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VILLAGES FOR FARM WORKERS?

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In certain parts of South Africa a farmer has a choice between providing accommodation for workers on his farm or employing men (and sometimes women) living in nearby villages. The village system is only possible where farms are small (as in the Western Cape) or adjoin African areas - the so-called homelands - or dorps, and it depends also upon the type of farming. In England, where probably the majority of farm workers lived in villages, accommodation for stock-men was provided on the farms employing them, and the necessity for stock-men to live on the premises is generally recognised. Where farms are large, all the workers must be accommodated there because transport for them is too costly. But on small farms producing fruit, vegetables, and even grain, as here in the Western Cape, there are certain advantages for both workers and employers if workers live in villages.

The chief advantage to the worker is greater independence. During his time off he is free of his employer, just as a factory worker is. If he changes his job, he does not necessarily lose his house. He is likely to be nearer a school, shop, clinic, church than on a farm, and may even have some facility for recreation. His widow has more security, provided she can pay her rent; she is not necessarily required to give up her house. And wives generally enjoy the company in villages.

The chief disadvantage to a worker is that, with the overall shortage of houses, he may not be able to find accommodation anywhere near his work. In England, I found that many farmers had long owned houses in villages in which to accommodate their workers. Over many years there has been a campaign against such 'tied cottages', in which the Labour Party was involved. However tied houses have not been made illegal, as some campaigners wished, for the good reason that, where a farmer was not able to provide a cottage, he would be unlikely (in some areas) to get any worker. In Elmdon, outside Cambridge, I was told in 1975 that, despite the housing shortage, no farmer would dare to evict a widow: the whole village would be against him if he did. Somehow he would have to replace a man who died or went on pension without eviction, though he owned and needed the cottage in which the man in question had lived.

A second disadvantage of villages to workers is that a farmer may well take less responsibility for dependants than when they live on his farm, and in the case of a good employer this may be a serious disadvantage to the wife and children - sometimes widow and children - who, if living on the farm, may receive rations and medical attention even when the breadwinner is sick or dead. Where alcoholism is a problem, it may be a real disadvantage for workers to live near a canteen.

The advantage of villages to the employer, on his side, is that he is free of responsibility for providing housing, free of responsibility for dependants and, should he dismiss a worker, he is not burdened with the eviction of the family. Where farm land is very valuable, as on wine farms, he may not wish to allocate land for cottages and cottage gardens. Moreover, for a fruit grower who needs much additional seasonal labour, a village may provide more additional seasonal workers than can come from the families of regular workers.

South Africa has a long history of villages from which farm workers were drawn, mainly in the Western Cape. The first was Genadendal, originally established by a Moravian missionary, Schmidt, in 1738. He aimed at settling the nomadic Khoikhoi (the so-called Hottentots) in a self-supporting village, growing their own food and learning trades. After five years, the work ceased for Schmidt was restricted. Withdrawal of permits for missionaries is an old South African custom. But in 1793, after a break of 50 years, mission work at Genadendal began again, and flourished. Not only did families living there produce their own food, but they provided workers for neighbouring farms and also, under pressure, men for commando and recruits for the Cape Regiment. (Moodie, V. 36; Marais, 68). Two other villages were soon started by Moravian missionaries, Elim in the Bredasdorp district, and Mamre, eleven miles from Darling. Both were important to farmers as sources of labour. Bethelsdorp, a London Missionary Society station now swallowed by Port Elizabeth, and Hankey on the Gamtoos, fulfilled something of the same function, and there were many other mission villages. Clarksdorp, near Storms River, was conspicuous in providing forestry workers.

Farmers who were short of labour constantly complained that these villages provided refuge for the idle: they insisted that workers with their families should live on farms and be obliged to work there. This complaint was made from 1793 onward, and was repeated again and again against Genadendal (Kruger, 63-79 et passim; du Plessis, appendix 11, notes E and F, 423-428) and other places. Farmers objected to families having any alternative other than working on farms. The objections were repeated as late as 1962 when residents of Elandskloof were dispossessed.

Elandskloof was a farm, 70 miles over the mountains from Citrusdal, which had been granted in perpetuity to the Dutch Reformed Church, provided it was used for missionary purposes. It had been occupied for over 100 years by Coloured families (426 persons in all in 1962) who paid a small rent to the church for the right to build a cottage and graze stock. The occupiers believed that their rights were secure since the land could be used only for a mission, and they were grouped about their church and school. But in 1962, after the clause requiring that the farm be used for mission purposes was abrogated by the State President in Council, the land was sold to a neighbouring farmer for R34 000, and the families evicted. The chairman of the Citrusdal Farmers' Association said that farmers in the Citrusdal district had sufficient work for all members of the Elandskloof community.

During the 1940's and 1950's, and probably for much longer, teams of workers from Elandskloof and from Pniel (above Stellenbosch) and other villages used to go out to work in neighbouring orchards. The leader, owning a lorry, bought a crop early in the season and was then responsible for spraying, picking and marketing it, with the help of members of his own family and neighbours. Until mechanical reaping became widespread, teams of reapers from Elandskloof and other villages worked in the wheat fields of the Western Cape, and reapers from Sotho villages in Herschel, Thabanchu, and Lesotho were essential to maize farmers in the Orange Free State. In forest areas from the Cape to Keiskammahoek - perhaps into Natal - sawyers worked in the same way, buying trees and felling and sawing, both for timber and for firewood, on their own account. Occasionally also a team-leader undertook the planting of trees for a farmer. Sheep-shearing teams have existed for over a hundred years, and fencing teams also, though perhaps only more recently. These teams have come from villages in African areas, and worked from farm to farm.

Leaders of all these teams had a measure of independence, and one of the complaints against Elandskloof by neighbouring farmers in 1962 was that workers living there were 'too independent', just as it had been a complaint against men from Genadendal in 1793, and men from Bethelsdorp a generation later. Opposition by farmers to villages occupied by farm workers has therefore been long-continued, and sometimes very strong.

Nevertheless, in 1972, farmers in the Hex valley were asking that a village for farm workers be established there. Perhaps the main factor was that they hoped the Government would provide subsidised housing. At the same time, in the Elgin-Grabouw area, some workers for whom accommodation was available on farms preferred to rent municipal houses in Grabouw if they could do so. I do not know how widespread the attitude of the Hex river employers or the Grabouw workers is.

Nowadays, full-time workers from such villages as Mamre and Genadendal mostly work in Cape Town, ^{and} those from Sir Lowry's Pass village in Somerset West, but wives and children are still (or were until quite recently) important in fruit picking and vegetable planting. In the Eastern Cape, notably along the borders of African areas, seasonal workers on citrus farms have been drawn from villages. Now, also, the Forestry Department is employing large numbers of men and women, providing daily transport from the home village to the place of work on the mountains. Many small-holders on the Hogsback also prefer to employ men and women with homes in villages, rather than provide accommodation for families. The areas in which this is at present possible is, of course, restricted to 'border areas'. I, myself, do not accept the principle of apartheid at all, and I think there are great advantages in developing villages throughout South Africa from which workers may find employment on farms and elsewhere. I think it is disastrous, for the country as a whole, to require African families to separate in order to eat. Already, we are reaping the whirlwind of separated families.

Two questions emerge here. Does independent contracting by leaders of teams, as for fruit picking, harvesting, shearing, fencing, timber felling and planting necessarily disappear with large scale farming? If it does, do all full-time workers necessarily live on the farm on which they work?

During the last seven years a large number of books have been published in England which describe the changing position of English and Irish farm workers. These studies, together with earlier classics like Cobbett's Rural Rides, J.L. and Barbara Hammond's The Village Labourer, and Flora Thompson's Larkrise to Candleford provide a useful comparison with changing conditions in South Africa. Several of the studies show how real poverty - acute shortage of food - pressed on many rural families until the 1914-1918 war. There were also the problems of loss of pay on days too wet to work, and rheumatism from exposure. From Cobbett (writing in 1821) onward the studies emphasise the importance to farm workers of a vegetable garden attached to each cottage, a pig fed on household scraps and what could be gleaned from the hedgerows, chickens, and a hive for the honey bee. The first three exist among farm workers with whom I am familiar, but fruit and vegetable gardens and bee-keeping certainly require to be fostered, and might partly replace the grazing rights which used to exist, but are inevitably curtailed as farming becomes more intensive.

It is interesting to see that, in England also, it proved much easier to persuade girls to remain in school until they were fourteen or fifteen than it was to keep boys in school. Both boys and girls had to earn as soon as possible, but literacy and manners were more important to girls going into domestic service than to boys going to work on farms, and a ten or twelve year old boy might pick up a few coppers working on a farm. Also the girls had to learn to sew, and this they did in school. In 18th and early 19th century England, as now in South Africa, there was the problem for the young of finding jobs and, when a man had work, of finding a cottage so that he might marry. The genealogies collected for Elmdon, a village outside Cambridge, reflect movement to town. Domestic service was the usual ladder for girls who sought 'a good place' where they might acquire skill. Only in the 20th century did large numbers move into factories around Cambridge or in London.

The English studies reflect certain points of friction, all too familiar here: accusations or evidence of pilfering; unjustified suspicion of it; meanness of an employer over food and time off; ill manners; laziness of a worker; alcoholism; harshness of an employer. All the issues could be matched here and it is instructive to read of them in another situation, uncomplicated by issues of race.

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It is conspicuous that alcoholism among farm workers decreased markedly in England with improved houses which meant that a man, at the end of the day, had somewhere comfortable to sit other than the pub, and with the development of alternative recreation, first cinemas and motor-bikes, then radio and telly. Young men began to take their girl friends to the cinema, rather than drinking in the pub, then married couples listened to the radio and watched telly.

The issues I suggest for discussion, therefore, are:

First, the principle of farm workers living in villages rather than on farms. Is this satisfactory for both employers and employees under any farming conditions in South Africa? What are the arguments in favour of it and against it?

Secondly, if it is satisfactory under some circumstances what precisely are the conditions under which it is preferred?

Thirdly, are independent teams still useful for particular types of work and if so what work?

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