INTERVIEW EXCERPTS FROM THE LAST HARVEST PROJECT
THE LIFE AND WORK OF FARMWORKERS
ON LAKE APOPKA

A Grant Project of the Florida Folklore Society
in association with the Farm Worker Association of Central Florida
Apopka, Florida, 1998

"The history of the people who have been working the muck for decades should be preserved, so our people don't lose their past. So others know that a lot of our people came to those farms and worked on those farms for a long time."
Tirso Moreno, Apopka, Florida, March 5, 1998

The Last Harvest Project documented through oral interviews the life and work of farmworkers who were displaced by the closing of muck farms on the shores of Lake Apopka, Florida. These interview excerpts were originally selected by Laurie Sommers for use with the initial Last Harvest photo exhibit which opened at Crealdé School of Art in Winter Park, Florida and subsequently toured the state. A later Florida Humanities Council traveling version of the project, curated by Ronald Habin, came to Valdosta State University in October, 2002. There is a connection between South Georgia and the Apopka project. Zellwin Farms, formerly operating muck farms in Apopka, had relocated a carrot processing facility to Echols County, Georgia, and some Zellwin employees from Florida had moved to South Georgia. By the time of this project, Zellwin had sold out to Coggins Farms from Echols County. The project was intended to highlight aspects of farmworker life and culture for the Valdosta community. To emphasize the local connection, four additional "South Georgia" panels were added to the traveling exhibit. PDFs of those panels are included in this website. **Copies of the 1998 Apopka interviews conducted by Laurie Sommers are included in the Last Harvest Series of the South Georgia Folklife Collection, along with materials on South Georgia farmworkers. Originals are housed in the State of Florida Archives, Tallahassee.

Tirso Moreno, March 5, 1998, interviewed by Laurie Sommers
Willie Mae Williams and Louise Seay, March 6, 1998, interviewed by Laurie Sommers
Luckner Millien, March 4, 1998, interviewed by Laurie Sommers
Olga Martinez, March 6, 1998, interviewed by Laurie Sommers
Geraldean Matthew, March 5, 1998, interviewed by Laurie Sommers

Nathaniel Jerger, May 8, 1998, interviewed by Sarah Sullivan
Samuel Renauld, December 6, 1997, interviewed by Kristin Congdon and Catalina Delgado-Trunk
Jeanette Brokenborough, April 16, 1998, interviewed by Kathleen Sullivan
Louis Nicisse, December 6, 1997, interviewed by Kristin Congdon and Catalina Delgado-Trunk

INTERVIEWS

The African Americans

When I first came to Apopka in the early '60s the muck lands only grew pole beans. We would go out and pick pole beans by the pound. At that time you got a dollar for a bushel of beans. It was almost all black farmworkers here then. We didn't have unemployment, so you always have to find one season after the next, traveling from state to state. We would travel on the back of a truck. Back then they didn't have highways like they do now, so it took us two weeks to get to New York to pick apples. Geraldean Matthew, March 5, 1998

When I was a girl, we would take our lunch. We would take turns eating, one would stop working while the others worked, But some people would go all day without eating anything. This is why you find a lot of bleeding ulcers in the black community and a lot of health problems, because we would work all day without eating. And when we come home we would cook. Because you wouldn't have time to eat because you trying to make the money. The season is short and you just work hard to make the money. Geraldean Matthew, March 5, 1998

From December until the first week of July is our carrot season…. When May comes then they come in with the corn. So carrots and corn finish the same time in July. And then there's a little space between there. In August they don't get the production work. Then they start hoeing, blocking the plants for the stuff to grow. Then in October they start back what they call leaf season, cutting the celery, lettuce. Many years ago you only had the corn season, and when the corn season finish everybody's off work until September. But as the years passed on then they started growing different type of vegetables...so it keeps work now practically year round for the farmworkers. Geraldean Matthew, March 5, 1998

Worked for Lust Farms for twenty-six years. I did it all. Started out loading trucks for them, driving the forklift, keeping things going out the door at the packing house. Run the shipping office. Now I run harvester for them. Carrot harvester, corn harvester. I

work year 'round, five days a week. Except when they start corn: we might work seven days a week because we got to get that corn when it's fresh...If I go in at 7, by 9:30 or 10:00 we're basically going to put in everything the packing house need. So the rest of the day we just sit there. Most of the time we leave about 2:00. We get paid until 5:00. That's a good job. A lot of jobs you got going don't do that. Nathaniel Jerger, May 8, 1998

I started at an early age, 'round about fifteen. I was young and I wanted to just see what it was all about. The feel of the earth, the muck. I liked it. There wasn't nobody standing over you, hassling you, pushing you around. Nothin' like that. ..If you go to Zellwin the crew make you feel welcome...You could feel the love. When you didn't have nothin' to eat you didn't have to worry about it because somebody give you something to eat... When it was time to hoe we had race time. We would race down them rows and race back to the other end. It was just fun....Our group of peoples sang songs, a lot of gospel, church songs, out in the fields. I'm not making this up. I lived that life. My Daddy lived it, my brothers and sisters lived it. Jeanette Brokenborough, April 16, 1998

Put it like this. It was an easy job. Quick money. Love that kind of work. Jut go out there and feel the muck...This muck here made me my money. You ever feel the muck? Just go out there in the field and grab it? The muck is real smooth, like sand. And sometimes, you can smell it. Smelled nice to me. Yeah, I loved the muck. Jeanette Brokenborough, Arpil 16, 1998

We used to get burnt pretty bad. Our face be black as the muck. And when we got ready to go and take our bath you could tell you went to the muck. We used to say, "I wonder if we really inhaling the muck?" And we was. Especially when the wind came up, if you didn't cover up like that it went in you. I never got sick from it. All the chemicals that I knowed that they was using, I never got sick off them. Jeanette Brokenborough, April 16, 1998

Well, I'm getting' older now. And say, well, there got to be somethin' better than this too, you know, you know what I'm saying? Some older people went to the packin' house 'cause they was tired of the cold. Some of them have arthritis, stuff like that, done worked out there so long. Jeanette Brokenborough, April 16, 1998

I started to work in the carrot house in Zellwood when I was 18 or 19. Before that, in the 1960s, I used to go help out in the fields on weekends, or in the evening time after school. Hoeing or cutting radishes, chicory, romaine. My aunt would pick us up, and she'd leave sandwiches and water in the car for the littlest children. The oldest ones would get out and work. You didn't rip around and play, you did what you were supposed to do. That's the way your parents brought you up. They brought you up

the way their parents brought them up. So you learned how to do that kind of work. Willie Mae Williams, March 6, 1998

At Lust carrot house, if you need carrots, you're welcome to take it. You'd take a meal, enough for your family. We used to put them in beef stew. Or carrot pie. I'd rather make a carrot pie than a carrot cake. It do taste like sweet potato. Willie Mae Williams, March 6, 1998

They had lot of sandwich trucks and stuff out there in the fields....A lot of people buy their lunches. But if you didn't have the money you didn't have the money. People come from town to eat from the sandwich truck because food do eat better in the field. And fish tastes-- Delicious! ...Fried. Uh huh. It'd be hot. There'd be a lady or a man and you order and he fry (right there). They'd be at the end of the field, the end of the row. It probably saved time. Because if the sandwich wagon was there, your crew could go eat and go back. Willie Mae Williams, March 6, 1998

Go to work in the carrot house, work all day long, talk trash, come home, cook and clean up and everything, get my children ready to go next day to school...I used to come by, help my mama clean, cook for my mama, too. But now I can't hardly do enough for me. It's getting older. It ain't no fun like it used to be. It'd be wall to wall people, people that you know, people you'd enjoy being with every day. You laugh and talk. And the machines didn't kill you like the machines kill you now...Used to do seven or eight wires in two hours. Now you can't hardly do two! Willie Mae Williams, March 6, 1998

The Latinos

A lot of people have misconceptions about farm workers. They think we're all migrant workers or illegal aliens. We're not. Many of us are U.S. citizens. All of us are taxpayers, and many of us own homes and have a stake in the community. Tirso Moreno, from The Daily Floridian, September 23, 1997

I only know farm work. Maybe I can do another job, but who knows? I am 67....We probably won't be able to keep the house. We'll probably go back to Mexico. I have a little property there, and our money will stretch farther. But I'd love to stay here. I wanted to say here until the very end. What was the government thinking? Where will they grow the corn when the farms close? And who will pick the corn? Adelaido Garza, from The Daily Floridian, September 23, 1997

It's hard working out in the fields. I think it's harder on us women because not only do we have the hard work out in the fields, but then we have to come home and do more work...It's harder on us because of our children also. Because we don't give our children the attention that they need. We get home real late, and we're in a hurry cooking. And we don't really get to talk. That's a problem among Hispanics. Family is so important, and we don't have time to communicate with the family. And I think it's because of the job. Olga Martinez, March 6, 1998

On the crew everybody has their specialty. Like my husband, he's got 30 people. He's really got two crews. The one I'm in, their specialty is escarole and chicory and kale. And then the other half, they do Chinese cabbage, napa, bok choy, and they cut kale, too. We all use knives, but everything is different. Like the bok choy? They cut that first, lay it out, and then let it wilt a little before they pack it. Because if they pack it as soon as they cut it, it will break, it will crack. Olga Martinez, March 6, 1998

At the end of the season my husband has a party for his crew. We have a cook-out. But he puts that out of his own money. My friends help me cook, because there's a lot of us. We make fajitas. Sometimes fried fish. Beans. Arroz. Tripas. Chicken grilled outside. Ensalada de papa. Olga Martinez, March 6, 1998

The Haitians

When Haitians started to come here back in the 1970s, the majority came without legal documents, including me. Until the spring of '78 they used to come here, get off the boat, and find their way. If they got caught by the INS they can be put in jail for a couple days or maybe a week, depending on their circumstances. After spring '78 they started to seriously detain people. I spent over three months in jail. That three months was like a hundred years to me because of the way it was. Can you imagine you are in a jail cell in an area where you know nobody? Your family back home doesn't know where you are, what's happening to you. You have no way of communication with them, no communication with the outside world. They don't even put you outside during the daytime. In that jail cell is where you eat, where you sleep, where you do everything. Luckner Millien, March 4, 1998

Especially for the Haitians who come to Florida, the reason why most of them get involved in farm work is because it's easier to get that kind of job. Especially when you first get here you don't have the language. And for many positions you don't have the knowledge. In that situation you find out, language is a big big problem. So the farm work is more tolerant in term of the language situation, to accept you whether you can speak English or not. Luckner Millien, March 4, 1998

Haitians from Belle Glade come up here for the corn season. All of the farmers who have large amounts of fresh corn, they used to have contracts with the crew leaders in Belle Glade to bring workers over here. They come twice a year, mid spring and in the fall, for the harvesting...Even when I was in Haiti I used to hear talk about Belle Glade, the farm industry, farmworking..You think if you do it, you can make some quick cash. Luckner Millien, March 4, 1998

I load trucks on the Duda farm. I work long hours and often don't get home until 8:30 at night. Some days I work seventeen or eighteen hours a day. The work lasts for eight or nine months and then I'm laid off. Those months without work are hard. I want to work. Samuel Renauld, December 6, 1997

I came to the United States in 1980 looking for a better life. I came by boat with twenty-three other people. It took eleven days to get here because it was so stormy. We carried big barrels of drinking water on the boat to survive. We learned to use water wisely. When I got here I was put in jail for two days. I have seven children in Haiti, but it's very hard to bring them here. A family of three needs to have about $20,000 to bring another child over. Still, life is better in the United States. If you're not lazy, you can find work. Louis Nicisse, December 6, 1997