

A photograph of a weathered wooden building with a corrugated metal roof and a wooden door, partially covered by green vines. The building has horizontal wooden siding and a dark, textured roof. A wooden door with a latch is visible on the right side. The left side of the building is heavily covered in lush green vines. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

A Poor Migrant Home

with Rich Wisconsin History



by Antonio Saldaña

This scanty migrant house, once my home, was originally located at the Bond Village Migrant Camp on Van Hecke Avenue in Oconto, Wisconsin. Migrant cabins like this one were homes to the hardworking seasonal migrant workers who used to come to Wisconsin to harvest cucumbers for the Bond Pickle Company from the 1930s through the early 1970s. The cabins measured a meager 24 by 14 feet. The majority of these miniscule homes had a front and back door entrance. However, a few of these tiny homes had a back left side door entry.

Because of the small dimensions of the migrant shacks, depending on the size of the family, numerous family members slept directly on the floor with no mattress. Those unfortunate to slumber on the floor would do so with a single blanket which acted as a mattress and another blanket to cover themselves. Some were blessed to have a pillow and others were not. All of these migrant shacks had minimal indoor electricity. The majority of the electrical energy was consumed by the two light-bulb outlets and refrigerators found in every home. A small number of families were lucky enough to own a small modest electric round industrial floor fan to keep them cool during the sweltering and muggy nights.

Beginning in 1949, the state of Wisconsin tried to provide much needed protection for migrant workers, especially in the area of their housing needs. In fact, a special migrant camp law was passed in 1951 and further fortified in 1957 and 1961. The law applied to camps housing six or more migrant workers.

The code of law set minimum standards of space per person, ventilation, toilet facilities, washing facilities, water supply, window screenings, door screening, waste disposal, etc. Unfortunately, the regulations were not always adhered to or enforced. Large families were crowded into shacks with broken or no screens on the windows, a few nails on which to hang clothes, and a small kerosene stove. The receptacles for garbage and the garbage was scattered about. The service building with running hot and cold water was often either lacking or out of order. In a nutshell, there was still a long way to go in migrant housing.

At the Bond Village Migrant Camp there was no indoor running water. Therefore, water needed for drinking, washing dishes, and washing clothes was provided entirely by a few cast iron hand water pumps located throughout the camp. Hot water could be heated on the small kerosene stove or obtained at the only regular indoor hot and cold water faucet located at the sole shower facility. This poorly lit shower facility was a busy place. Eventful because

men, women, and children went there to shower after a long day of work. Hectic because outside there was an old double laundry cement type of sink that was used as a washing machine for those who could not afford to go downtown to use the coin operated laundromat. For this reason, there was never enough hot water for showering. Toilets? Flushing was not necessary. There were only disgusting outhouses.

Life at the Bond Village Migrant Camp was unsophisticated. Nothing about living in a migrant shack brightened or dazzled life. Even so, when it came to the migrant children going to summer school, it was an awe-inspiring sight for the parents.

These children were educationally disadvantaged. Their lifestyle at home was sharply different from the patterns of activity at summer school. The inadequate home environment lacked books, papers, pencils, and other educational resources. Be that as it may, the parents knew that their children would not only learn something educational, but their little ones would eat breakfast, lunch, and a snack before coming home. And sometimes a full stomach was a lot better than a head full of knowledge.

My parents, thirteen siblings, and I survived those dreadful migrant years. Likewise, our historical migrant home endured the elements of time. Fortunately, on November 2017, Pat Drury of Drury Designs Inc. in De Pere, Wisconsin and Nick Backhaus, Director of Operations at Heritage Hill Historical State Park secured the building which was located at the property of Thomas and Jamie Sobush of Pensaukee, Wisconsin. Drury and Backhaus disassembled and transported the building to a temporary location. The DNR must approve the permanent move of the migrant home to Heritage Hill Historical State Park.

Readers interested in making a donation to support the preservation of the cabin can contact Margaret M. Karius, Chief Executive Officer, Heritage Hill State Historical Park, at (920) 448-5150 extension 118.

Sources

Kelly, J. P. "A Timeline of Oconto's Pickle Plant." *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, April 13, 2017. <http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/local/oconto-county/2017/04/13/timeline-ocontos-pickle-plant/100432564/>

Rauschenbush, Elizabeth Brandeis. "The Migrant Labor Problem in Wisconsin." *Madison: Governor's Commission on Human Rights*, April 1962.

Images courtesy of Antonio Saldaña

Left The migrant house that Antonio Saldaña and his family lived in.
Top Members of Saldaña's family and neighbors working in the field.