable because of the rising cost of living accommodations in cities. They can furnish living accommodations and farm produced foods at a cost considerably below that in urban environment.

Careful appraisal of what seems to be developing could easily lead to the conclusion that smaller farms will be forced to forego the employment of much hired labor. For the larger farms those with most of the land better suited to livestock and roughage production will reduce emphasis on the production of concentrates and spend their time on livestock enterprises with scarcely any hired labor.

Finally, land adapted to grain production is likely to be operated in units large enough to justify modern machinery and power with little dependence on hired labor. With adequate machinery and power equipment on this type of land, the proprietor and his family can handle a farm unit large enough to give a good family living and some prospect for saving. At the same time he can maintain low production costs, thus placing his business in a strong economic position.