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A STUDY OF THE GROUP FARM LABOUR

SCHEME MOVEMENT IN

NEW ZEALAND

by

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## INTRODUCTION

In New Zealand, the farm labour situation is somewhat unique in that one labour unit can care for a comparatively large amount of stock and land. The amount of non-family labour involved is small and a considerable proportion of farmers do not have any assistance. Although the need for general assistance is not very great, there has proved to be a need for assistance of a specialised type, involving short periods of work by employees of very good quality, and the concept of group employment of farm labour has risen from this need.

The earliest instance which has been traced of group employment of farm labour occurred in the Warkworth (North Auckland) branch of Federated Farmers in 1945. Single men were then employed by that branch to be available to members, but the organisation later came to grief. In 1947, at Sanson, near Palmerston North, the local branch of Federated Farmers started a similar organisation at the instigation of a Mr. C. Eglinton, of Sanson, R.D. This organisation, initially a loose arrangement whereby one man would work on the farms of members for short periods, was developed by Mr. Eglinton into a well organised arrangement with three married employees of the branch, available to all members, living in specially built state houses. These houses were opened by the then Minister of Agriculture, the Honourable Mr. Cullen, and it

was appropriate that the occasion was marked by some ceremony for this later proved to have been the inauguration of the first of a large number of successful group farm labour schemes in the Dominion.

The schemes, however, did not exist in any large numbers until about 1952 so that only comparatively recently have they been of any significance. It was recognised that they represented a new feature on the agricultural scene about which very little was known. The present study was, therefore, undertaken in the hope of bringing to light the nature of group employment of farm labour, the extent to which it existed in New Zealand, and the contribution which it made to the farms concerned. In addition, the experiences and advice of existing schemes have been collected together in the hope that this might provide assistance in the setting up of new schemes.



## CHAPTER I

### SOME RELEVANT FEATURES OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN NEW ZEALAND PRIOR TO THE INAUGURATION OF THE GROUP FARM LABOUR SCHEME MOVEMENT

One of the outstanding features of New Zealand agriculture is the very efficient use which is made of labour. The large number of farms which is operated by a single labour unit is striking and comparatively few employ regular labour. The present intensity of labour use is of comparatively recent origin, however, for there has been a fall in the number of non-family employees continuing from the great depression period in the early 1930's<sup>1</sup> to the present day. The General Report on the 1951 Population Census<sup>2</sup> states that:-

"Farmers' children tend to look to the towns as places of greater economic opportunity and of more varied social life. Many who came from the country to do war time work remained in the towns after the end of the war. There is a continuous movement of Maoris from rural areas to work in factories, shops, and offices in the towns."

The purport of this statement is supported by Hamilton and Mitchell<sup>3</sup> who found that only one farm in twelve employed a youth and only one in eight employed the farmer's son, in a dairy farm survey of Waipa County.

Various features of agriculture have been complementary to this urban drift. On the economic side, the introduction of new techniques in the 1930's, especially the

top-dressing of pastures and the use of new strains of grasses, tended to make farms more dependent on grass than on feeding crops and the acreage of pasture top-dressed increased from 2,385,182 in 1929 to 7,165,903 in 1953.<sup>4</sup> Since the utilisation of pastures requires less labour than that of crops, there was a reduction in labour requirement. About this time, for example, ploughmen almost disappeared from the farming scene in some dairying districts.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of machinery, too, played a part and tractors increased in number from 3377 in 1929 to 52,495 in 1953.<sup>5</sup> While these new features undoubtedly assisted the decline in numbers of farm employees, there is another reason to be considered. In the absence of a traditional agricultural proletariat in New Zealand, farms do not generally have more than one house so that any employed labour has to live, or, at best, eat, with the farming family. A social problem always arises in these circumstances for it is not desirable to have a labour force of unknown character living in close proximity to the family, especially should the labour be of the near itinerant, unmarried type of which there has been a long tradition in New Zealand. In order to dispose of this problem, therefore, there has possibly been some pressure leading towards the re-organisation of farms so that they could be operated by family labour only. The relative importance of the social and economic aspects as influences in

reducing the non-family labour force cannot be accurately assessed. However, the fact that the social aspect has been mentioned to the writer in interviews,<sup>6,7</sup> entirely voluntarily, is an indication that it is not without importance. The social aspect is of importance to this argument since, in more recent times when an addition to the farm labour force became desirable, the memory of the social problem played a part in evolving the group farm labour scheme in such a way that this no longer occurred.<sup>6</sup>

A large proportion of farmers, therefore, have more recently been operating their farms without assistance and the enterprise has been closely bound up with family life in a very personal, non-commercial way. That this independence has not been gained without cost, however, has become especially apparent through the post war intensification of agricultural production. In particular, the "one labour unit" farm is in a very vulnerable position for there is no flexibility in the labour force. In the event of illness or accident on the part of the farmer, the whole operation of the farm, the running of the household and the possible care of an invalid, must fall on the farmer's wife and family and a serious strain is placed on family resources. Even if neighbours give assistance, there is an obvious need for some organisation which would be capable of meeting such circumstances. Again, the farmer who works alone has only

little opportunity to enjoy recreation for he is tied to his farm to care for the stock. Opportunities for holidays are extremely limited, or even non-existent, and this is especially true if he is a dairy farmer. A relief labour organisation, well known to the farmer and sufficiently trustworthy for the farm to be left in its hands for periods of a week or a fortnight, could obviously find a place in appropriate farming communities. It may be, too, that the farm operated by one labour unit is of a size which could most efficiently utilise one and a half units, or some such inconvenient figure. The employment of part time casual labour would meet this situation but, since the recent war especially, the development of secondary industries in towns has been great and easier conditions and high wages offered there have drawn off from the country a great deal of its casual labour force.<sup>2</sup> That remaining is of poorer quality and at a high price. It is for this reason that reliance upon casual labour cannot be advanced as a solution to the first two problems of "one labour unit" farms which have been mentioned; vulnerability in case of illness or accident and the difficulty associated with enjoying recreation or taking a holiday.

There is another, much wider, and less factual matter to be discussed. The agricultural community has become discontented with the circumstances which were its

lot thirty years ago. People born then into farming communities accepted as their lot the facts that they must spend long hours in hard work daily, be tied to the farm to care for stock, and experience a standard of living which, while not necessarily low, was simple and conducive to a narrower outlook on life. There was but little awareness of a developing philosophy which held that life was to be lived for reasons other than gaining a living from the environment, and that happiness and relaxation were moral and socially acceptable aims. Those days are past. Better communications, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and, perhaps, especially the radio, have widened the outlook of the agricultural community which, now very well aware of the relaxations enjoyed by other sections of the community, feels that it has a right to share in this aspect of the higher standard of living. There is thus a requirement for extra labour on farms arising from this source. The need is not to fill a vacancy as such but to replace the time which the farmer no longer spends on his farm and to give assistance with the harder tasks which he is now less inclined to perform alone.

There has been a need, therefore, for extra labour:-

- (a) To meet sickness, accidents, and other general emergencies where there is an inflexible labour force.

- (b) To substitute for the farmer during holidays and other recreational periods.
- (c) To give assistance on farms of such a size that they cannot be run at maximum efficiency by the existing labour force but which cannot usefully employ another full labour unit.
- (d) To remove some of the drudgery from a farmer's life, notwithstanding the fact that he may be able to run the farm efficiently without assistance.

Viewed against this background, the emergence of a system of farm labour employment such as the group farm labour scheme, the nature of whose contribution is essentially part time, is hardly surprising. From the four points of view which have been discussed, the need was there.