HARVEST OF SHAME
EDWARD R MURROW
Renowned American war correspondent and CBS news anchor Ed Murrow, who had broadcast from London during the Blitz, reported the British retreat from Dunkirk as the near-disaster it was and, in the 1950s, campaigned against Senator Joe McCarthy's vendettas. He turned to the plight of migrant farm labourers in his 1960 documentary *Harvest of Shame* for the *CBS Reports* series. This is an astonishing film because it demonstrates that a form of slavery existed in the United States in the mid-20th century.

Producer David Lowe and camera operator Martin Barnett spent months following migrants from Florida and Mexico to orchards and fields up and down the United States's eastern seaboard before Murrow joined them. He immediately showed his commitment to exposing the exploitation of those Hispanic, black and white workers working from dawn to dusk for 136 days a year at harvest time on the east and west coasts. They were paid an average salary of $900 – less than a fifth of the country's average – and lived in crowded, filthy shacks with no running water or healthcare.

Murrow clearly identified with his subjects. He was born to parents living in a log cabin without electricity or plumbing on a North Carolina farm that barely earned enough for the family to survive. He himself laboured on farms during summer school holidays. Once asked why he was so committed to workers' rights, he replied: 'Because I hoed corn in a blazing sun.'

*Harvest of Shame* begins in Florida with the hiring of men, women and children – 'the humans who harvest the food for the best-fed people in the world,' as Murrow describes them – who are packed like sardines into flatbed trucks transporting them to their places of work. Murrow quotes one farmer as saying, 'We used to own our slaves – now, we just rent them.'

The documentary follows labourers from Florida to New Jersey and New York state, and from the Mexican border in California to Oregon and Washington. The squalid conditions and back-breaking work they endure are compounded by their sense that there can never be an escape from such a life.

On 25 November 1960, the day after their annual Thanksgiving feast, millions of Americans watched *Harvest of Shame*. It shocked and triggered a national debate, and almost certainly contributed to the civil rights campaign that was then under way. This led to President Lyndon Johnson signing the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which effectively ended slavery and began another era of struggle for racial and workplace justice that goes on today.

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