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Phyllis A. Hunter

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FARM LABOR IN FLORIDA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

by Phyllis A. Hunter

One thing I find: using the cutlass is a skillful trade. It is a dangerous weapon, and if you not skillful you getting hurt all the time. Sometimes when you board the bus and hold it wrong, it cuts you. I sharpen it every single day. You have to be passing the file on it some regular. If it be dull, you feel the cane heavy like, and it break down your physical. Cutting the cane in itself is also a skillful task, you must be skillful at it. When cutting the cane you must have a free mind. You must not be frightened. You must try not to go in a doubt. To the point where you go in a doubt, you will never make your money for that day ... you must go in sure.

A sugar cane worker in Florida.¹

Agriculture has played a vital role in Florida’s economy for over one hundred years. Detailed documents about soil, crops, produce, transportation, and weather are numerous and readily available. In contrast, the written record is strangely silent about the workers, those men and women who have performed the labor necessary to sustain Florida’s economy. These photographs offer a dramatic visual reminder of their efforts.

Nineteenth-century Florida, like the rest of the Cotton Belt, relied on short staple cotton as the leading cash crop. Farmers grew corn and sweet potatoes for local consumption. Citrus fruit developed rapidly toward the end of the century. By 1899, it provided over one million dollars to the state economy; yet this amounted to less than half of the value of cotton sold in the same year. In the twentieth century, cotton, corn, tobacco, and sweet potatoes continued to support farmers in neighboring states of the Deep South.

The spectacular growth of citrus, garden vegetables and nursery business set Florida on its unique path. The citrus industry, as any tourist can quickly observe, now dominates Florida agriculture, producing in 1982, a harvest worth over one billion dollars. Garden vegetables, and nurseries each yielded one-half billion dollars of produce.²

This impressive growth occurred in spite of a marked decline in rural population. At the turn of the century, farmers and country dwellers represented almost 80 percent of the state’s population. By 1982, the ratio of urban/suburban to rural folk had reversed itself. Surprisingly, the actual number of farmers remained the same. Clearly, mechanization, sophisticated agricultural techniques, and new varieties of vegetables and fruit created an enormous growth in farm productivity.³

Several other products round out the profile of agriculture in the Sunshine State. Following the discovery that Brahman cattle resist tick bites and thrive in a hot climate better than other breeds, Florida has become an important cattle state.⁴ Recently, sugar cane emerged as the state’s second most significant crop in terms of acreage and fourth in crop value.⁵ Sugar cane demands a
tropical climate and therefore can only be planted in the southern part of the state around Lake Okeechobee.

Blacks and immigrants perform most of the basic agricultural labor throughout the state of Florida. Many harvesters are migrant laborers; others, like the cane workers return to southern Florida from their homes in the Caribbean to harvest cane year after year. Photographs in this essay speak to the fertile silence of their work and highlight the significance of agriculture in vacationland.
A large crew of laborers picking tomatoes somewhere in central Florida, circa 1893-95.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Members of the same crew shown above gathered in front of a tomato packing house in the mid-1890s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
A banana grove in south Florida, circa 1895, with what appears to be the owner on the left and a farm worker to the right.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

A primitive spraying outfit for citrus trees at the turn of the century.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Black and white workers picking oranges, circa 1893-95.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Black men and women picking and packing oranges in Hillsborough County at the turn of the century.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Team of oxen pulling a wagon loaded with boxes of oranges from the groves of Dr. H.A. Whitford, located in Ozona in Pinellas County, circa 1900.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.

The packing house of the Waverly Growers Cooperative in Polk County, photographed in 1915.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Planting citrus groves in the Temple Terrace area (Hillsborough County) in 1921. The equipment included both a power-driven tractor (in the middle) and a mule-driven wagon (to the left).

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Workers spraying a young grove near Tarpon Springs, circa 1910.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.
Workers picking grapefruit from young trees near Avon Park (Highlands County) in 1921.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Farm hands picking oranges near Wauchula (Hardee County) in 1920.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
A homemade hay-stacking device operated in the 1920s by members of Pinellas County’s pioneer McMullen family.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.

A farmer and his black field hand in a potato and cabbage field, located in Largo (Pinellas County), circa 1920.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.
Black laborers using a mule to grind sugar cane near Tampa in 1921.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Children using a mule-driven sugar cane grinder.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Harvesting watermelons at Wilser’s Farm in Hillsborough County during the 1920s.

Photography courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Workers loading watermelons on an Atlantic Coast Line freight car in Largo (Pinellas County), circa 1912.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.
Farmworkers, picking cucumbers in 1926.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

2 launderer for migrant vegetable pickers in Lake Harbor (Palm Beach County), shown in 1939 with his scrub tubs, wash table and clothes line.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Seminole Indians herding Florida cattle.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Brahmin cattle were introduced into Florida because they could withstand the heat.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Ranch hands preparing branding irons.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Ranch hands branding cattle in Florida.

Photograph courtesy of USF special collections.

Migrant workers weeding and thinning endless rows of celery near Belle Glade (Palm Beach County) in the 1960s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Farm workers in a tomato field.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

A crew picking beans in Lake Wales (Polk County).

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Picking strawberries in Hillsborough County.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Migrant farm workers living in tents somewhere in Florida during the 1950s or 1960s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.


3 Ibid.


5 Bureau of the Census, *1982 Census of Agriculture*. 

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