Brooklyn College last summer had some 67 students working on farms near Red Hook, N.Y. A wider use of student labor is in prospect for the summer of 1944. The following letter, prepared as a partial analysis of the farm labor situation, is reproduced for its informational value. (New York Herald Tribune, November 4, 1942). Faculty Committee on Employment.

On the home front is there any topic which takes precedence in importance over the farm labor shortage? We know that farms are losing regiments of production labor to defense industries, to the Army and to other Federal service. We are informed that thousands of farms are being sold because needed workers are unavailable. As to proposed remedies, we read of price collusions, wage ceilings, freezing farm labor, drafting men for farm work, drafting women for the farms, deferment from military service of farm labor, increased mechanization of farms to reduce labor, et al.

That many able men are making every effort to discover some formula or formulae by which the critical situation may be remedied we may be sure. We must hope so because for most of us there is little else we can do. For the sake of making some aspects of this farm labor more meaningful, however, some concrete facts are offered here, together with suggestions based on observations made during the last few months, and also on an interest in farm problems which is nearly forty-five years in duration.

On a farm in central Missouri two workers employed by the day, when weather permitted, received during the first part of this year $1.25 and $1.50, respectively, for eight-hour days. What would happen if a defense plant were to be opened in that neighborhood, in which pay at the rate of 65 cents an hour would be the return for any one who knew "one end of a monkey wrench from the other", as shipbuilder Kaiser recently offered? Would the agricultural "hands" be required to stay on the farm, with a ceiling on their pay?

Within one hundred and twenty-five miles of New York City, near Red Hook, N.Y., the regular pay for extra workers during harvest may be determined on a piecework basis—so much per basket picked—or at the hourly rate of 30 cents per hour, yielding $3 for a ten-hour day. Piecework rates vary with the crop harvested. Strawberries brought 4 cents a quart to the worker this year—a cent more than last year, and a cent higher than reported paid on the west shore of the Hudson. College students who had volunteered from patriotic motives to help on the farm front earned from $1.50 to $4 for about seven hours of picking. The top figure was reached only once; the average earnings, even of a good-yielding field, were rarely as much as $3.

The results from picking snap beans, more often known as "string beans" were definitely lower. Pickers received from 30 to 40 cents per bushel at different times during the summer; $3.15 for nine bushels at 35 cents was the largest day's return. Only a few picked as many as eight bushels in a day. These were "green" hands; experienced pickers may have earned as much as 25 per cent more. Variations in yields were chiefly accountable for differences in earnings.

In the same region a number of the student volunteers were fairly steadily employed for nearly three months at 30 cents an hour for eight-hour days. In most cases their work was well regarded by the employing farmers, although one or two suggested that, in comparison with experienced day workers, the students were worth only 20 cents per hour.

But Red Hook is within commuting distance from Poughkeepsie where defense industries are paying $40 a week for unskilled work. The farmers of the Hudson River counties will have to do one or more of several things: (1) raise their rate of pay to compete with industrial wages; (2) restrict their crops to such as can be raised and harvested by a few workers using machinery; (3) get higher prices for their produce; (4) obtain state or Federal subsidies; (5) be given drafted labor with ceiling wages; or (6) obtain seasonal labor from the cities in the form of volunteers who are willing for patriotic reasons to work hard for little pay. The chief source of such volunteers would be the older pupils of the city high schools, college women, and the younger college men.
That this group of young people constitutes the only available large reservoir for summer harvest work seems unquestionable. It is not suggested that such vacation work will serve as a panacea for curing the farm labor shortage, nor that this summer labor need is co-ordinate in importance with the year-round requirements of farming. But that the recruiting of considerable numbers of student workers can make a substantial contribution toward lessening labor shortages during harvest seasons has been fairly well demonstrated not only during this year, but during the first world war. Then for the "Boys! Working Reserve" organized under the Department of Labor I know that hundreds of high-school boys were recruited from New York City; that one Brooklyn high school, (Bushwick) for example, released at least fifty boys with teacher supervisors about June 1, 1918, to work in the camps on Long Island.

So far the utilization of much volunteer labor seems to have been due chiefly to local initiative. Brooklyn College, after six weeks of preliminary orientation, had 189 volunteers enrolled to work on farms, to be placed by the United States Employment Service. June 1 arrived with no placements until a member of the college placement service was introduced (by the U.S.E.S.) to a farmers' committee at Red Hook. From this juncture three camps resulted which took care of sixty-seven Brooklyn College students, together with some thirty more, mostly from City, Hunter and Queens Colleges. Another volunteer agency, the International Student Service, also carried on two farm-work camps during the last summer.

Coincident with the contribution which such students can make toward farming needs are the educational values which their work and life in the country scene cannot help but contribute to them. Some of these values will be intangible, though none the less fundamental; others will be such tangibles as gains in health and strength, the broadening of horizon and loss of provincialism characteristic of cities (and of New York City more than of others). These educational values have been a fundamental aim of the Volunteer Land Corps, which has so far concentrated on placing student volunteers on individual farms in Vermont and New Hampshire.

For those students who are suited to it, much more isolated farm-work experience has probably greater value than that afforded by life in a residence center from which the workers go forth day by day. But that the actual needs of many city boys and girls will be better met by the recurrent association, day by day, with their fellows, combined with actual days of farm work, seems certain; for then such work-camp experience would be the only avenue of introduction to any part of this enriching education.

It cannot be too strongly urged that college and school authorities will need to assume the initiative and responsibility for the proper development of work-camp programs for city youth. How far the Volunteer Land Corps may be able to expand its activities beyond the two states now involved for individual placement and supervision remains to be seen. But for the preliminaries of enrollment and orientation, for placement with suitable farm employers, for the continuous supervision of the farm work experience and for the guidance and control of the living centers no outside agency can completely relieve educational authorities nor adequately substitute for them.

An analysis of the various factors of the farm work-camp problems as they revealed themselves in the Red Hook experiment is being prepared by a faculty committee at Brooklyn College. A copy will be forwarded to any one interested to send for it.

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Brooklyn, Nov. 2, 1942.