
09.26.2014 AGRICULTURE

Special Report: 'Dark days' at the Cutchogue labor camp

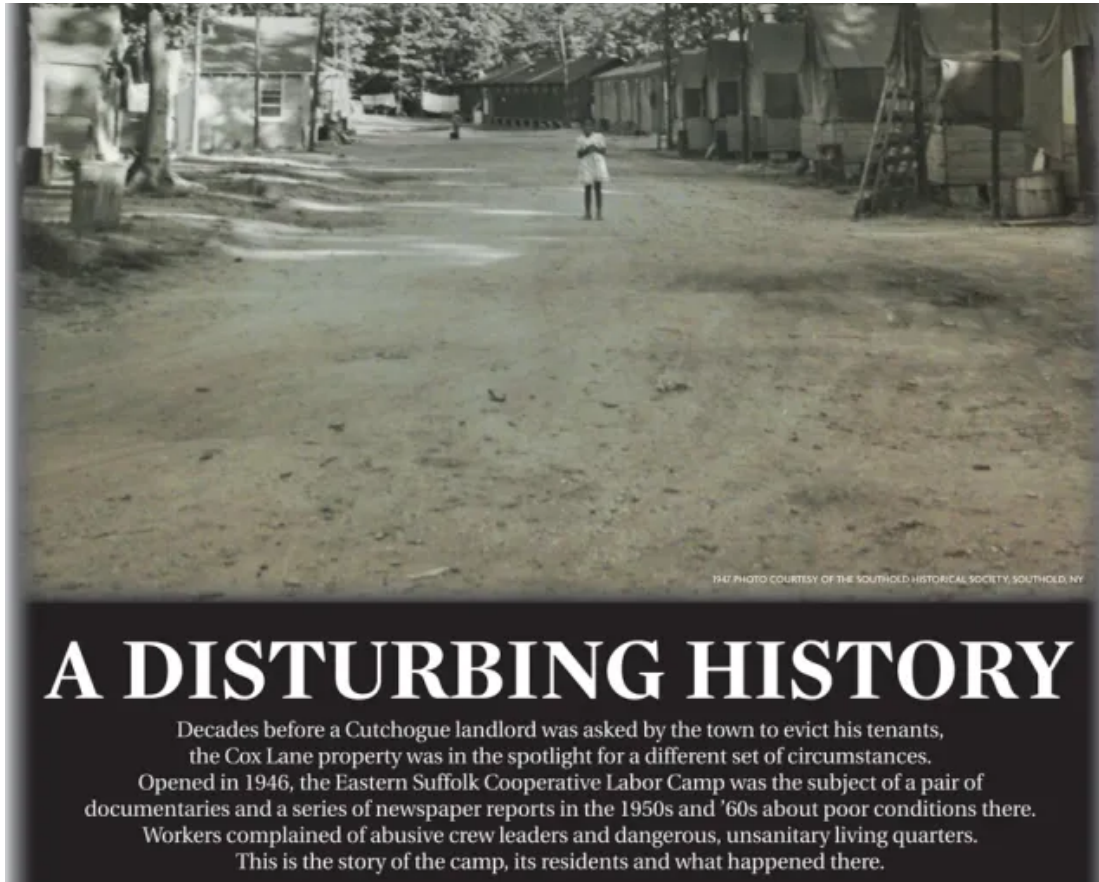
By Paul Squire

The Suffolk Times.



1947 photo courtesy of the Southold Historical Society, Southold, NY

The Suffolk Times.



Ask around about the former labor camp on Cox Lane in Cutchogue and the reaction you'll get is often the same: a slight frown, a widening of the eyes or a small shake of the head. The history of the camp — which housed hundreds of migrants during its heyday in the 1950s and '60s — is now seen as an embarrassment, longtime farmers and local residents say.

"It was horrible conditions," said Josephine Watkins-Johnson of Greenport, who knew many who worked the fields at the time. "That was the worst camp of any of them."

The Cutchogue migrant camp, which included barracks-style housing for single men and families, opened in 1946. It was the last of three camps that had been created in Southold and Greenport during World War II to help farmers tend their fields.

The Eastern Suffolk Cooperative, a group of 139 Southold Town and Shelter Island farmers, spent \$15,000 to build the camp, which it operated along with the Suffolk Farm Bureau, according to a 1946 article in the Long Island Traveler.

It would become one of more than 50 camps — though many were much smaller — scattered across Riverhead and Southold towns, according to a map created by Suffolk County health officials in 1959. More than 1,000 migrants were working on the North Fork at that time, the map's legend states.

The Suffolk Times.

It was criticized as messy and dangerous, a place that barely met county building codes as its owners cut corners on maintenance and supervision. Abusive crew leaders took cuts from each migrant worker's pay and allegedly manipulated the workers to keep them in poverty and debt, according to contemporary New York Times reports.

Only after years of exposés by television and newspaper reporters, as well as investigations by federal and county government agencies, were issues at the camp finally addressed.

[Prime Purveyors purchases former labor camp](#)

The Suffolk Times.

26837

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THIS INDENTURE, made the 9th day of May, nineteen hundred and eighty-three

BETWEEN EASTERN SUFFOLK CO-OPERATIVE, INC., a Co-operative Corporation formed under the Laws of the State of New York, with a principal office for doing business at (no #) Cox's Lane, Cutchogue, New York

party of the first part, and PRIME PURVEYORS, INC., a domestic corporation having its principal place of business at (no #) Main Road, Peconic, New York

DISTRICT SECTION BLOCK LOT
0 12 17 21 26

party of the second part,

WITNESSETH, that the party of the first part, in consideration of Ten Dollars and other valuable consideration paid by the party of the second part, does hereby grant and release unto the party of the second part, the heirs or successors and assigns of the party of the second part forever,

ALL that certain plot, piece or parcel of land, with the buildings and improvements thereon erected, situate, lying and being in the Town of Southold, County of Suffolk and State of New York, being more particularly bounded and described as follows:

BEGINNING at a concrete monument set at the Southeast corner thereof at the point of intersection formed by the westerly line of Cox's Lane and the Northerly line of the land of Heidtmann; running thence in a general Westerly direction along the land of said Heidtmann South 46° 05' West a distance of 225 feet to a concrete monument; running thence in a general Northerly direction along lands of The Town of Southold and Leander B. Glover, Jr. North 59° 14' West a distance of 562.22 feet to a concrete monument set on the southerly line of lands of Droskoski; running thence in a general Easterly direction along the southerly line of lands of Droskoski North 32° 24' East a distance of 225 feet to a monument set on the southerly line of said Cox's Lane; running thence in a general Southerly direction along the Westerly line of said Cox's Lane South 58° 30' East a distance of 615.23 feet to the point or place of BEGINNING.

BEING AND INTENDED TO BE the same premises as conveyed to the party of the first part by deed dated July 17, 1946 and recorded in the Suffolk County Clerk's Office on July 22, 1946 in Liber 2597 Page 442.

TOGETHER with all right, title and interest, if any, of the party of the first part in and to any streets and roads abutting the above described premises to the center lines thereof; TOGETHER with the appurtenances and all the estate and rights of the party of the first part in and to said premises; TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the premises herein granted unto the party of the second part, the heirs or successors and assigns of the party of the second part forever.

AND the party of the first part covenants that the party of the first part has not done or suffered anything whereby the said premises have been encumbered in any way whatever, except as aforesaid.

AND the party of the first part, in compliance with Section 13 of the Lien Law, covenants that the party of the first part will receive the consideration for this conveyance and will hold the right to receive such consideration as a trust fund to be applied first for the purpose of paying the cost of the improvement and will apply the same first to the payment of the cost of the improvement before using any part of the total of the same for any other purpose.

The word "party" shall be construed as if it read "parties" whenever the sense of this indenture so requires.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the party of the first part has duly executed this deed the day and year first above written.

In presence of:

RECEIVED
Suffolk Co.
REAL ESTATE
MAY 12 1983
TRANSFER TAX
SUFFOLK

EASTERN SUFFOLK CO-OPERATIVE, INC.
By *Frank McBride*
Frank McBride, President

TAX MAP
DESIGNATION
Dist. 1000
Sec. 084.00
Blk. 03.00
Lot(s):
001.001

*800 666 9
Suffolk Co. N.Y.*

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Though the Eastern Suffolk Cooperative sold the camp in 1983 to Prime Purveyors, which built a dry goods warehouse on the property soon after, it's unclear exactly when the camp closed for good, as documentation about the its final days is scarce.

Today, the former camp property is at the center of a dispute between Prime Purveyors owner Robert Hamilton and Southold Town, which is accusing him of violating town code by [renting out apartments](#) at the site.

Still, for the those who remember it, the former labor camp remains a shameful and rarely discussed part of the North Fork's farming history.

"We grew up and didn't think anything was wrong," said Long Island Farm Bureau executive director Joseph Gergela, whose family ran a Jamesport potato farm when he was young. "Those were part of the dark days.

"We were kids," he continued. "Now, I look back and say, 'Oh my god.' We all look back and remember these things and are shaking our heads that this was the way it was."

That feeling is echoed by some of the farmers who worked on the North Fork during the years the camp was open.

The Suffolk Times.

The workers came each morning, she said, prepared with a breakfast egg sandwich provided by the crew leader. At the end of the week, that breakfast would be the first of many deductions from their salaries, part of a cycle of endless debt.

Ms. Zuhoski told The Suffolk Times she can remember her nine children going to the Dixie Inn, the combined restaurant and convenience store at the labor camp, to buy soda, ice cream and candy.

Paul Squire



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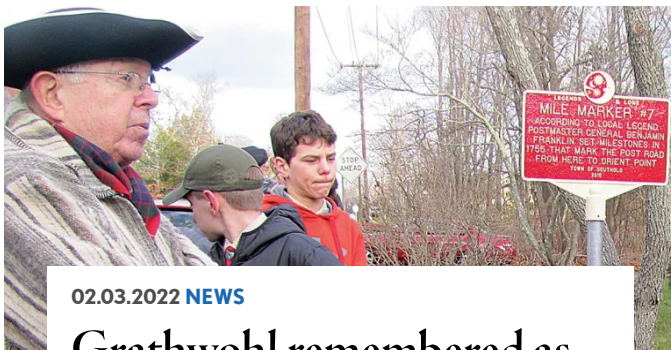
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