

Michael Lee

IN AUGUST 2001, when he was sent to jail for four years, Michael Allen Lee was forty-three years old. He had been convicted of enslavement.

This happened in Fort Pierce, a town on the coast of Florida in the south-east corner of the United States. There are many large and prosperous farms nearby where citrus fruits—oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes—are grown. Michael was working there as a ‘labour boss’. He was hiring workers to pick fruit. The workers were not paid by the farmers whose fields they worked in. They were paid by Michael. The farmers paid him for providing labour for them.

Many of the people who pick the fruit that is grown in Florida are migrant workers. Most of them come from Mexico and other Central American countries. About eighty percent are in the US illegally. The workers Michael hired, however, were Americans, men who had been born in the US.

Michael found his employees in shelters for homeless men in Orlando, a large city about 150 kilometers to the north of Fort Pierce. He told the men he found living in these places that, if they came with him to Fort Pierce, they would make good money. He also tempted them with cocaine and alcohol.

When the men got to Fort Pierce, however, they discovered that their lives were worse than they had been in Orlando. Fifteen men had to live in a run-down, four-bedroom house. They each had to pay \$30.00 a week in rent. The money was deducted from their paycheck. They slept in small beds or on mattresses on the floor; some of them slept in the halls. There were insects everywhere.

There was no drinkable water in the house. There were taps, but the water that came out of them was green or brown, and it smelled bad. The men had to bring drinking water from the farm in coolers.

They got up every morning before the sun came up. They were taken in a van to the farms where they were working. The van was over-crowded and they had to sit on the floor or on buckets.

On the way to the fields, the van stopped at a small store, and Michael gave each of his workers about five dollars to buy their breakfast and lunch.

They worked all day, until six in the evening. There were no bathrooms in the fields. There was no way they could wash the pesticide off their hands. They did have water in coolers but they had no cups to drink it from.

After work, Michael gave the men some more money, five dollars or less, for their supper. They pooled what they got, and then they shopped and cooked together. Sometimes they cooked a chicken. Sometimes they had hot dogs. Occasionally, one of Michael’s associates brought a wild animal, a raccoon or a tortoise, and cooked it for the men’s supper.