

What was it like to work tobacco?

Overview

[How To](#)

[What's Next](#)

[Related Resources](#)

Provided by:

Department of Education

Overview

This topic can be integrated into unit on business and labor; on Great Society programs, on immigration and migration from 1950 to 1980.

Lesson plan contents:

- [Introduction](#)
- [Supporting questions](#)
- [Purpose](#)
- [Historical context](#)
- [How to: Classroom setup](#)
- [What's next: Informed action](#)
- [Resources](#)

Compelling Questions:

**What is it like to be a migrant worker?
What sources are the best to use to back up your
argument?**

Introduction

Migrant agricultural workers were among the last laborers to organize.

In Connecticut, where shade grown tobacco was one of the largest agricultural exports, tobacco growers hired migrants in the 1940s and 1950s from historically Black Colleges, and high school students from Florida and Pennsylvania. They also hired local high school students. By the late 1950s through the 1970s, the growers encouraged migrants to come from Puerto Rico. In the camps where the migrants lived, and in the fields, the workers and employers disagreed on the quality of working and living conditions.

Supporting Questions

Page numbers refer to the [Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks](#)

- What was it like to work tobacco?
- What type of economic, social, and political opportunities were available — or denied to — different groups of people such as African Americans, Latinos, indigenous peoples, and women in the 1950s? (p. 137)

Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks

- What types of economic, social, and political opportunities were available — or denied — to different groups of people such as African Americans, Latinos, indigenous peoples, and women in the 1950s? (p. 137)
- INQ 9–12.6 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- INQ 9–12.8 Identify evidence that draws information directly and substantively from multiple sources to detect inconsistencies in evidence in order to revise or strengthen claims.

Purpose

- To understand what factors affect the workplace and what roadblocks workers face when they try to improve their working conditions

- To understand the difference between a newspaper article and a newspaper advertisement

Historical Context

Teachers and students can read Ruth Glasser's article "Tobacco Valley: Puerto Rican Farm-Workers in Connecticut," in *Connecticut Explored*, from the Fall of 2002. This article puts tobacco farming in the context of U.S. and Puerto Rican history starting in 1898. Glasser also tells the story of the attempts by tobacco workers to organize into unions in the early 1970s.

What was it like to work tobacco?

Overview

How To

What's Next

Related Resources

Provided by:
Department of Education

How To

Classroom Setup

Students will work in groups and have a full class discussion.

Procedure

Activity 1 (20 minutes)

Have students read the two headlines in the *Hartford Courant* from August 1973. Put them in groups of four to ask questions about these headlines, using the QFT method. Visit [this link](#) for directions.

Students can wonder about the author, audience, and content of these written pieces. Have them mark their 3 best questions in light of our compelling question. How do people without power get power? Use this exercise as a springboard to reading the articles.

Migrants' Dissatisfaction Growing Toward 'Tough' Tobacco Camps

THE TRUTH ABOUT SHADE TOBACCO WORKERS

Activity 2

Ask students to brainstorm about what makes an advertisement in the newspaper different and the same from a newspaper article. They should have something like this:

Article	Advertisement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reporter researches the information• Talks to multiple sources• Article edited• People who it is about are not paying for it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Company provides the text• From point of view of company• Article written by the company to describe the company point of view• Company pays for article

Activity 3

Students will read [Elissa Papirno's "Migrants' Dissatisfaction Growing toward 'Tough' Tobacco Camps," *Hartford Courant*, Aug. 13, 1973.](#)

While they read, they should list the complaints of workers (that is, what their dissatisfactions are) and who are their allies and enemies? [Download worksheet.](#)

Worker Dissatisfaction	Growers' Answer
Dissatisfactions:	
Allies:	
Enemies:	

Their charts might include:

Migrants' Dissatisfaction Growing

Toward "Tough" Tobacco Camps,
Aug. 13, 1973

Growers' Answer

Dissatisfactions:

Wages in Puerto Rico

Work hard

Food bad

Poor health care -No Spanish
speakers in health facility; Dirty,
crowded

Living quarter squished - 4 men to a
room, open bathrooms

Nothing to do in free time but sleep
or drink

No freedom

Trouble caused by younger
workers

Workers arrested for drinking,
disorderly conduct, political activity -
thrown out of camps

Want worker representation in
yearly negotiation of the contract
between the growers and the Puerto
Rican labor department

Allies:

Springfield based New England
Farmworkers council, funded by US
Office of Economic Opportunity and
the Department of Health,
Education, and Welfare

META - Ecumenical Ministry for
Puerto Rican Farmworkers - church-
funded group with specific goal of
unionizing the workers.

Enemies:

Shade Growers Agricultural
Association - barred

META organizers from Camp
Windsor

Workers afraid they will get fired
Puerto Rican Department of Labor
supposed to be overseeing the
camps

Have a discussion with the following questions:

- Do you think the workers are telling the truth?
- Is this article believable?
- This is an article that has been read by an editor. What would the editor require of Papirno, the writer?
- How does this information fit with what you thought in looking at the headlines in Activity 1?

Activity 4

Students will read [“The Truth about Shade Tobacco Workers.”](#)

This 1973, full-page ad was written by the Shade Growers Association to answer the dissatisfaction of the tobacco workers. The organization was made up of the owners of the three biggest tobacco companies and several smaller ones in the Tobacco Valley. Everyone should read the introduction. Then split the 9 sections among the class, take notes, and share your information. [Download worksheet.](#)

“The Truth about Shade Tobacco”

Hartford Courant advertisement by The Shade Tobacco Growers

Agricultural Association, August 26, 1973, p. 44A

1. Introduction

The Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association and its members are currently the victims of what we believe to be a series of false and unsubstantiated attacks in the press and on radio and television distorting labor conditions of their workers. These charges have emanated from a small self-appointed and self-proclaimed “defender” of farm workers, the so-called Ecumenical Ministry to Puerto Rican Farmworkers (META). Although it represents itself as wanting to “organize” and “unionize” the workers, META is not a labor union and has no substantial support among the workers. Its leaders lack sufficient background or familiarity with the actual conditions in the labor camps to qualify as their spokesmen. Nevertheless, META’s reckless, untrue and self-serving statements have been widely

disseminated by local news media without adequate checking into either their accuracy or the group's background and true purposes and without an opportunity to the growers to fully respond to these unwarranted attacks.

2. Living Quarters and Campus

The many distortions and misrepresentations of facts are causing community concern and threaten the stability of the shade tobacco industry and the employment opportunities extended to the thousands of workers who annually receive wages aggregating more than \$25 million. Not only is the payment of these wages a vital contribution in the economic welfare of Connecticut and Western Massachusetts, but the shade tobacco growers also make a total capital investment in the area of more than \$35 million annually in order to carry on their operations. The purchases of materials, supplies, services and other items used by the shade tobacco industry are a major source of income to many local business concerns, all of which support jobs for many workers in this area.

One of the victims of this series of attacks upon the shade tobacco industry may be the Association's summer youth program. This model program is the largest single employer of 14, 15, and 15 year old students in the nation and has made possible the continuing education of hundreds of thousands in high school and college. The youth program has won high praise by educators and by members of Congress who have had occasion to review it. It is particularly important at this time, when jobs for teenagers are scarce and the federal government is spending hundreds of millions of dollars annually to provide summer work, to keep idle youth off city streets. Many of these teenagers are being discouraged from working on the shade tobacco farms because of the strife created by META's representatives.

There are many business and professional residents of the Connecticut River Valley who have in the past worked their way through school with the help of income earned during summer employment in shade tobacco. It would be most unfortunate if the present youth are denied the same opportunity as a result of META's misrepresentations.

3. Puerto Rican Season Workers

The seasonal workers from Puerto Rico voluntarily come to this area to work in the shade tobacco fields. They select this employment, although other types of agricultural work in other areas of the United States are offered to them. Their presence here is in no way compulsory and is entirely a matter of their own choice. Many return here year after year.

These seasonal workers from Puerto Rico represent at the peak less than one tenth of the total labor force in shade tobacco. They are hired under regulations strictly enforced by the U.S Department of Labor, the Massachusetts and Connecticut Departments of Labor and Agriculture and the Puerto Rican Government. They are hired only when acute shortages of local adult-labor exist. They receive many advantages not accorded to other farm workers in the United States, including a minimum work guarantee of 120 hours every three weeks, grower subsidized meals, comprehensive healthcare, free housing, bonuses, their entire transportation cost from and to Puerto Rico on completion of their contract, and other benefits which the growers are required to guarantee by the Government of Puerto Rico.

These Puerto Rican workers are not exploited. They are actually high cost labor -- enjoying earnings and benefits not accorded to most other farm laborers in the United States. Members of this group all work under an agreement negotiated on their behalf by the Puerto Rican Government. They have added protection by having available at all times the services of a representative of the Government of Puerto Rico who visits the camps regularly and to whom they bring complaints for prompt adjustment. These workers also democratically elect their own representatives to the New England Agricultural Workers Health Council on which they are the majority, and they must regularly with officials in the Association to discuss any matters of employment requiring adjustment. Attempts have been made to disrupt and prevent these elections, which are completely open and free.

4. Wage is One of Highest in Agriculture

The present guaranteed minimum wage of these workers is \$1.90 an

hour -- far above the present federal minimum agricultural wage of \$1.30 an hour. The shade tobacco industry has always been far in advance of other segments of agriculture in wage standards and other labor conditions. The growers are paying one of the highest agricultural wage i the entire United States to all of their workers. The \$1.90 hourly wage paid by the shade tobacco growers is higher than that paid to Puerto Rican agricultural workers in other states, including New Jersey, where the largest number are employed. It is much higher than these individuals could earn in Puerto Rico.

5. Recreation, Education, and Religious Services

The Association provides many recreational facilities -- all ignored in these attacks which have been directed primarily against Camp Windsor. These facilities include a recreation building, a baseball diamond, and a basketball court. The Association furnishes sport equipment and uniforms for softball teams in competition with teams of other camps. Indoor and outdoor television is provided. Free movies with feature films, are shown three evenings a week. There are educational programs, including the teaching of English and health education. Spanish language programs are transmitted from F.M. broadcasting radio stations throughout the camp.

A chapel provided by the Association at Camp Windsor is attended by the workers of all religious faiths. Bilingual services are conducted by ministers of the various faiths on Sundays and various secular days of the week.

All workers are encouraged to participate in and enjoy these activities.

6. Food

The Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association years ago pioneered in establishing a high standard of food in consultation with experts from the U.S.

Department of Labor and dieticians from the University of Puerto Rico designed menus meeting these standards and furnished in excess of 3500 calories served daily. There are no restrictions on the quantity each worker may eat in the Association's dining room. The menus are regularly submitted to the Puerto Rican government for their approval.

The kitchen and the dining room facilities are subject to unannounced inspections by the Connecticut Health Department. The workers are charged \$2.50 for three well-balanced meals a day, well below the cost of these meals to the growers. Officials and the staff of the Association daily eat the same food from the same kitchens as that prepared for the workers. The Association will continue to meet the high standards it has set with respect to the quality and quantity of the food.

7. Workers Enjoy Complete Freedom of Association

The workers enjoy complete freedom of movement and association. They take pride in their freedom, independence, dignity, and their own ability to enjoy their rights as US citizens. All workers are free to leave and return to the camp at will and they do so regularly as residents and businessmen in the area are well aware from the workers' frequent visits and shopping in Windsor, Hartford, Springfield and other nearby communities. There are absolutely no restrictions on the workers' freedom of movement or association. However, to prevent visits to the camp by dope pushers, gamblers, and similar undesirables, and to maintain order at night when the workers want to rest and sleep, the Association has required visitors in the camp to first identify themselves and ordinarily to make such visits during regular visiting hours. Reasonable exceptions have always been made when necessary. A fence around the camp, except at the entrance thereof, helps to protect the privacy of the workers and their right not to be constantly annoyed against their wishes by outsiders. There is no gate at the main entrance to Camp Windsor and there never has been.

8. Outside Efforts Resented by Workers

The vast majority of Puerto Rican workers protested the activities of outside organizers which have infringed upon the workers' right to privacy, prevented many of them from going to work when they wanted to do so, and created disruptions that have caused serious concern to local law enforcement officials.

With such a large community interest at stake, it is difficult to understand why the local press, radio and television stations have given such prominent attention to misrepresentation and distortion of

fact relating to the shade tobacco industry that have come from an organization of a political character that has denounced the United States as "imperialistic" and seeks to embarrass the democratic government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico by attacking the farm labor program.

This organization has openly announced that its intention is to halt the hiring of all Puerto Rican farm workers in the United States and destroy the migrant farm worker program, although this program provides these workers far better wages and working conditions -- and many more jobs -- than are available in Puerto Rico, where the unemployment rate recently dropped to a low of 12.5 percent.

Instead of trying to protect the workers and improve their working conditions, this organization has urged the workers to "tear up their contracts," which are their legal guarantee of work and fair working conditions. Its only goal for the workers is to send them home without a job or savings.

9. Health Program is Nation's Finest

The Association for many years had had in operation what is undeniably the best and most comprehensive program of health care for agricultural workers that exist in the country, under which efforts are made to seek out and control all contagious diseases, including tuberculosis. This program has been carried on with the full cooperation of the Connecticut State Health Department for more than 20 years, and it includes chest X-rays, which doctors and health authorities recognize as the best and only reliable test for tuberculosis. When the State of Connecticut discontinued its free chest X-rays for the workers a year ago, the Association, instead of shifting to the less costly but unreliable Tine test, purchased its own X-ray equipment in order to provide the best possible protection to the workers. More than a million dollars has been invested by the shade tobacco growers in the Association's health care program. The new Agricultural workers Hospital in Windsor, Connecticut, which cost the growers more than \$350,000, was opened in 1971 and is the only state-licensed hospital for farm-workers in the entire nation. With the help of a grant under the Migrant Health Act, the Association last year began providing the workers a complete medical program of both outpatient and hospital health care, which even includes free dental

treatments.

10. The Association's Commitment

The Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association and its individual members are proud of their unrivaled record of concern and positive action to improve the welfare of the workers. The Commissioner of Agriculture of Connecticut has stated flatly that the Association's Camp Windsor, scene of recent attempts to cause disruption, is "the finest camp in the world." It is visited regularly by government officials, social and agricultural leaders from throughout the nation who hail it as a model farm labor establishment. Since its founding, the Association has sponsored and been instrumental in the enactment of practically all the laws protecting the safety, housing, health and working conditions of agricultural workers in Connecticut and Massachusetts, which are among the most progressive in the nation. The Association will continue to provide its workers with the highest standards of housing, food, medical care and working conditions to be found anywhere in agriculture, and it invites the cooperation of all responsible groups in its continuing efforts to improve them. It will never, however, bow to threats, lies, and intimidation from organizations that do not represent the true interests of the workers, but, rather, seek to use and mislead them for their own selfish, political ends.

Section	Key Points Addressing Dissatisfaction
1. Intro	
2. Living Quarters and Campus	
3. Puerto Rican Seasonal Workers	
4. Wage is One of Highest in Agriculture	

5. Recreation, Education,
Religious Services

6. Food

7. Workers Enjoy
Complete Freedom of
Association

8. Outside Efforts
Resented by Workers

9. Health Program
is Nation's Finest

10. The
Association's Commitment

After students have filled in the chart, they should go back to the first chart they filled out and share the information to see how the growers addressed each issue.

Class Discussion:

- After reading both pieces, what is believable in each?
- What do you not believe and why?
- What else might you do to find out what these camps and this work was like?
- Would you want to be a tobacco worker in the 1970s? Why or why not? Would you like to be a grower in the 1970s? Why or why not?

What was it like to work tobacco?

[Overview](#)

[How To](#)

[What's Next](#)

[Related Resources](#)

What's Next

Informed Action

Add an exhibit to the Luddy/Taylor CT Valley Tobacco Museum which expresses the working conditions and the attempts of workers to organize over wages, working conditions, and living conditions.

Provided by:

Department of Education

What was it like to work tobacco?

[Overview](#)

[How To](#)

[What's Next](#)

[Related Resources](#)

Related Resources

[Dawn Byron Hutchins, "Laboring in the Shade," Connecticut Explored, Summer 2011.](#)

[Connecticut Valley Agricultural Museum aka Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum.](#)

[Glasser, Ruth. "Tobacco Valley: Puerto Rican Farm Workers in Connecticut." Connecticut Explored. Fall 2002. Accessed May 23, 2017.](#)

["Migrants' Dissatisfaction Growing Toward Tough Tobacco Camps." Hartford Courant, August 13, 1973, Accessed May 23, 2017.](#)

[The Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association Advertisement, "The Truth about Shade Tobacco," Hartford Courant , August 26, 1973, p. 44A.](#)

[Collected news articles and ads from Hartford Courant](#)

Provided by:

Department of Education