

Hard-Working 'Handicaped' Alabaman Wants No Gifts

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

At 59, John Wesley Thomas is 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighs a solid 185 pounds. His graying hair is in a crew cut and his face is leathered and tanned from many years of hard, manual labor. He neither smokes nor drinks and attends church regularly. But John Thomas is different from other men. He only has one arm.

It was 52 years ago when little Johnny Thomas fell and broke his left arm in a field in central Alabama. Medical methods were crude and when gangrene set in the country doctor amputated. All his life he's had an empty left sleeve.

BUT FOR some reason no one ever told him he was supposed to be handicapped, so he went to

work just like other men.

He and his wife worked a tenant farm in Alabama and raised eight healthy children.

"My wife and I could pick 400 pounds of cotton a day," he grinned, "and after that I'd hitch up the

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## Perspective

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mule and plow until dark."

Later he went to work in a sawmill, first as a logger and then as a night watchman. "How'd you handle a crosscut saw?" I asked him. "A man can do most anything he sets his mind to," he answered.

BUT JOHN Thomas is unlike other men in other respects also. For some odd reason he doesn't think

the world owes him a living. The last three years he has worked for a concrete firm as a custodian and laborer. But a recent cutback has laid him off — and for the first time in his life he's been told he's handicapped and ought to

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apply for the poverty program.

"Employers look at me and shake their heads," he says. "I tried to get on as a school janitor but they said they were afraid I couldn't change light bulbs. I asked them to give me a chance but they just shook their heads and said I'm too much of a risk and should apply for welfare."

But unlike a lot of men with two arms, John Thomas doesn't want to stand in line with his hand out.

**"I HATE** to bring my troubles to anyone," he told me. "I'd rather just carry them on down the road. If only someone would give me a chance to prove I can still do a day's work."

But maybe he's a risk after all. I mean, who'd be willing to trust a man who actually wants to work for a living. Who knows? A guy like this would probably even give part of his salary to the church.

**Note:** Telephones are luxuries for working people like John Thomas, but his address is 1279 Palmwood Drive, Eau Gallie.