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Maintaining a Stable Labour Force on a  
Fruit Farm in the Northern Boland

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## MAINTAINING A STABLE LABOUR FORCE ON A

### FRUIT FARM IN THE NORTHERN BOLAND

Our farms lie on a plateau in a mountain range about 100 miles north-east of Cape Town and 18 miles to the town. We form part of a small fruit growing area surrounded by grain and sheep farmers in the valley below. When we came here 16 years ago the labourers were accustomed to working from sunrise to sunset including Saturdays and it used to take us most of the day getting round to them all for their customary six tots of wine per day; this amounted to two and a half bottles per day! Weekends frequently were spent in drunken brawls as wine was brewed from freely available kaffircorn and yeast. Such sprees could last from anything from 3 to 5 days when saturation point was apparently reached. Labourers were given rations in lieu of wages and paid sums of money twice a year. These were about R4.00 per year and they were then taken to the village where the money was promptly spent on more wine.

We felt this situation intolerable and that weekly wages should be paid so that an awareness of money could be built up. They were mostly illiterate and were unaware of the denominations of money, let alone what one could buy with it. Also it was undignified for them to be under the influence all day quite apart from the poor productivity. We told them that only one bottle of wine would in future be given at night. Those who could not accept this could leave. Not one left. Other farmers in our area give no wine at all but their farms are dens of shebeening and a constant source of brawls. Those of our staff who over indulge and cause discontent are deprived for two weeks of their wine - the daily reminder of this misbehaviour has to be seen to be able to appreciate its salutary effect. Of late we have not had to meet out such punishment as drunkenness has receded into near non-existence.

#### HOUSING CONDITIONS

At the outset the labourers' cottages were in an appalling state housing anything from a few to 15 in three small rooms. This was rectified by having a cottage for each married couple, the number of rooms depended on the size of the family. Water has been laid on to each house and some have electricity where Escom points are near at hand. It is the custom still today that illegitimate babies are dropped with the grandmothers but here we stand very firm and warn all youngsters that this is not tolerated. We can claim to have achieved success in this field.

In order to encourage the women to take a pride in their home we provide seeds and flowers annually and a yearly prize is awarded. Less litter is now evident around their houses. We make special efforts to purchase suitable furniture so that the essentials are to be found in each home.

### SOCIAL

We encountered a lot of in-quarreling between the labourers on our three farms when they had to work in a team especially amongst the women. This we reduced to acceptable levels by arranging social functions each month. Balanced film shows were much enjoyed where the women took turns to make soup and sandwiches which were sold for funds for their school, church or soup powder from the School Feeding Scheme. We are now planning to provide a coloured TV set in place of the film shows. Physical games like soccer and football have not been a success mainly we believe, because they are weekdays active physically in their work and for recreation they need mental and visual exercise. On the few occasions that we have brought our own TV set to the farm we have noticed a far more general interest to view the box without persuasion as was in the case with films. Even more gratifying is the complete disappearance of idleness over the weekends at which time the younger set migrated to the shebeens leaving their family alone at night while they over indulged.

We feel convinced that television will prove a great boon to the farm labourer as its up-to-dateness will never fail to be attractive to these folk in out-lying areas.

### RELIGION

We actively encourage our people to become members of their church and make special efforts to take them to church regularly. We do not tolerate living together unless married. Failure here leads to one child after another born out of wedlock and dumped on the parents. Similarly, a married couple have a happier family life and home atmosphere and this markedly reduces the illegitimacy on our farms. We have had good results where the bond with the church has been made. Working in advance for their church functions like bazaars, takes weeks of planning and here the team spirit is activated with competitive targets for each group. Participation of members in the running of their church is also encouraged as the status of being deacon or warden is much sought after. All we have to do is to make sure their enthusiasm does not wane. Fortunately we have had the full support of their minister who is held in high esteem by all.

HEALTH

A balanced diet, adequate food and a healthy body ensures a productive labourer on any farm. Their purchases are carefully watched so that luxury overbuying does not occur from our farm shop. Advice is always given even though not sought at times. Basic good food comes first with adequate protein so essential where physical exercise is performed most of the day. We frown on sweets with low nutritional value and encourage wholesome chocolate types. We run a non profitmaking shop purchasing almost always at the best wholesale prices or where specials are offered. Fruit is given throughout the year from our coldstore and vegetables are bought when none is available locally. Medical and dental expenses are paid by the farm but with the newly established dental schools in the Peninsula we are hoping to arrange special sessions where a more conservative approach will be established. This will be an expected uphill struggle as dental clearance is something the labourers look forward to and are proud of.

Family planning is carefully explained to old and young so that each couple has its needs and desires discussed and cared for. We have found hygiene and sex talks of great interest and help enabling them to understand what the PILL is all about. Rainy days are ideal to get such messages over to the whole staff. They now discuss family planning openly - before it was a problem to get the men to allow their wives to take the pill. A clinic is held on our mountain regularly by the Divisional Council and this has been of immense value to us. Maternity cases are dealt with in the town.

With the high C.O.L. the wives are given ideas of how to make more economical use of the expensive items like meat and fish. These form a very large portion of the purchases. Powdered soups are handed out in the winter months as additional protein enriched food and a marked improvement has been noted by the school teachers in the concentration of these pupils.

WAGES

All wage scheduling is done on a productivity basis. Those with administrative and organising abilities are the best paid and special talks are given to them either in groups or alone to sort out inherent weaknesses. Wages vary from R22.00 to R15.00 per 5½ day week with free housing, electricity, water, medical and dental services as well as in most cases subsidised meat and groceries. Wives are paid on a daily basis and average R8.00

per 5 day week. We actively encourage all the wives and single girls to work so that they are engaged for at least 9 months of the year. However, they have shorter working hours so that they can do their domestic chores in time. Frequently an afternoon in a week is given off so that they can catch up with the laundry, baking etc. In this way we ensure that when the husband arrives home at night (we make sure he is in his home before dark so that the children will have some time with their father) he will find the evening meal already cooked. This we have found helps overcome the stresses of married life. Many families earn a substantial total wage in this way and yet we do not interfere with the family life. In this way we have had little necessity to engage seasonal labour. It has been our belief that we would rather pay our own staff throughout the year than get outside contract labour who in fact cannot be relied upon in the years to come. Bonusses equivalent to approximately one month's wages are paid annually but here again productivity and devotion to duty are factors taken into account. We now have a stabilisation fund envisaged whereby labourers will be paid out an additional sum after two successful years. In this way we hope to keep our good staff permanently. The wives are encouraged to have a target at the end of each year. They then buy some special article from the money saved - part of their wages also goes to household purchases with a certain portion retained by them for their end of the year spree. We have found they tire if there is no target at the end. All members of the farm - old and young - are taken to the village at regular times on Saturdays with a view to buying special items not available from the farm shop. There they meet socially and spend time browsing in shops getting to know what there is to buy. The men are constantly reminded that they too are expected to shop and only as a minor item on their shopping list to buy wine if they deem it necessary. Only an amount which they themselves must decide on, should be purchased so that they do not exceed their quota. Over-indulgence with brawls are not tolerated. Those guilty are debarred from the next trip to town. The salutary affect this has, has also to be seen to be appreciated.

Xmas presents we deal with much more personally and much planning goes into this exercise so as to ensure the present is both useful and liked.

Annual holidays are so arranged that almost all of the staff are away simultaneously. We have found a seaside holiday more beneficial and a great success. Here again much careful planning and preparation must precede the trip so as to ensure a smooth trouble free stay. Just giving them a week off and expecting them to find their own way around does not work out.

They remain at home, become bored with the forced idleness and derive no benefit whatsoever. They welcome a return to work which is evidence enough of a failure. It is of importance for them to get completely away from the farm to really derive the best benefit of the holiday:

#### WORK SCHEDULING

A factor in our opinion of utmost importance in maintaining a permanent labour force is active and constant Communication amongst the staff. Adequate background information and explanation must precede any new venture if it is to be successful. Full knowledge of the principles involved, the method to be adopted and the result desired, is essential if a happy team spirit is to be created. We are making more and more use with very pleasant results of the women doing the work formerly the accepted work of the men. Once the fundamental ideas are explained to the girls they take a pride in doing it better than the men. It is important to ensure that the staff understand what is expected of them and why it is to be done in a certain manner if success is to be achieved. Pride of achievement flows automatically. In our opinion communication is absolutely basic and essential.

To facilitate this 'our farm' spirit we have a committee established. This consists of 5 - two are elected by the staff themselves while I nominate the other two with myself as chairman. Monthly meetings are held at which all facets of the farm are discussed. Minutes are kept and all new schemes are well evaluated at such meetings. Staff welfare, social working conditions, housing, recreation etc., all form part of the agenda. These meetings must be frank, open discussions and mostly in committee to have the desired success. We have derived an amazing amount of benefit and insight from these meetings and have simultaneously had our ideas and desires disseminated to the whole staff by these committee members.

We also make much use of Kromme Rhee training centre and will not allow anyone for example, to use a tractor unless he has been on a tractor course. We have sent our young boys on the youth course as well so as to enlighten them to the future of a farm labourer as a career.

To maintain a happy and stable force on a farm requires the farmer to be absolutely honest, fair and strict with whomsoever he deals. Understanding of their way of life aids one at arriving at the correct decision. On several occasions where a real problem has arisen, it is often wise to delay giving a verdict in order to let heated parties cool off until the

following day or whenever the time is ripe for settlement. On such rare occasions we call an emergency meeting of the committee who very efficiently deals with the problem in an understanding and just way. In our opinion it is of great value to have their own considered opinion since we feel they are in many circumstances better able to assess the situation involving their own race. This is particularly true in the outlying rural areas where their culture and way of life differs so much from the city dweller.

Regular informal and unannounced visits to their homes for a chat and sensing of any discord, pays and is much appreciated. One must know how each family is coping and what their needs may be if a harmonious and happy labour team is to be realised today. A sympathetic word at the right moment or a word of encouragement when there is trouble in the home, solves many a problem. It is often best not to have both the husband and wife at home when making such visits as a freer chat will take place if the one is not at home.

A loyal family-spirited labour force who feel not only at home on your farm but feel an actual part of the farm itself are the precursors today of a stable farm labour force. And believe me without them we cannot farm successfully however much mechanisation may lead to believe this a possibility.

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