



A berry picker with her parasol strolls down the muddy lane on the Burlington county farm

where Italian families from South Philadelphia have been harvesting the blueberry crop 50 years.

'The Family's Not What It Used to Be'

Old Times Are Gone for Field Hands

By LEONARD H. GASHEL
Of *The Inquirer Staff*

"THE family isn't what it used to be."

An Italian field worker was discussing old times with fellow workers one rainy day last week at the Joseph J. White farm near Browns Mills in Burlington county.

"The family" is composed of south Philadelphia Italians who have spent part of their summers working on the farm for more than 50 years. It includes men, women, children and relatives, neighbors, people from the "next block over" and pets.

"When we first got started, many of the workers were new arrivals from Italy," said Isaiah Haines, general manager of the large blueberry and cranberry farm.

Although some Italian still is spoken by the older people at the farm, Haines said the workers now seem a long way removed from "the old country."

Now there are about 70 Italians living in the cedar shingle houses that make up a homogeneous summer settlement on the White farm called Florence.

Prior to the First World War, Haines said, the farm employed up to 500 Italians in late summer and early fall to handpick the cranberry crop.

Besides Florence, the Italian

workers used to be housed in a "twin sister" settlement on the farm called Rome. Today, Rome is largely inhabited by Puerto Rican, Southern Negro and other migrant laborers.

MACHINERY has largely displaced the field hand in harvesting cranberries. Now the workers are used to harvest blueberries—the season lasting from mid-June to August.

The White farm was one of the pioneers in developing cultivated blueberries for large-scale commercial sales. New Jersey is the Nation's largest supplier of blueberries.

"When cranberries were being harvested by hand, Haines said, several thousand Italians from South Philadelphia worked on farms in the area. But for many years now, the White farm has been the only major employer of Italian farm labor in South Jersey.

"It's become sort of a tradition with us," Haines said. "Some of the older people have been coming back to work at the farm each summer for 30 years or more."

From June 18 through last Tuesday, the Italian field hands worked continuously on an early-to-bed, early-to-rise schedule. When the rain came Wednesday they were called in

Continued on Page 2, Column 5



Johnny Fergone, 12, wanders among piles of empty blueberry crates waiting to be filled with berries picked by members of the "family."



Children pass their time in the nursery on the White farm while the rest of the "family," Italian farm workers, pick the blueberry crop.

Good Old Days Are Gone for Field Workers

By LEONARD H. GASHEL

Continued from First Page

from the blueberry fields at 10 A. M.

What did they do for entertainment?

Some drove to the nearest town and went to a movie. Others stayed at the camp and watched television or played cards.

A few sat on their porches, watched the rain, and talked about the old times.

* * *

“REMEMBER how we used to bring accordions and banjos to camp and sing songs about Italy?” one worker recalled. “I haven’t seen a musical instrument in the camp in the last five years.”

“How about all the story telling sessions we used to hold at night after work?” another worker recollected. “We had great story tellers in those days.”

Some of the older women talked about how they used to bake bread in outdoor ovens at the camp and wash their laundry by the side of wells.

Of the eight outdoor bake ovens that once stood in Florence and the four formerly in Rome, only one remains. It doesn’t work but Haines said he was thinking of having it fixed up as some kind of memorial to the old days.

Electricity has replaced the old kerosene lamps at the camp and most of the women have washing machines.

“It’s hard to get the young people to work in the fields anymore,” one of the women said.

“A few years ago, we didn’t have this problem. The parents said we are going and that was that.”

“Now they carry those little radios out to the field with them and listen to the ball games,” another worker remarked.

Most of the workers agreed that the “family” had indeed changed. With movies and television, they no longer have to entertain themselves.

“But we are still like a big family,” a woman said. “We have fun. It’s just that we seem to have lost some of our closeness.”

