

# Remembering “The Contract”: Recollections of Bahamians

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1943 and 1965 an estimated 30,000 Bahamian men and women migrated temporarily to the United States on short-term contracts to work in the agricultural sector. The programme, known as the British West Indies Labor Program, was created to fill labour shortages caused when Americans left the farms to work in more profitable war industries or to serve in the armed forces during World War II. In the Bahamas the programme was sometimes referred to as “The Contract” because each worker signed a contractual agreement to work in the United States. Drawing upon oral histories collected in the early 1990s, this paper uses the recollections of former Contract workers to explore the personal, economic and social ramifications of their experiences working on the Contract.

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## INTRODUCTION

April 2013 will mark the 70th anniversary of the launch of the farm labour programme known in the Bahamas as “The Contract”. (The programme was also sometimes referred to as “The Project”, Greenberg, 1978; Craton, 2007). The programme carried that name because each worker signed a contract with the U.S. Farm Security Administration during the government-to-government era of the programme (1943-1947) or the worker signed a tripartite contract with an employer and the Government of The Bahamas during the government-committee phase of the programme (1947-1965). Scholars have suggested that The Contract left a significant mark upon Bahamian society. Academic historians Craton and Saunders (2000) for

example have pointed to the economic impact of the programme, noting that wages earned on The Contract enabled significant numbers of black Bahamians to leave subsistence farming in the Out Islands or to leave industries in which they worked primarily for others in order to start their own businesses (2000, p. 293). Independent scholar Cordell Thompson (personal communication, November 1990) has claimed that the programme wrought tremendous disruption among families, with men returning from the United States to find their wives carrying children for other men, or even to find, after they had sent home large portions of their earnings, both wives and earnings missing. What is also apparent is that some former Contract workers rose to prominence

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nationally and internationally, among them Sir Clifford Darling, Governor General of The Bahamas (1922-2011), Amos Ferguson, celebrated Bahamian artist (1922-2009) and Bishop Brice Thompson, National Overseer of the Church of God of Prophecy from 1974-1999. This paper explores some recollections of several former Contract workers who spoke in the early 1990s about their experiences working on The Contract.

### ***The Contract, 1943-1965***

Under The Contract, from 1943 to 1965, an estimated 30,000 Bahamians migrated temporarily to the United States to work in agriculture in over 20 states.<sup>2</sup> The majority of contract workers were black men. Women also went on The Contract but accounted for fewer than 10% of contracted workers. An individual worker might work in several states, for example harvesting tobacco in Tennessee, apples in New York, corn in Minnesota, peanuts in North Carolina, and citrus, sugar cane or beans in Florida. Again, instead of, or in addition to, cultivating and harvesting produce, he or she might care for livestock, cook for other workers in labour camps, or operate and maintain farm equipment. Workers often lived in labour camps with hundreds of other workers, such as the Okeechobee Farm Labor Supply Center in Belle Glade, Florida, which in July 1943 housed 850 Bahamian workers. At other times, workers might live in quarters on a private farm. The quarters might be tents or buildings. Married workers might have quarters to themselves. Single men and single women might have separate quarters. Though accommodations were spartan, they included amenities such as flush toilets, electric lights, and radios (Craton, 2007, p. 100).

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics provided in *Study of Population and Immigration Problems* (U.S. House of Representatives, Roberts, & Smith, 1963, pp. 108, 112) indicate the numbers of Bahamians admitted into the United States annually under The Contract. However they do not explain whether some of the admittances refer to re-entries of the same worker.

### ***Temporary Farm Labor Programme***

A series of agreements between the Bahamian government and other parties brought into being and maintained The Contract. Following threats of labour unrest in the Bahamas, the Governor of the Bahamas at the time, the Duke of Windsor, approached the United States government with a plan for providing temporary labourers for the American agricultural sector. The series of agreements were seen as an extension of "The Project", an initiative which involved the building of airfields on New Providence in 1941-42.

The first agreement between the United States government and the Bahamian government was signed on March 16, 1943. The Bahamian government selected workers and paid their transportation by air to the United States. The United States government managed the American side of the programme until 1947. In 1947 the Bahamas Employers Committee took over management of the American side of the programme from the United States government and continued to operate it until 1965. The Committee included organizations such as the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association (FFVA), Birds Eye, and the Green Giant Canning Company. The FFVA took the lead among the employers in organizing the recruitment of Bahamians. Mr. George Sorn, a retired executive vice president and general manager of the FFVA explained that the United States government advised private employers that it had no further need for the programme but would raise no objection if the employers wished to assume responsibility for it (G. Sorn, personal communication, February 1993). The Bahamas Employers Committee then negotiated annual agreements with the Bahamas government. The programme ended in 1965, with the Bahamas government declining to conclude further agreements.

The Bahamas was by no means the only country from which the United States Government arranged to import farm labourers during the 1940s. In August 1942, for instance, the United States government negotiated a formal agreement with Mexico that created the Emergency Farm Labor Program, also known as the Bracero Program. As with Bahamians, Mexican workers went to the United States to fill labor shortages in the agricultural industry. They worked on farms in California, Texas and Arizona. Between 1943 and 1945, each year between 50,000 to 60,000 Mexican labourers worked in the United States on the Bracero Program (Violet, 1978, p. 16). Similarly, the United States government recruited labourers from Jamaica to work in its agricultural industry. Like Bahamians, Jamaicans were recruited within the framework of the British West Indies Labor Program created by the United States Government in March 1943.

It was as a result of the exigencies of war that the United States government established the British West Indies Labor Program. By March of 1943 the United States had been fully involved in World War II for 15 months and agricultural workers had been leaving farms in large numbers. Some had gone to work in war industries, which paid higher wages than did farm work, while others had been drafted into the armed services by the Selective Service System. Labour migration away from farms impeded the efforts of many farmers to produce enough food for the 200 million persons—Americans and citizens of allied and other countries—whom, the *Times* of London wrote, the United States was committed to feeding ("U.S. farm prices", 1943, p. 7). From around the country farmers urged policymakers to help them to secure laborers. Thus Kenneth Parker, president of the Parker Pen Company, writing to the Department of Agriculture from Wisconsin,

outlined the 1942 experience of a tenant farmer charged with operating Parker's farm:

Considerable losses were occasioned by the unavailability of labor, particularly in the cases of quickly perishable crops like tomatoes. My farm alone lost something like twelve acres of the tomatoes for lack of pickers and shortage of labor in the canning factories (Parker, 1943).

J. G. Deriso and George Penrose, chairman and secretary respectively of the Miami Area Committee of the Food Distribution Administration, summarized the challenge facing farmers in that area by February 1943 in a telegram addressed to congressional representatives in Washington, D.C.:

Our committee after thoroughly investigating farm labor shortage as it affects production and harvesting South Florida fresh vegetables and fruits, find that a tremendous unnecessary loss of such crops is inevitable (*sic*) unless immediate action is taken to alleviate this labor shortage. Present methods of importing domestic labor from other states are completely inadequate both as to quantity (*sic*) and quality (Deriso & Penrose, 1943).

Demands by agricultural growers on the East Coast of the United States for temporary labour due to wartime labour shortages contributed to Bahamians' migration on The Contract. What also contributed to Bahamians' participation in The Contract was the Bahamas government's receptivity to the idea of exporting Bahamian labour. The domestic tourist industry had collapsed as a result of the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941. The construction of two airbases in New Providence, which had begun in May 1942 and employed over 2,000 workers, would soon be complete and policymakers worried that widespread unemployment would arise. Saunders (1985,

p. 445) writes that the Colonial government moved quickly to negotiate The Contract.

Bahamians responded readily to the opportunity to win employment and strengthen their economic position. Recruitment proceeded rapidly. During April 1943, initially 1,885 Bahamians were transported by air to the United States. Another 4,698 persons followed later that year. At first labourers were assigned to work in Florida. Over the course of five years more than 15,000 workers were recruited to work across the country (see Table 1). In 1945, in addition to the 1,978 workers recruited, under a separate arrangement between the two governments, 91 white Bahamians were recruited to work on dairy farms.

Table 1  
*Numbers of workers recruited*

Year	Number
1943	4,698
1944	3,048
1945	2,100
1946	2,690
1947	2,705
Total	15,241

Note: Adapted from: *Temporary worker programs: Background and issues* by U.S. Library of Congress, 1980, p.17.

These numbers were large indeed in relation to the size of the Bahamian population. The 5,762 Bahamians who were working on The Contract on July 1, 1944 represented roughly one tenth of the national population (Rasmussen, 1951, pp. 241-244). During the years 1948–1962, thousands more Bahamian workers were admitted into the United States under the programme.

**Contract Voices**

Who were these workers and why did they go on The Contract? Remelda Bodie was a housewife with two children who wanted to earn more money in order to take care of her children and make a better life for herself. She went on The Contract in the 1940's, following her husband, an unskilled worker,

who had already left for the United States:

Well we heard about [The Contract]. He was sick then, but still he decided that he was going because it was better than anything here. Was no work here to do. I think it was the time when they was doing some construction work in Soldier Road or some place down there, but anyhow he was a truck driver down there. But it was better to go on the project cause they give a good seventy-five cents to send home to the family and they was gonna pay good and all of that. And it was better. It was nothing here in The Bahamas at that time (Bodie, 1993).

Calvin Bethel, who went on The Contract in 1951, ran away from home in order to escape material hardship and what he saw as the lack of a future (Bethel, 1992). Samuel Miller decided to go on The Contract after he was laid off from a job with Bahamas Airways. He went on The Contract in 1950 (Miller, 1991).

The wage provisions stipulated for Bahamian workers fluctuated over the 22 years of the programme. Generally speaking, during the first phase of the programme, under the government-to-government agreements, workers were promised a wage of whatever level prevailed in the area where they were working, but, in any event, of not less than 30 cents per hour. They were guaranteed employment for three quarters of the period of their contracts, not counting Sunday or one other day in each period of seven days. Stipulated arrangements took effect in cases where workers were underemployed (Rasmussen, 1951, p. 235). Workers' individual contracts, which were implemented under the overarching agreements, included more detailed explanations of the provisions relating to compensation arrangements.

In the actual running of the programme, take-home pay could vary widely, depending upon

whether workers were paid by a unit of time, for example a day, or were instead paid by the level of output, for example, the number of oranges picked. Remelda Bodie recalls having earned a handsome \$40.00 per week while working as a cook in the kitchen of a camp in Virginia (Bodie, 1993). Calvin Bethel recalls that in Vero Beach, Florida, in 1951, the prevailing wage in the area was \$6.01 (Bethel, 1992).

Contract workers worked hard for their money. Samuel Miller and Calvin Bethel describe work conditions in Vero Beach, Florida:

We was workin' over in Wabasoo, we was workin' over the beach, the beach side. Mosquitoes was there like you ain' never see in your life. You could rake your han' like this an' grab a hand full o' 'em. Mosquito was so bad until we had [to] smoke the trees with the tractor while we pick the fruit.

I got out there morning times and we had this much ice on top o' the water, when you walk you could hear the ice breakin'. Sometime the snake is sittin' there 'bout froze. Then your toes—when you get out there, maybe out there in an hour or two, you don' feel like you had no toes (Miller, 1991).

The work could be dangerous. Poisonous snakes were only one hazard. Workers had to be careful not to fall from ladders when picking (Bethel, 1992).

Unsurprisingly, former Contract workers report positive relationships with some employers and difficulties with others. "He was very nice to us" said Remelda Bodie of her employer in Virginia. "We used to take our food on the farm and cook and then he used to say, come in the house and look around. He was the best white man I ever see to be that nice" (Bodie, 1993). H. R. Bethel, who worked in Vero Beach, Florida, became

the protégé of an employer who entrusted to him the management of his several hundred employees, the power to sign checks on his behalf, and the trading of his securities on the New York Stock Exchange (Bethel, 1991). On the other hand, Calvin Bethel recalls protesting in 1956 the wage levels of an employer in Pompano Beach, Florida who paid \$5.50 per day for a 19-hour workday (Bethel, 1992). Samuel Miller recalls the kind of gratuitous harassment that workers could encounter:

We had this fella, he would come and go and he would check each [piece of] fruit. He had to see if you had the right size ... So what he would do, he would kick the box—you done pick a whole box of fruit—kick it over, check 'em, an' he leave 'em on the ground till you pick 'em up. He wouldn't put his hand [in the box], he'd kick it over, check every one o' 'em, then he would [say]: "Pick that up, boy" (Miller, 1991).

### **Racism**

The government-to-government agreements addressed the question of how black workers were to be treated. They stated that workers were not to suffer racially discriminatory acts of any kind. In doing so they extended to Bahamian workers the protection of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order No. 8802, also known as the Fair Employment Act (1941), which prohibited discrimination in employment because of race, colour, or national origin with a view to supporting the war effort. In the southern United States, legal segregation, implemented through Jim Crow laws, still governed interactions between blacks and whites. Notwithstanding the principle expressed in the inter-governmental labour agreements, workers did encounter racist attitudes and practices. Donald Rolle, who went on *The Contract* in April 1943, recalls that at that time the sheriff of a particular town in Florida did not allow

blacks to be in the town after 6:00 pm. They had to return to neighbouring Gifford, where blacks lived (Rolle, 1991). Remelda Bodie speaks of the novelty of such practices as having to go to the back door of a liquor store in order to be waited on, having to put a covering on her head before trying on a hat, and having to put a stocking on her foot before trying on a shoe (Bodie, 1993). Samuel Miller claims that after the relative freedom of living in Nassau, adjusting to segregation's norms was hard, especially when travelling, because "you couldn't eat what you wanted to eat. If you stop to a place to eat you had to go to the back and you had to wait so long before they serve you and they serve you food you didn't want" (Miller, 1991).

### **Economic Impact**

Even as they acknowledge the challenges to body and mind which working on The Contract presented, some former Contract workers see the programme as having helped them in particular and Bahamians in general. They were able to save enough money from their earnings to lay the foundations of financially more secure lives. Remelda Bodie was able to buy a house (Bodie, 1993). Calvin Bethel was able eventually to purchase fifty acres of land and build a citrus grove in Vero Beach, Florida (Bethel, 1992). Samuel Miller states:

[The Contract] made a one hundred and fifty degree turn in my life. I'm sure—I'm not goin' to say that I'm guessin', I'm sure that if I was in The Bahamas and didn't come to the United States, in the time period that I was in, I wouldn't have nothing [to] compare with what I have now (Miller, 1991).

Calvin Bethel explains:

It made it good for us, workin'. We didn't actually, say, enjoy [working on The Contract]. But the way t'ings was home, it beat home. Anyway you was livin'

better than you was home. An' then it gave you chance to grab at somethin' bigger (Bethel, 1992).

The terms of the agreement surely helped the programme to have the strong material impact which it did. The Bahamian government required that deductions be taken from the pay which each worker received. Part of the deduction went to the worker's family or other persons identified by the worker. Another part went into a savings fund supervised by the Bahamian government. (Rasmussen, 1951, p. 236) At first, 75 cents was deducted from each worker's daily earnings. Later the amount deducted was 25 cents from each dollar. The amount saved, voluntarily and through enforced remittances, could be significant. Samuel Miller, who left The Contract in 1955, recalls that the Labour Office in Nassau had \$1,800 waiting for him, not counting the funds that he had directly sent to a family member (Miller, 1991).

In the eyes of Americans, the programme appears to have been successful. Its economic value to employers was plain. "The Bahamas (*sic*) proved most satisfactory in their eventual out-put (*sic*) during their stay in the Glades, proving profitable to both themselves and the farmer" (Cline, 1943). They got along well with people in the community, in part because the communities needed them and in part because they went on The Contract with the intention of working and to make money.

The workers from the Bahamas who have been brought in ... particularly in New Jersey, are doing a splendid job of farming. They are getting along well and the people have been gracious and considerate of these men and women. They have been well received by the communities, generally, the farmers, and others who need their labor (Rasmussen, 1951, p. 246).

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