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"Brasshats" and "Baby Fingers": The Battle Over Rural Education

by STEPHEN D. ANDREWS

LATE in 1919, Grover Rogers returned to the cotton farms of Albertville, Alabama, after service in the "Great War." Rogers had received his discharge six months earlier, and had worked his way slowly from Florida, through Georgia, and finally home to Alabama. Rocking on the front porch of his family's sharecropping shack, Grover told an avid audience of family and neighbors about his travels. Along with tales of battle and Europe, he spoke of a hamlet called Plant City, Florida.

His stories of France paled beside his glowing descriptions of the rich agricultural paradise along Florida's Gulf Coast. He contrasted chopping and picking cotton with the "easy" winter cultivation of plump, juicy strawberries. Grover declared cotton a boring staple crop. In contrast, berries offered farmers a succulent luxury fruit in heavy demand throughout Northern urban markets. Looking over the crowded shacks hunched beside rolling cotton fields, Grover leaned back and remarked: "If ya'll worked down in Plant City as hard as you worked in cotton, heck— we'd all be strawberry millionaires." Grover's brother Tagulo took him at his word. Two months later he packed his family and drove south in the family truck, headed for Plant City and berry millions.¹ Tagulo did not find light work and easy money; instead, he found a complex strawberry culture that promised rich returns, but required intensive labor.

Strawberry culture remained largely the same from the 1920s through the era of modernization and urbanization in the 1950s. Farm families such as the Rogers sought their dreams of agricultural success in a social network increasingly pressured by consolidation and the efforts of urban reformers. One of the final battle lines drawn between farmers and the agents of modernization involved control of rural schools. Throughout America, public ed-

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1. Donald Rogers, Interview with author, February 8, 1995, Tampa, Fla.

ucation reflected its rural heritage in the institution of the summer vacation period. In Florida, however, the summer brought a hot, dormant season. In contrast to most of the country, farmers in the southern “winter garden” needed labor during the cooler seasons. In Plant City, the traditional school system allowed students to work in family strawberry fields during the winter. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s these “strawberry schools” came under attack as the last vestiges of an anachronistic social system.

When the Rogers’ truck rumbled into Plant City, they found a bustling commercial center servicing a large agricultural hinterland. Originally named for the Indian village of Ichepucksassa, the town changed its name, at the request of the Tampa mail dispatcher Alfonso DeLauney, to the more easily comprehensible Cork in 1860.² The village incorporated in 1885 and named itself after Henry B. Plant, the rail baron who extended his South Florida Railroad into the area.³ From its incorporation, the city served as a marketing depot for local crops of cotton, timber, and strawberries.

Grover Rogers told the truth when he described the almost hyperbolic value of strawberries as a cash crop. When Tagulo Rogers arrived in Plant City, strawberry production held a primary position in a network of small, independently-owned private farms. The first recorded strawberry pioneer in the region was Major Wheeler, a homesteader at nearby Shiloh in the late 1870s.⁴ However, a Mississippian named Constantine Shannon is commonly credited with setting out the first seedlings in Plant City.⁵ By 1896 farmers realized that berries could be grown in the Plant City section for commercial advantage and three leading citizens— Col. J. L. Young, Dr. J. W. Douglas and Jonah Yates— planted two acres.⁶ By 1919, berry cultivation was entrenched in the agricultural life of Plant City and the eastern portion of Hillsborough County.

As early as the 1920s Plant City declared itself the “Winter Strawberry Capital of the World.”⁷ By 1939 Plant City shipped al-

2. Quintilla Greer Bruton and David E. Bailey, Jr., *Plant City: Its Origin and History* (St. Petersburg, Fla., 1977), 45-47.

3. *The WPA Guide to Florida* (New York, 1939), 518.

4. David E. Bailey, “A Study of Hillsborough County’s History, Legend, and Folk Lore, with Implications for the Curriculum” (master’s thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 204.

5. Bruton, *Plant City*, 136.

6. Bailey, “Study,” 205.

7. *Ibid.*

most three-fourths of the nation's midwinter strawberries.⁸ The weather of central and southern Florida allowed for berry cultivation while the rest of the country slumbered under winter snows, and eastern Hillsborough County became the center of Florida berry production. Local berry growers and strawberry specialists attributed this statewide advantage to the "local Scranton sand [which was] far superior to the East Coast's coral."⁹ Plant City also emerged as a center of strawberry innovation. The local Strawberry Laboratory turned out new hybrids of berries such as the Missionary, Tioga, and the Florida Ninety, which comprised two-thirds of the strawberry acreage planted in the Plant City area during the 1954-55 season.¹⁰

This almost obsessive attention to strawberry cultivation was merited by the amazing productive potential of midwinter berries. Strawberry fields assured farmers of survival and promised the possibility of financial success. Due to the high yield and value of strawberry plants, farmers could survive on surprisingly small plots of soil. In 1919, Florida contained 1,254 strawberry farms located on just 834 acres. Though averaging less than a half-acre each, these farms produced over 1,200,000 quarts of strawberries.¹¹

The high level of productivity and value of the strawberry crop increased during the years between the wars. By 1936, Plant City and the surrounding farms in eastern Hillsborough County had 4,524 acres of strawberry fields. Their annual yield was 7,784,013 quarts of berries valued at \$1,654,614. This amounted to an average of 1720 quarts worth \$366 for each farmer. Corn, although grown extensively throughout the county, trailed far behind the value of berries. The county's 9,928 acres of cornfields produced only 155,220 bushels worth a mere \$169,111. Averaging 17 bushels worth \$18 per acre, the corn crop was far outstripped by the production of strawberries. Grown on half the total corn acreage, strawberries yielded 50 times the total corn crop with ten times the value.¹²

8. WPA Guide, 518.

9. "Berry Specialist Says East Hillsborough Nation's Best Soil," *Plant City Courier*, February 1, 1968.

10. William G. Mitchell, ed., *Growing Berries in Florida: A Revision of University of Florida Agricultural Extension Services Bulletins* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1962), 6.

11. *Sixth Census of the United States—Agricultural (Second Series)* (Washington, DC, 1941), 16.

12. *Agricultural Statistics of Florida—Twenty-first Census, 1936-37* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1938), 90.

These astonishing berry production figures increased steadily until labor shortages during and shortly after World War II caused a severe contraction. The number of strawberry farms in the state as a whole dropped from 3,970 in 1940 to 1,066 in 1945. That amounted to a change in acreage from 8,066 to 1,266 during the same period. There was a recovery by 1950 to 1,757 farms cultivating 2,356 acres, but the 1950 yield of 3,358,187 quarts was only a quarter of the 14,666,281 quarts marketed in 1940. It would be the 1970s before strawberries would regain their prewar position in the Florida economy.¹³ The situation in the Hillsborough County fields compared closely with that in the state. In 1939, 1,422 farms with 4,219 acres produced 7,571,153 quarts of berries.¹⁴ In 1950 there were only 878 farms covering 1,632 acres producing 2,197,849 quarts.¹⁵ But, while the quantity production shrank during the 1940s, the value remained well above the market value of other agricultural items and strawberries remained one of the most valuable cash crops produced by Hillsborough County farmers.

While there was the promise of great profits, strawberries were not an easy crop to grow. They required extensive preparation of the land and a labor-intensive, time-pressured, freeze-threatened harvesting period. The 1939 *WPA Guide to Florida* reported that "strawberry culture has been termed the 'thirteen months a year job.'" ¹⁶ Farmers began setting plants in October for the first picking in the third week of December, and continued to set and pick until early April.¹⁷ One writer declared that "every day is a shipping day. . . beginning with a few quarts when cool weather comes just before Christmas and increasing in volume as the weather grows warmer."¹⁸ During the winter months, growers "found it necessary to pick daily."¹⁹ January and February also marked the time to set out fresh runner beds of soil for the following season. From July to September, runners were pulled from parent plants to produce plantable seedlings. With little access to large-scale irrigation until

13. *United States Census of Agriculture: 1950—Counties and State Economic Areas, Florida (Volume I, Part 18)* (Washington, D.C., 1952), 16; Florida Department of Agriculture, *Florida Agricultural Statistics, Vegetable Summary—1989* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1989), 48.

14. *Sixth Census of the United States—Agriculture (First Series)*, 12.

15. *Agricultural Census—1950*, 106.

16. *WPA Guide*, 518.

17. Mitchell, *Growing*, 12.

18. Burton, *Plant City*, 140.

19. *Ibid.*

the late 1950s small-plot farmers relied on "pine needles and meadow hay heaped up between the rows and raked over the plants to protect them from weeds and freezes."²⁰

In berry production, the most crucial season was from the middle of December until March when berries were picked and the beds were prepared for the next year. As a crop extremely sensitive to temperature and damage from handling, strawberries had to be carefully picked and packed as soon as they ripened. Small farmers had no access to technology that could make the task of the berry picker any easier. The only method for successfully harvesting the berries was a slow, stooped walk between the ripening rows. Strawberries, even if planted at the same time, did not always ripen simultaneously. With experience, a picker learned to determine which berries required another day on the vine to reach their peak. This process obviously demanded large amounts of time and labor. Most small landholders and sharecroppers turned to the most ready pool of agricultural workers within their community— the children of the farm families. To facilitate this labor relationship, and in acknowledgment of the importance of the strawberry culture, the school system ran on a summer schedule. Rather than ending in June as traditional "Winter" schools did, the primary break in the school year came from January until March. This allowed students to work in the strawberry fields when the need for their services was at its peak.

One of the unique aspects of strawberry harvesting, and a testament to the value of the strawberry crop, was the use of both African-American and white children in the fields. From the turn of the century, when farmers realized the possibilities of berry cultivation, until the late 1940s strawberry schools supplied segregated education for many of the rural citizens of East Hillsborough County. Usually, the schools convened classes in one building for all grades from the first through the twelfth. Mrs. Vincent McGuire, who, as Emma Rose Wingate, attended Knights Station school in the 1920s, described her school as a simple "red-brick building" with "no cafeteria [and] no toilet facilities but two oblong out-buildings way back on the lot."²¹ Schools like Knights Sta-

20. *WPA Guide*, 519.

21. Mrs. Vincent McGuire, Letter to author, March 7, 1995.

tion also presented “drainage problems, since the school stood in a low spot.”²² Darrie Hatcher Walden, who taught for 40 years in the Trapnell strawberry school, recalled that “during the depression years most of the children had very little clothing, school supplies, or books . . . most of [my] teaching was from the chalkboard and 30 pupils in [my] grades seven and eight had only four sets of books—[mine] and three sets bought for the school by the trustees.”²³ Though often under-equipped and primitive, strawberry schools, declared former Pinecrest school principal Omar Mitchell, were “a godsend to that country.”²⁴

While students of strawberry schools often had fond memories of their summer schools, by the 1940s urban reformers in nearby Tampa began to see rural schools as exploitative, rural anachronisms. In Florida, the period between 1920 and 1960 marked the emergence of what historian Jack Temple Kirby called “the New New South” when the “Great Depression, New Deal farm programs, and the demographic chaos occasioned by World War II all conspired to end or alter the main elements of the old systems.”²⁵ One of the old systems experiencing upheaval was traditional rural agriculture. As an integral part of berry culture, the strawberry schools became a focus for urban reform efforts.

Crusading *Tampa Tribune* reporter J. A. “Jock” Murray ran a series of exposes on the status of education in Hillsborough County during the winter of 1946. Murray denounced the status of the county school organization, declaring that Hillsborough could “have a good system just as soon as its people sweep out the debris of antiquated laws, practices and customs.”²⁶ In the first installment of his expose series he presented an array of educational and social evils. He depicted the decentralized organization as “a horse-and-buggy division of the county” and he ridiculed strawberry schools as “a separate system of inferior schools for the child laborer.”²⁷ In

22. Leland Hawes, “‘Strawberry’ Students Had School in Summer,” *Tampa Tribune*, April 24, 1988.

23. Quintilla Greer Bruton, untitled manuscript at East Hillsborough Historical Society, 2.

24. Leland Hawes, “Alumni Still Pine for Pinecrest,” *Tampa Tribune*, April 24, 1988.

25. Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge, 1987), xiv.

26. J. A. Murray, “Outdated Laws and Customs Hinder Hillsborough Schools,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 1, 1946.

27. *Ibid.*

vivid language he declared that "the strawberry picker is the forgotten child of Hillsborough County."²⁸

The following morning Murray championed his idea for a centralized school bureaucracy. He produced a report from the George S. May Company, hired to survey the school system, which criticized county education as "uneconomical and antiquated."²⁹ In contrast to the hub-like school system of "progressive" counties such as Dade, Hillsborough had a "muddle-headed way of running the schools in which local officials are basically not responsible . . . it is difficult to tell where one jurisdiction ends and another begins."³⁰ Murray suggested that the schools, presently managed by local school trustees, needed to be supervised and overseen by a county-wide organization.³¹

Murray expounded the reason for the change on the front page of the next day's *Tribune*. In the school system "youngsters in the poorer districts of Hillsborough County are denied school opportunities of those who live in wealthier sections, and it looks as if the city of Tampa must go to their aid if they are to get any kind of a fair break."³² The separation of the county into largely independent districts meant that rural children had less access to busing, maintenance, and purchasing funds that a centralized bureaucracy would provide. Murray argued that "it is hard for a country school to get a plumber, and harder sometimes to pay him after he has gone. There are desks kicking around Tampa warehouses that would be a luxury to schools out in the country, where children sit on benches and boxes."³³ Poor children, left to the tender mercies of local school trustees, suffered under burdens that could be lifted by a centralized, modern education organization.

To the *Tribune's* Murray, the worst of those hardships occurred in the rural strawberry schools of East Hillsborough County. In the area's 22 strawberry schools, more than "4000 boys and girls in

28. Ibid.

29. J. A. Murray, "Schools Need Overhauling from Top to Bottom Here," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 2, 1946.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. J. A. Murray, "Children in Poor Districts Penalized in County Schools," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 3, 1946.

33. J. A. Murray, "Purchasing and Maintenance Pose Big School Problems," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 5, 1946.

overalls and faded gingham receive an indifferent education.³⁴ He questioned the readers of the *Tribune*: "Did you ever drive through the strawberry lands at dawn and see little children, barefoot and shivering around a tiny fire, waiting for enough light to start picking?"³⁵ To Murray, strawberry pickers "live[d] the life of a mule, hired out by their parents at so much a day."³⁶

Murray demanded the elimination of strawberry schools because of student performance and poor teacher quality. He reasoned that the labor of strawberry school children "sears the souls of these child slaves. They come to hate the land and the parents who gave them birth."³⁷ Rather than becoming the next generation of independent farmers, the harshness of strawberry cultivation drove them off the land. Murray quoted an unnamed former farm youth who declared that he had "[his] belly full of the land. My father has worked me like a dog, and I am not going back, never."³⁸ Murray also asserted that summer school teachers were inferior because "it is hard to persuade good teachers to go in Summer school . . . the majority of poorly qualified teachers are in strawberry schools."³⁹ To substantiate his claim Murray quoted statistics that showed "out of a total of 123 strawberry school teachers, 21 had no college training, compared with nine out of 991 Winter school teachers."⁴⁰

Murray bemoaned the added expense of strawberry schools and the inferior academic performance of rural students. Summer schools added to the educational cost in the county by necessitating year-round bus service. He described the extended journeys involved in transporting rural children to strawberry schools when "normal" schools were closer. The inspired reporter argued that consolidating locally governed rural schools into a regular schedule would save the poor districts money.

He went on to critique the performance of strawberry students— noting high absentee rates and inferior academic preparation. "The day I visited the Turkey Creek school," Murray observed,

34. J. A. Murray, "Strawberry Schools Called 'Excuse for Child Labor,'" *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 6, 1946.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. J. A. Murray, "Strawberry Schools Face Teacher and Bus Problems," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 8, 1946.

40. *Ibid.*

"the principal said 25 per cent of his pupils were out planting strawberries."⁴¹ In Murray's opinion, even when the students attended, they received a substandard education. Murray expressed his concern that "strawberry school pupils have problems making good in a regular high school or college with a Summer school background."⁴² According to Murray's final *Tribune* article in October 1946, County Agent Alec White worried about "the way good youngsters make honor roll in strawberry schools, and fail to get to first base in college."⁴³ Jock Murray closed his week-long jeremiad against rural education with a final insult, claiming that in Summer schools "there are compensations. If you cannot afford to clothe your youngsters well, send them to a strawberry school. They will at least be comfortably in style there."⁴⁴

Champions of the rural education system attacked Tampa in general and Murray in particular in their defense of the strawberry schools. A. P. Cooke, publisher of the *Plant City Courier* condemned the idea that the consolidation of the county's schools "which would also include Tampa's far-flung system, [was] the Utopian cure-all for Hillsborough county's far-flung school ills."⁴⁵ To Cooke, consolidation removed district trustees who spoke for local communities. This removal of local autonomy "might be disastrous to East Hillsborough . . . if the entire balance of power [was] centered in Tampa."⁴⁶ Cooke predicted that "the rural areas could find themselves at the mercy of the urban areas, with the latter having the best teachers . . . and the best educational facilities. This end of the county [is] keenly aware of what it means to be an un-respected minority by the brasshats in Tampa."⁴⁷ Along with caution, the *Courier* recommended that its readers "become familiar with the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence— just in case."⁴⁸

Jim Robinson, a member of the County School Board from Plant City, defended the schools as a necessary evil in the rural communities. To Robinson, the education given by strawberry schools was superior to the alternative— no schooling at all. "You

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. "Look Before We Leap," *Plant City Courier*; October 12, 1946.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. *ibid.*

know the law allows them out of school to work in an emergency," argued Robinson, "and berries ripening in the fields is an emergency."⁴⁹ J. A. Holmes, the principal of the Turkey Creek strawberry school, echoed Robinson. While Holmes admitted that some farmers abused their power over their children's labor, the fact remained that "the strawberry crop is bread and butter to these people, and when the time comes to plant and pick, they have to plant and pick."⁵⁰ Even if the double-system of education cost more than a homogeneous, "normal" educational structure, it was essential for the continuance of the local economy.

Cooke also contended that children were better at picking than adults because "[p]icking is not the best kind of work for an adult who is not built close to the ground."⁵¹ While Cooke agreed that "big operators" were using more machines to plant the berry seedlings, he maintained that "no one has been able to replace baby fingers in the business of picking."⁵² Cooke grudgingly conceded that the pickers did not receive the best in educational opportunities, but stated that their necessary labor was the economic foundation of the Plant City community.

Unfortunately, many of the accusations the *Tribune* levelled at the strawberry schools were true. The teachers did hold fewer certifications and college degrees than their counterparts in the Winter schools. Graduates of the strawberry schools often argued that this did not mean that their educations were inferior. Warren Cason, a Summer school graduate who later received his law degree from the University of Florida, refuted the charges that his schooling was inadequate: "We had teachers who cared, and when I left the strawberry schools I was the equal of any of the students who went through the winter system. Our education was better because we knew what it meant to have to work for it."⁵³ Don Rogers, Tagulo's grandson, also praised the teachers at his strawberry school and remembered them as "wonderful, because they worked with the kids and understood how hard it was to work on the farm before and after school." However, Rogers also recalled that the children at Plant City High School, a Winter school in the city, "had

49. J. A. Murray, "Strawberry Schools Called 'Excuse for Child Labor,'" *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 6, 1946.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. Warren Cason, Interview with author, March 8, 1995, Tampa, FL.

it better in academics because their parents encouraged them to study and think about college."⁵⁴

When strawberry school students reflected on their rural classrooms they often wistfully recalled the kindness and attention they received from their teachers and administrators. However, in some areas, student recollections matched the accusations of Tampa's urban reformers. The work in the strawberry fields drove many rural children to find some way out of agricultural labor. Don Rogers, now an environmental engineer, remembered how he "wanted out of strawberries— I wanted to get into the phosphate business, where you made real money."⁵⁵ Rogers found his way out of the fields by volunteering for military service during the Korean War. Alumni of strawberry schools often repeated this sentiment. Arthur Yates "realized, on frosty mornings, picking strawberries, that it was a hell of a way to make a living!— so I became a watchmaker."⁵⁶ For many, the labor in strawberry fields hurt their education. Maude Maits, a writer in Polk county who worked throughout central Florida as a sharecropper, maintained that "because of farm labor, my education was left to chance . . . it was hard to make decent grades at school by attending one day a week or, at best, every other day. But we made our grades, probably because . . . most of our teachers were kind and generous."⁵⁷

Though individuals throughout the eastern part of Hillsborough County sprang to the defense of their schools, the *Tribune* articles and pressure from reformers began to erode the stability of the strawberry schools. In December 1946 Webster, in nearby Sumter County, eliminated berry schools. The *Tribune* claimed that "the action result[ed] from *Tribune* stories. The people here have had an awakening. They have been following the *Tribune's* campaign for better schools . . . and understand that they cannot have a good school and continue to run on a Summer schedule."⁵⁸ F. A. Hayes, a school board member in the Webster district, planned to

54. Don Rogers, Interview with author, February 8, 1995, Tampa, Fla.

55. Ibid.

56. Arthur Yates, Letter to author, February 7, 1995.

57. Leland Hawes, "It Seemed Like 'Strawberry Fields Forever' to Children," *Tampa Tribune*, June 7, 1986.

58. J. A. Murray, "Summer County Will Abandon Berry School," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 22, 1946.

“switch to a Winter schedule and write the strawberry term off as a failure.”⁵⁹ In Webster, the school board decided that to defend Summer schools identified oneself as a member of the lower classes. A local planter, W. A. Brown, declared that “most of the good people want Winter schools; it is the drifter class that is against it. They want their whole families out in the field.”⁶⁰

Despite the Webster example and continuing pressure by urban reformers, there was no change in the long-established Summer school structure around Plant City. The majority of strawberry school supporters were secure in their feeling that Summer schools were essential and unalterable parts of the rural community. By the end of 1946, the furor against the strawberry schools subsided, largely due to an agreement to correct the greatest inequities pointed out in Jock Murray’s expose. But while the *Tribune* moved on to other issues, the debate over rural education bubbled just beneath the surface in eastern Hillsborough County. Though they reduced their calls for change, the urban reformers in Tampa did not abandon “the lost child of Hillsborough.”

In 1950 Jock Murray again challenged the strawberry schools. In his opening article he described his earlier series of articles, the decision of Sumter County to abandon strawberry schools, and the present status of the Summer school structure. By 1950 the number of Summer schools had dropped from 22 to 12. Murray acknowledged that “the strawberry schools are immeasurably better off today than they were four years ago— an improvement resulting from a 1947 school law passed . . . to give poor students ‘equality of opportunity.’”⁶¹ In his 1950 campaign Murray largely repeated the charges he levelled four years earlier. This time, however, he saw the strawberry schools as “class schools . . . providing one system for the poor, working youngster, while fortunate children may go to other schools.”⁶²

Again, the *Tribune*’s Murray attacked the strawberry schools as backward and inefficient. He described the new-found modernity and efficiency in the nearby counties that abandoned simultaneous educational sessions. In 1946 Murray charged that rural parents

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. J. A. Murray, “Hillsborough Still Had Child Labor With ‘Berry’ Schools,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 31, 1950.

62. Ibid.

bore the responsibility for defending an outmoded system. By 1950 the principal champions of strawberry schools were wealthy planters who wanted access to the child labor of their sharecroppers. Ellsworth Simmons, president of the Florida School Board Association, observed that "those who fight to retain the strawberry schools seldom send their children to them. They do not want Summer schools for their own children, but that they may hire the children of other people to work in their fields."⁶³

Murray thundered against the high absentee rates and expenses inherent in running a wide-ranging, rural bus network. During midsummer, large numbers of students left school to go on vacations or work in crops other than strawberries. Meanwhile, some children in Plant City boarded buses for country schools while kids of landowners headed into the city for Winter schools. "We've got to be sending them off in all directions; it would take a Philadelphia lawyer to figure it all out," said Charles C. Boone, county transportation manager.⁶⁴

The *Tribune* called for the elimination of the strawberry schools and attacked wealthy growers for ruthlessly exploiting child laborers. Murray blamed the landowner for "his insistence that the children of his share croppers work in the fields when they ought to be in school. He is the one . . . more than anyone else who has the sweat of little fingers on his conscience."⁶⁵ The landowners perpetuated the exploitative system by driving ruthless bargains with the sharecroppers that forced them to brutalize their children. Simmons called for the elimination of the Summer schools because "the child of the working man is entitled to as good a schooling as the child who is more fortunate."⁶⁶ Attendance expert Florence Roberts blamed a practice among itinerant farmers that made it acceptable to send children into the fields rather than to school. Echoing this practice, a farm mother replied: "What do you think I have all these children for? I want them to make me a living."⁶⁷

63. Ibid.

64. J. A. Murray, "High Absence Rate is Big Problem in Berry Schools," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 2, 1950.

65. J. A. Murray, "Berry Schools Are Symbol of Sorry State of Affairs," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 4, 1950.

66. Ibid.

67. J. A. Murray, "U.S. Law Seen As End to Child Labor in Berry Fields," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 3, 1950.

Tampa reformers praised a new federal law that promised to end the exploitation of tiny rural workers. The *Tribune* announced that the "slave labor of children has reached an almost incomprehensible low in the strawberry fields of Hillsborough County, and the Federal Government is out to put an end to it."⁶⁸ The "new" law was actually a revision of the federal wage-hour law which prohibited the employment of children on farms during school hours. Though it allowed children to work at home, reformers hoped that it would "effectively back-stop the Florida law which require[d] parents to keep their children in school until they are 16 years old."⁶⁹ The law carried a daunting fine of \$10,000, and the *Tribune* promised to aid enforcement.

The *Plant City Courier* attempted to make light of the *Tribune's* accusations in an editorial labelled "Bleeding Heart Department." The *Courier* ridiculed the Tampa reformers who "set [their] hearts to bleeding at the plight of East Hillsborough farm youngsters whose lives are upset by. . . having their vacation during the berry harvest season and not in the summer."⁷⁰ The editorial argued that "as long as strawberries are grown in East Hillsborough, children (not union labor) will be needed to pick them. . . . So why fret about it? Let the *Tribune* clean up Tampa first!"⁷¹

Many defended the strawberry school structure because it provided work and nurtured family ties. "We were happy to get the work in the fields," Warren Cason said. "It allowed my family to make ends meet."⁷² Ed Swindle, a student in the late 1940s, defended the Summer school system because it "helped build the family unit. Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles kept strong together instead of going their separate ways, as they often do today."⁷³

Other supporters of the strawberry schools took a more active role in defending the rural institutions. E. W. Wansley, Jr., a Turkey Creek merchant and chairman of the committee, saw the fight as a domestic example of anti-communist containment. The strawberry schools, and the network of small farms they supported, embodied the highest goals of the American economic system. Wansley pic-

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. "Bleeding Heart Department," *Plant City Courier*, November 3, 1950.

71. Ibid.

72. Warren Cason, Interview with author, March 8, 1995, Tampa, Fla.

73. Leland Hawes, "End Of Strawberry Schools Was Traumatic," *Tampa Tribune*, June 7, 1986.

tured "East Hillsborough [as] predominantly an area of small, home-owned, family operated farms; the kind of community which the countries of Europe belatedly are trying to build up as the best means of stemming the tide of Communism . . . we are farmers working towards that great freedom promised by Jefferson."⁷⁴ Strawberry schools dovetailed with the growing season in Florida, argued Wansley, adding that "there is no natural law which says school should begin in September. . . . That pattern was established many years ago when farms everywhere were family enterprises and Summer was the busiest time on the farm in all parts of the United States."⁷⁵

Wansley challenged the many attacks on strawberry schools that appeared in the pages of the *Tribune*. He chided the Tampa paper for inconsistency in praising some rural children working during vacations while chastising others. "They give the recruiting of boys and girls to go to Connecticut to work in the tobacco harvest their heartiest sanction," Wansley explained, "but for children to help in harvesting the berry crop is a crime that must be stopped at all costs. Ah, consistency, thou jewel, where art thou?"⁷⁶ Wansley also denied class motivations in the strawberry school structure. In schools such as Turkey Creek, "landowners['] and sharecroppers' sons play side by side and equal opportunity is offered to all."⁷⁷ To conclude his argument Wansley asserted that "we do not think our children are the objects of pity that some would have you believe. We believe there is a place for the small farmer in the economy of Eastern Hillsborough County. A school term where vacation comes at harvest time is no abnormal monstrosity, and the propaganda to destroy the berry schools is vicious and most unfair to those most concerned."⁷⁸

During the years following the second Murray expose, attacks on the strawberry school structure increased in frequency and intensity. Immediately following the *Tribune* articles a group of parents, tired of the Winter-Summer debate, attempted to switch Springhead berry school to a regular schedule. Though the informal referendum failed to pass, it was clear that more serious challenges to the

74. J. A. Murray, "Berry Schools Defended As Just Another Result of Florida Weather," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 5, 1950.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

berry schools lay on the horizon. In 1953, the three African-American strawberry schools remaining in Hillsborough County— Simmons, Glover, and Marshall— petitioned to change to a regular term. School officials asked the Hillsborough County school trustees for the change because they believed strawberry school children “were deprived of many educational benefits derived in the Winter session programs.”⁷⁹ The black schools worked out a plan that allowed some berry school children to attend afternoon classes so they could work in family fields during the morning hours.

By December 1954 supporters of the strawberry school system realized the current of social reform flowed against rural Summer schools. Farmers called for an open panel discussion at the Hillsborough Farm Bureau at Turkey Creek to “thresh out the controversial strawberry school question.”⁸⁰ Local growers feared that the school board would eliminate the rural school system without consulting East Hillsborough farmers. The panel featured J. Crockett Farnell, the County School Superintendent, who wanted to meet “farmers’ contentions [that] some teachers, school officials, and parents not concerned with strawberries for a livelihood want strawberry schools to revert to the same terms as standard schools.”⁸¹ The *Courier* advised all parents and residents of the area to attend the meeting.

A crowd of 400 people, almost unanimously in favor of maintaining the strawberry system, packed the Farm Bureau building. Though Farnell and other school board representatives attacked the Summer school system for high levels of absenteeism, he conceded that the schools were not any more expensive than “regular schools” because “all children went to school 180 days a year.”⁸² The president of the Farm Bureau, J. Foy Lee, asked the most important question of the night: “If this school is ever changed to a Winter from a Summer school will we have a chance to vote on it?”⁸³ Farnell replied that no one would have a voting voice in scheduling other than the parents of children attending the school. Farnell announced that “no school has ever been changed except by the will

79. “Patrons of 3 Negro Berry Schools Ask Regular Term,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 4, 1953.

80. “Meeting Is Slated On Berry Schools,” *Plant City Courier*, December 10, 1954.

81. *Ibid.*

82. Leonard Brown, “Farnell Says Turkey Creek School Wouldn’t Be Changed Without Hearing,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 14, 1954.

83. *Ibid.*

of the people."⁸⁴ The *Courier* declared "the meeting a successful one from the standpoint of the pro-strawberry schedule people."⁸⁵

Though small growers felt relieved by the Farm Bureau meeting, the number of strawberry schools dwindled to four when the school session began in April 1955. The four schools which remained on Summer session were Turkey Creek, Dover, Cork, and Trapnell. Two more schools, Springhead and Pinecrest, ran on a double session which gave students the choice of attending on a Winter or Summer schedule. Overall, the strawberry schools still employed 100 teachers and educated 3,000 students.⁸⁶ Despite Farnell's pledge, defenders of the strawberry schools perceived that Summer schools' agricultural importance could no longer shield them from attack. The needs of farmers were no longer the most important concerns of the decreasingly rural society of Hillsborough County.

Only a year after the "successful" meeting at the Farm Bureau, the front page of the *Tribune* announced that "Hillsborough County's 'strawberry' school system is doomed."⁸⁷ On July 25, 1956, Farnell called a meeting at Turkey Creek High School to announce the "impending event" with the farmers whose children would be affected. The *Tribune* noted that earlier attempts to change the schools were bitterly resisted by farmers and parents. Understandably, J. Foy Lee protested that there was too little notice to hold an important meeting, especially when Farnell had sworn to them that parents would decide the fate of the school system. He promised to lead the opposition to the school change and accused county and Tampa authorities of trying "to wreck the farmers of East Hillsborough."⁸⁸

That night, over 1,000 people formed a "fist-shaking crowd" in the auditorium of Turkey Creek High School. Farnell cited figures from a new survey which proved that "duplicative transportation and attendance losses cost the county \$85,000 a year."⁸⁹ Also, the complicated busing network cost the county \$31,000 a year and

84. "Parents to Get Say on Any Change for Berry Schools," *Plant City Courier*, December 17, 1954.

85. *Ibid.*

86. "School Opens Today for 3000 in Strawberry Areas," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 21, 1955.

87. Leland Hawes, "End Appears Near for 'Strawberry' Schools," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 25, 1956.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*

forced some children "to ride three buses getting to and from the school of their choice, with a few remaining away from home 11 hours a day."⁹⁰ Farnell suggested that students be required to attend the school nearest their home rather than be bused across the county to attend a strawberry school. The school board also raised the perennial question of rural attendance. For the first time county officials attributed absenteeism to a growing group of agricultural migrant laborers "who follow the vegetable and fruit seasons in other states during the Summer and will miss three or four months of school."⁹¹ Because of this high number of absences these children failed and had to be remediated at a high cost to the county. Farnell declared that county school officials would determine the best education for rural children and the proper use of tax dollars.

The farmers and growers of Plant City greeted Farnell's plan with boos and threats of "string 'em up!"⁹² Farnell explained that all strawberry school students would be graduated at mid-year and would attend their assigned Winter schools for the 1956-57 academic year. This pronouncement met with screams of "We can't make enough to eat" – "We won't do it" – "This ain't Russia" – and "Get out and let us run our schools."⁹³ Farnell granted that some students could arrive at school later in the day if their services were needed at home in family fields. At this, a woman leaped to her feet and demanded: "How can you expect our children to work in the field half a day, change clothes, ride a bus to school, and then make decent marks in school? It won't work and you can't shove it down our throats."⁹⁴ J. Foy Lee, self-appointed leader of the strawberry resistance, received loud applause when he yelled, "They say we're going to have Winter schools whether we like it or not. We don't have anything to say about it and we're the taxpayers."⁹⁵

During a short intermission, a pianist played "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" while the strawberry school supporters assembled and selected a group of "ten level-headed

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Bill Boyd, "Parents Say They'll Fight to Retain Berry Term," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 26, 1956.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. "Irate Crowd Objects Strongly to Proposed Berry School Change," *Plant City Courier*, July 27, 1956.

men." After the meeting adjourned this committee immediately took up \$235 for attorney's fees, talked about getting an injunction against the change, and obtained signatures on a petition protesting Farnell's plan.⁹⁶ The next evening, at a specially called meeting of the County School Board, Farnell and the trustees voted the strawberry school system out of existence. After the unanimous vote, Farnell told the board members their action was the "greatest step you've ever taken for the welfare of children in this county."⁹⁷

The *Courier* attacked the way Farnell railroaded his decision through the school board. Though they recognized that there were some logical arguments in the board's favor, a "good share of the ire was caused by the way the situation was handled."⁹⁸ A *Courier* editorial questioned why Farnell forgot his promise to let farmers decide for themselves and made his decision without concrete information about the hardships growers faced without strawberry schools. State representative James S. Moody from Hillsborough County criticized the school board's decision and "went on the record as favoring the retention of [strawberry schools]."⁹⁹ Moody sternly chastised Farnell and warned that the abolition of berry terms "could well be a severe blow to the entire strawberry production program in this area."¹⁰⁰

L. H. Lewis, director of the State Farmers' Markets, joined the attack on the decision and prophesied the "end of the strawberry industry in East Hillsborough County." He predicted that the number of planted acres would drop from 4,000 to 1,000 without children to pick the berries. The attorney hired by the farmers' committee, Woodie Liles, argued before the school board, debated Farnell's figures, and suggested a number of alternatives to eliminating the Summer schools. "When you compare the figure saved by cutting out strawberry schools with the amount of loss if labor is not available," Liles exclaimed, "the former figure is insignificant in the overall picture."¹⁰¹ Despite Liles' best attempts to change Far-

96. Ibid.

97. Leland Hawes, "Controversial 'Strawberry' Term Abolished by Board," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 27, 1956.

98. "The Berry Schools," *Plant City Courier*, August 3, 1956.

99. "Berry Term Abolished but Farmers Say Will Fight Board's Decision," *Plant City Courier*, August 3, 1956.

100. Ibid.

101. "Farnell Says School Board Will Stick By Decision," *Plant City Courier*, August 10, 1956.

nell's mind, the superintendent refused to rescind the abolition of the berry schools.

Strawberry school teachers expressed their fears that the elimination of the rural education structure might cost them pay, seniority, and vacations. Farnell, in front of an audience of over 100 teachers, refused to give them the pay increases that educators in regular schools received.¹⁰² Since the board's decision ended the school term prematurely, the teachers would not receive career credit for the months they taught. Farnell tried "to soothe the teachers with the suggestion that they should be willing to make some sacrifices."¹⁰³ The transfer also stripped the teachers of their regular vacation periods. Instead of a midsummer break, the teachers' vacation would be moved back to Christmas. Consequently, former rural school teachers would have to teach for 15 continuous months without a vacation.

Robert T. Mann, an attorney hired by the strawberry teachers, protested that his clients were "being changed over without their consent. Maybe they agree with the change, but still it is a salary loss to them."¹⁰⁴ Farnell pointed out that in the past teachers had received retroactive pay raises, but he could not allow them in this case. "You never complained over anything that was to your benefit," sighed Farnell. "I think you should be willing to take this and do the best you can."¹⁰⁵ The director of education, A. L. Vergason, told the teachers: "If it hurts you financially to make this change you should realize that it is being done in the interest of educational progress. You are helping to do something that should have been done long ago."¹⁰⁶ Though the teachers continued to demand better treatment, their arguments fell on the deaf, reforming ears of the County School Board. The teachers dropped their opposition and became part of the modern school bureaucracy.

Farmers faced the end of the labor system they had relied upon for over 50 years. Though they wailed about the loss of their livelihood and the end of Hillsborough County, their legal attempts to overturn the board's decision showed no hope of success

102. "Berry School Teachers Told Fears Are Groundless," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 17, 1956.

103. Bill Boyd, "Berry School Teachers Urged to Take Pay Loss and 'Do the Best You Can,'" *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 21, 1956.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

against the unyielding determination of Farnell. The tide of modernization left the strawberry growers with no one to turn to for support outside of the East Hillsborough area. Local planters realized that they could no longer depend on their children for a supply of labor. Though some farmers abandoned planting strawberries in favor of other crops, some local farmers decided to plant a normal set of strawberries despite the reduced pool of workers. They planned to change the structure of strawberry production by introducing a new element—wide-scale migrant labor. Though small numbers of migrants had worked in the area during the middle-1950s, for the first time Plant City growers “began looking into the possibilities of getting Bahamian and Mexican labor to help in the fields.”¹⁰⁷ Though farmers traditionally favored familial or sharecropping labor, they acknowledged that “outside labor might work out satisfactorily if they were paid on a per-quart basis for picking strawberries.”¹⁰⁸

In 1957 Earl Lomon Koos wrote *They Follow the Sun*, a short study of migrant labor assembled for the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health of the Florida State Board of Health. In it he described the Atlantic coast migrant stream that journeyed annually up the Eastern seaboard, from bean fields on the shores of Lake Okeechobee to apple orchards in the hills of upstate New York. Though centered for much of the year in Florida, the migrants usually stayed in the freshly cleared farm lands of the Everglades.¹⁰⁹ In towns like Belle Glade, African-American migrants settled into semi-permanent communities during the long season in the “winter garden.”¹¹⁰ In the ensuing years, East Hillsborough farmers faced the challenge of attracting a reliable group of agricultural laborers.

The strawberry school debate surfaced for a final time in the school board elections of 1956. Republican candidates Mrs. Ona C. Hilliard, Robert Johnson, and Ralph Blanchard, hoping to make some progress against the solidly Democratic structure of Hillsborough County, promised to “restore the strawberry schools if elected in November.”¹¹¹ Johnson denounced the sitting school board as a

107. “Most Farmers To Set Normal Berry Acreage,” *Plant City Courier*, August 17, 1956.

108. *Ibid.*

109. Earl Lomon Koos, *They Follow The Sun* (Jacksonville, FL, 1957), 2-5.

110. Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed* (New York, 1992), 188-91.

111. Bill Boyd, “GOP Candidates Pledge Return of Berry Schools,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 2, 1956.

body of "five yes-men" and declared that "If elected— we pledge to you here tonight that we will return the berry schools."¹¹² Despite the widespread desire for a return to strawberry schools, the staunchly Democratic *Courier* drew the line at accepting an alliance with the Republicans. Even the *Plant City Courier* with its predominantly rural readership, accepted the end of the strawberry culture and objected to the Republicans' seizure of the farmers' cause. A *Courier* editorial conceded that "the berry schools were a relic of the past . . . [and] the School Board was quite right in closing them and, from reports we've heard, the children are happy to be going to school on a normal schedule."¹¹³ The newspaper mocked the Republicans' attempts appeal to a "disgruntled group of farmers" and felt confident that their appeal "would persuade thousands that . . . a change of parties means a change for the worst."¹¹⁴ Though small growers still grumbled about the crippling of strawberry production and hoped for the return of traditional agriculture, their battle for rural education was lost.

Farmers screamed when the school board threatened the structure of rural education; but in the exhausted aftermath of the decision the agricultural community quietly abandoned its struggle and began to adjust to the new social alignment. For over a decade the strawberry growers shielded their "peculiar institution" from continual assault. However, both the greater opportunities outside of agriculture in the post-war boom and the harsh nature of strawberry cultivation drove the younger generation of pickers to leave the family sets. Pressure from Tampa reformers and a weakening of the internal structure of rural culture robbed strawberry growers of their ability to resist modernization. The erosion of berry culture mirrored the decreasing importance of small berry growers in the local economy. Agricultural organization no longer decided the structure of society.

Though the farmers attempted to devise new farming strategies and labor relationships, the late 1950s marked a period of extreme contraction and consolidation in strawberry production. In 1950, Hillsborough County farmers planted 1,632 acres of strawberries.

112. *Ibid.*

113. "A Change for the Worse," *Plant City Courier*, October 8, 1956.

114. *Ibid.*

In 1957, the first year without Summer school labor, the acreage shrank to 1,450.¹¹⁵ The number of acres dedicated to strawberries fell to 650 by 1960, a low level that would remain steady until the "berry boom" of the late 1970s.¹¹⁶ The 1980s marked the high point of strawberry cultivation— in 1983 Hillsborough and Manatee County strawberry fields covered over 4,700 acres, a number not seen since the 1930s.¹¹⁷ However, the new berry culture had little in common with the tiny sets of the 1940s. By the 1980s, strawberry growers ran large, modern, mechanized farms that sprawled over hundreds of acres. Commercial farmers finally realized the goal of strawberry millions— long after Tagulo Rogers' family abandoned their agricultural dreams on a half-acre of rich Plant City soil.

115. Florida Department of Agriculture, *Florida Agriculture Annual Agricultural Statistical Summary, 1960-1961 Season* (Jacksonville, Fla., 1961), 99.

116. Florida Department of Agriculture, *Florida Agricultural Statistics, Vegetable Summary— 1969* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1970), 42.

117. Florida Department of Agriculture, *Florida Agricultural Statistics, Vegetable Summary— 1989* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1989), 48.