Recalling Migrant Workers at Grover Farm

Amelia Sanders-Johnson is the granddaughter of two migrant workers who worked at Grover's Farm, and lived at the farm on and off for several years during the 1960s and 1970s. She is now a colleague of West Windsor resident David Parris at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton. Parris asked Sanders-Johnson to share her memories of Grover Farm with readers of the WW-P News.

Here are some details of my grandparents' involvement with the farm owned by Mr. Leroy Grover and their life in Dutch Neck, NJ. My grandparents, Amelia Beatrice and James Henry Rose, first came up to New Jersey in the late 1950s from Virginia as migrant workers. After their first year working for Mr. Grover, he asked if they knew of anyone who could provide 20 reliable hard-working farm workers for the upcoming season.

My grandfather, James Henry, said, "Sure, we can."

And the following season they showed up with two truckloads of farm workers from Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The workers were predominantly African-American, and a few were either Puerto Rican or Mexican. In just one year my grandparents had gone from being migrant workers to becoming contractors of migrant workers. My grandmother Beatrice Rose provided meals, cigarets, and a juke joint to dance in, while my grandfather James Henry Rose managed the workers.

Mr. Grover provided lodging for the workers; a two-story house for the single men; a small-two room house for one couple, Joe and Flossie Brooks; and a three-room house for my grandparents. In the 1950s there were outhouses, but I remembered my grandfather and my uncles building a shower house and communal bathroom made of concrete and corrugated metal. One side was for men and the other side was for women. Eventually my grandparents added a bathroom to the back of their three bedroom house. All building materials were provided by Mr. Grover. They also built a white picket fence around their house so that my younger sister and I and our cousins could play in the yard.

When farming season slowed my grandparents sold quality second-hand clothing such as Princess Anne coats and cashmere sweaters at the Englishtown Auction. This continued for many years until they eventually opened two stores, one in Cheapside, Virginia, near Cape Charles, Virginia; and another operated by my mother, their only daughter, and her husband (Mary and Melvin Sanders) in Parksley, Virginia.

In addition, my grandmother worked as a domestic in Princeton for Mr. Bertram and Mrs. Corella Bonner [the Bonners were benefactors of the Bonner Foundation that is now headquartered in Princeton]. My grandmother also had a working yet close relationship with another prominent family in West Windsor, the Colemans. She worked for them in their farm house as a cook, and ran most of the domestic chores including helping to raise the two sons when they were young. These two sons would grow up to run several car dealerships in the Trenton, Hamilton, and Lawrenceville area including Coleman Pontiac.

My grandfather worked in construction, helping to complete Jadwin Gym of Princeton University all the while living on the Grover farm.

My grandparents personified the American dream; they worked hard, were willing to take chances and always willing to help anyone. My grandfather was a great story teller, dreamer and a practical joker; my grandmother was the constant one who kept everything on course working cooperatively to make sure every plan succeeded. We had wonderful times with them.

I loved living at Grover's Farm. My father was from Oklahoma, so we were used to rural living and loved being on the farm. We would smell the scent of the fresh strawberries in the early spring, and know that it was soon time for the baby pheasants to be born. We would go through the farm looking for the baby pheasants. We would get up when my grandmother got up, at 5 a.m., and do what my grandmother did around the farm.

I was very nosy and curious, and my grandmother would say that I was the nosiest child she had ever met. I was always asking people where they were from, and how they ended up here. I was interested in their stories, so my grandparents bought me a Princess typewriter and I would type up little newspapers for the people on the farm.

And there were always lots of books. We didn't watch TV, but we always read books. There was always a basket filled with books for us. My grandfather and mother were great storytellers, too, which added to my interest in writing. Because of this, I ended up becoming an English major at Douglass College (now part of Rutgers University) and became a teacher. I now work in information technology at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton.

We also had a lot of family around us at Grover's Farm. Eventually most of my grandmother's siblings moved into the area and most of their children attended Dutch Neck Elementary. My grandparents lived on Grover's farm until the late 1970s when my grandfather died. My grandmother lived to see me graduate from Douglass College and on into the 21st century; she passed away about five years ago.

— Amelia A. Sanders Johnson