

## Temporary Labourers on Niagara Fruit Farms: The role of the Haudenosaunee people

By Jessica Linzel

Temporary labourers are a vital component of Niagara's fruit industry today, and they have been throughout much of history. Work on fruit farms and nurseries can be tedious, hard labour. In the past, it was mostly conducted by temporary labourers hired on a daily or weekly basis, since so much of it was seasonal. This menial labour was in large part performed by temporary farm workers. These workers were often local women and young people, immigrant European women coming in from Buffalo, and occasionally Haudenosaunee people from the Six Nations Reserve. Around the 1970s, Niagara farmers began hiring offshore seasonal labourers from places like Mexico and the Caribbean.

The Haudenosaunee people from the Six Nations Reserve at the Grand River came to the region to work during harvest as a critical part of the region's labour force. In 1906 the press credited "Indians" from the Reserve for saving Niagara fruit farmers as crops were plentiful and labour was scarce. It was often entire Indigenous families that would come to the region to work—in particular, to pick berries. This included men, women, and children. Despite outpacing other seasonal labourers like the "farmerettes" (also known as the "daughters of Canada"), they were still classified as lower-class citizens, fit only for menial farm labour. This colonial attitude is revealed in documents like this propaganda piece from the Canadian Department of the Interior, published around 1910 and claiming that during fruit-picking season, "the civilized descendants of the once dreaded tribesmen come in from their distant villages to help in the gathering of the crops."



Locals recall how farmers from their community in Lincoln would travel to Brantford early in the season and enter agreements with individuals from the Six Nations Reserve to come and pick fruit on their farms. Often entire families would travel to Niagara, including their children. Courtesy of the Friends of Lincoln's History.

These Indigenous labourers from the Grand River came to Niagara as seasonal workers, most often choosing to work on larger farms that offered steadier employment. Smaller fruit growers complained about the lack of labourers during harvest season, and temporary workers likewise worried about transitioning precariously from job to job during those few summer months. Thus, it was beneficial for growers in Niagara to produce a variety of crops lasting multiple seasons, from gooseberries in June to blackberries in August. Some growers, like the Henry family in Winona, incentivised workers to remain for the entire season by paying back their travel fares from the Reserve on their last day.

In addition to picking and packing fruit, some also sowed and planted in the fields and orchards, thereby extending their working season in Niagara by a couple more months. One woman recalled how her friends and family “went in May and maybe didn’t come back until late September.” Some stayed as long as December, performing other tasks like hoeing and weeding.

They lived on the farms as they worked throughout the season in very simple living conditions, much like the migrant labourers that work in Niagara today. Payment was offered on a day-by-day basis. In some places, farms paid out their workers in cash at the end of every day, or used a punch-card system, but this was not the case everywhere. L. B. Henry, a Winona grower and graduate from the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph stated in a 1913 Ontario Fruit Growers’ Association meeting that they

used a “system of books.” This meant that labourers each night entered how much they picked that day and could choose when they wanted to cash out. At the Henry farm, the Haudenosaunee labourers were considered “very satisfactory berry pickers,” gathering on average 12 to 15 baskets of berries a day. That meant, with gooseberries or red currants paying 15 cents a basket, they made approximately two dollars a day.

Indigenous peoples were also part of Niagara’s fruit economy by weaving and selling baskets to growers and shipping companies. In the 1870s, they provided the baskets that grape farmers in Niagara-on-the-Lake used for shipping table grapes like Delawares and Concords by steamship to Toronto.

## References

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Farmerettes on a Dray (Wagon) 1917–1918. R. O. Smith Farm, Grimsby, Ontario, Canada. Photo courtesy of the Grimsby Museum.