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MIGRANT FARM LABOR

THE PROBLEM and
some efforts to meet it

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THE PROBLEM AND SOME EFFORTS TO MEET IT

At least 350,000 American families—more than a million men, women, and children—are wandering from State to State in a desperate effort to earn a living as migrant farm laborers.

These families probably have the lowest living standards of any group in the United States. Their incomes usually range between \$200 and \$450 a year. They “follow the crops” in rickety automobiles, packed with their only possessions—a tent, a couple of blankets, and a few pots and pans. Many of them travel as far as 3,000 miles a year. Usually their only homes are temporary roadside camps, which seldom have any kind of sanitary facilities or even a decent water supply. Their children have little chance for education, adequate medical care, or normal community life. Malnutrition and disease are common among both adults and children.

These migrant workers are absolutely essential to some of the Nation's most important farm areas, under their present system of agriculture. In California, for example, a big vegetable or cotton farm may use only a few dozen workers during most of the year: but in the peak periods, especially the harvest season, it will need as many as 500 laborers for a week or two.

The same thing is true in other areas where the old-fashioned family-sized farm has almost disappeared, and agriculture has become a big industry. In these regions a single farm may cover thousands of acres, and often is owned by a corporation, which operates it like a factory with modern machinery and crews of day laborers.

This kind of farming is most common in the specialty-crop regions of California. It also is widespread, however, in the

lettuce, cotton, and vegetable fields of Arizona; the fruit, berry, and hop regions of the Pacific Northwest; the beet and potato country of Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado; the cotton and citrus areas of Texas; and parts of Florida and New Jersey.

In Texas alone, there are nearly half a million migrant laborers, who find most of their work in the cotton harvest. More than half of all the cropland in Texas—a strip 800 miles long—is planted to cotton. Most of this land now is plowed, planted, and cultivated by machinery, so that hand labor is needed in abundance only in the picking season. The cotton harvest lasts for nearly 6 months in the State as a whole, but in any single area it lasts for only 6 to 10 weeks.

Consequently, the cotton pickers start work in early July in the lower Rio Grande Valley. They drift north into the Corpus Christi area; then into Blacklands during August and September; into the South Plains and western cotton area; and finally back into the extreme southwestern part of the State in December.

In Florida, the migrant workers are largely concentrated in the vegetable-growing country near Lake Okeechobee—particularly around Belle Glade. A great many buildings in this city were destroyed by hurricane and flood in 1928, and as a result good housing is scarce, even for the permanent population. Moreover, farm production is expanding rapidly in this area, but so far there has been little increase in facilities to take care of the seasonal workers.

WHERE MIGRANTS COME FROM

FOR YEARS most of the migrant farm workers in all sections of the country were foreigners—Chinese, Hindus, Japanese, Filipinos, and Mexicans. Today, however, these races have been largely replaced by native, white American families, which now make up about 85 percent of the migrant labor supply.

Most of these families were once small farmers—owners or tenants—in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and other Southern and Midwestern States. Many of them were driven

out of the so-called Dust Bowl by the great droughts of 1934 and 1936. Others were foreclosed and lost their farms in the early days of the depression; and still others came from land worn out by decades of soil erosion and bad land use.

Many thousands of additional families, mostly tenants, were “tractored out”—pushed off the land by the growing mechanization of agriculture. All through the southern Great Plains and the Mississippi Delta, small tracts operated by tenants and mule power are being combined into large farms, run with tractors and seasonal day laborers. A few of the displaced tenants have been able to find jobs in industry, but most of them have been forced to take to the road in search of temporary work in the big commercial farming areas.

The extent of this displacement is illustrated by the rapidly increasing use of tractors. In Texas, for example, there were only 9,000 farm tractors in use in 1920; but in 1937 there were about 99,000. It has been estimated that each tractor replaced from one to five tenant families.

In one Alabama county there were eight farm tractors a few years ago. In 1937, there were 260 tractors in that county, and each one forced one or two tenant families off the land.

A recent study of 6,655 typical migrant families in California disclosed that many of these families came from regions where the trend towards farm mechanization has been most pronounced. It showed that:

1. Most of these people came from four States—Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Oklahoma was the State of origin of two-fifths of the group studied. (Most of the migrants in Oregon and Washington, on the other hand, came from the drought areas of Montana, the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska.)

2. These families have become migrants relatively recently. Almost half of them had lived for 20 years or more in the States from which they came; and only 17 percent had lived for less than 5 years in their States of origin.

3. Most of the migrants are young people, in their best working years. The average age of the heads of the families was

33 years. The typical household consisted of two adults and a child under 5 years old. Only one-fifth of the children were 15 years old or over.

4. Virtually all of the migrant families studied were sincerely looking for work, and were very reluctant to accept relief.

HOW THE MIGRANTS LIVE

THE PRESENCE of this horde of migrants has created grave health, housing, and economic problems, especially in the Pacific Coast States. Some of the big farms furnish cabins for their seasonal workers, but most of the migrants have been forced to pitch their tents on the roadside, on ditch banks, or in vacant lots on the outskirts of small towns. In such crowded makeshift camps there is constant danger of smallpox, typhoid, and scarlet fever epidemics.

In the summer, there is a sharp rise in child deaths among the migrants, as a result of eating unripe or unwholesome fruit, and drinking contaminated water. In winter, there is a heavy increase in pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, and other pulmonary diseases, since few of the migrants have good clothes or warm shelter.

The constant movement of these families creates a year-round danger of the spread of such diseases as typhoid, smallpox, and infantile paralysis.

Here are a few excerpts from the reports of trained investigators, who recently made a study of health and housing conditions in the States where migration is heaviest:

1. *California*: "In Imperial Valley in a typical ditch-bank camp, dwellings were constructed of old tents, gunny sacks, dry-goods boxes, scrap tin. All the shacks were without floors * * * very dirty and swarming with clouds of flies. No sanitary facilities and backyard used as toilet. Irrigation ditch half filled with muddy water used for all purposes."

2. *Florida*: "Typical housing for migrants: 14-room shelter, each room containing a family numbering from 2 to 10 people, each room renting from \$1.50 per week. During the 8-month season the landlord receives \$819. The cost of building this

shelter was \$400. For each 4 to 8 such shelters, the common practice is to have a single open-pit toilet."

3. *Arizona*: "Cotton-picking season: Housing consisting of deserted chicken sheds and a barn. Eight or ten families lived in the barn with rough rag partitions for privacy and slept on the bare dirt floor. No toilets at all."

4. *New Jersey*: "Housing consists of crude barracks, particularly in the cranberry bogs, designed to house 10 to 30 families. Absolutely no comforts or conveniences. No bathing or laundry facilities."

5. *Texas*: "During the harvest season, the community becomes an open camp with a huge fluctuating migrant population deprived of facilities for washing, bathing, cooking. 'Jungles' spring up as seasonal suburbs."

6. *Washington*: "The conditions under which the transient workers lived on the average were insanitary and inadequate for health and decency. * * * Toilet facilities often were insufficient to meet the county board of health requirement. * * * Sickness, particularly dysentery, was found in nearly all camps. The victims usually were unable to afford the assistance of a doctor * * *."

Migrant children have little or no opportunity for even a minimum of education. Usually they cannot attend classes, because they have to work in the fields with other members of the family. Moreover, few communities provide adequate school facilities for migrant children, since they are in a given area only for a few weeks a year.

Even where school facilities do exist, migrant children must interrupt their attendance every few weeks, as the families move on to another locality. Under such circumstances, satisfactory education is virtually impossible.

FSA CAMPS FOR MIGRANT FAMILIES

In 1936 the Farm Security Administration set out to help the States meet some of the most urgent health and housing problems which had been created by this great wave of migration.

Primarily as a sanitation measure, Farm Security started to

build camps, where migrant families could live as they followed the crops. Today there are 26 permanent camps either in operation or under construction. When all of them are completed, they will provide shelter for about 7,000 families at any one time. Since the migrants are continually flowing in and out of these camps, as the demand for labor changes in each area, as many as 12,000 or 15,000 families may use the camps in a year.

Twelve of these camps are located in California, where the migrant problem is most urgent; three in Arizona; four in Texas; two in Idaho; two in Florida and one each in Oregon and Washington. Requests for the establishment of additional camps have been received from many communities, chambers of commerce, and local farm groups.

These camps do not pretend to provide good housing nor can they be considered a permanent solution for the migrant problem. They merely offer the barest minimum of decent living facilities. The camps provide far better shelter and sanitary arrangements than most of the migrants had before, however, and they have done much to relieve suffering and check the spread of disease.

The earliest camps simply consisted of rows of wooden platforms, on which the migrants could pitch their tents. More recent camps have been equipped with simple, one-room wooden or metal shelters, in place of tent platforms. Each camp has accommodations for from 200 to 350 families.

Every camp has several sanitary buildings, ordinarily 1 for each 40 or 50 families. These buildings provide toilets, shower baths, and tubs where the migrant women can do their family laundry. A central disposal system carries off the camp's sewage and waste. The opportunity to clean up and wash their clothes is one of the features of the camps most appreciated by the people who use them.

Most of the camps also have a children's clinic and nursery with a resident nurse and visiting physicians; an isolation ward for persons who have contagious diseases; a small shop where the residents can repair their automobiles; a cottage for the camp

manager; and a modest community building for church services and other meetings. A few of the camps have temporary school buildings, with teachers supplied by the local school authority.

Each camp is democratically governed by a camp council elected by the residents. This council represents the camp population in its relations with the manager, and handles problems of discipline and order within the camp. It has no jurisdiction outside the camp, and major problems often are referred to the camp manager for final decision. All camps are, of course, subject to the police and health authorities of the counties in which they are located.

A "Good Neighbors Committee" also has been organized by the women residents in nearly every camp. This committee shows newcomers how to use the camp facilities, brings them into the community life, and frequently furnishes food and clothing for the neediest families.

Child welfare committees often are organized by the resident or visiting nurses, to give instruction in first aid, hygiene, and child care to other camp residents. Sewing groups sometimes are formed to take clothes for children, with cloth purchased through the camp welfare fund.

Almost invariably there are several guitar, fiddle, and accordion players in camp, who are glad to play for occasional dances in the community buildings. Farmers from the surrounding country are invited to these dances and other camp affairs, such as baseball games; and as a result the relations between the migrant workers and people living permanently in the neighborhood have been considerably improved.

Since most migrant families have a hard time earning enough money for food and clothing, they are not charged anything for living in an FSA camp. Each family is asked, however, to contribute about 10 cents a day to a camp welfare fund, which is handled jointly by the campers' committee and the FSA manager. Money from this fund is used for minor improvements around the camp, and sometimes to help out families who are particularly hard up or to provide school lunches and

clothes for needy children. In a few cases, campers have used some of the money to finance inexpensive camp newspapers, consisting of three or four mimeographed pages.

In addition to its daily contribution, each family is expected to put in 2 hours work every week around the camp, cleaning up the grounds and sanitary buildings, planting grass, repairing shelters, and so on. If a family is unable to pay its 10 cents a day, it is asked to do an extra 2 hours work a week.

MEDICAL CARE FOR MIGRANTS

THE ESTABLISHMENT of sanitary camps has done much to check the spread of disease, but many acute health problems could not be solved by this means alone. Most migrant families are not able to afford even a minimum of medical care, and as a result there has been much needless suffering and many preventable deaths.

Consequently in 1938 FSA helped form the Agricultural Workers' Health and Medical Association, to bring medical care to destitute migrant families in California and Arizona. This corporation, financed with FSA funds, is operated by a board of directors which includes representatives of the California Medical Association, the State relief administration, and the State board of health. Its headquarters is at Fresno, Calif., and it has 15 local offices and clinics along the main routes of migration.

Migrant families which have no money to pay for medical care may apply at the nearest local office of the association. First aid is given on the spot by a trained nurse. Serious cases are referred to a clinic where a doctor is available, or to local physicians, who have agreed to provide treatment at uniform, reduced rates. Patients are expected to pay as much as they can for this service, and many of them send in a few dollars at a time as they find temporary jobs and save up a little cash. The rest of the bills are paid by the association.

PORTABLE CAMPS

SOME OF THE FSA camps are almost empty for several weeks

every year, when there is no farm work available in that immediate region.

In order to get more continual use of its camp facilities, FSA recently has been experimenting with portable camps, which can be moved from one harvest area to another with the seasons. Six of these mobile camps are now in operation.

A typical portable camp has about 200 tent platforms, which can be easily moved by truck. It also has a first-aid and children's clinic built into a trailer; and a big, specially built trailer which contains 12 shower baths for men and 12 for women. Its water and drain pipes can be quickly connected with hydrants and sewerage lines whenever the camp moves to a new site. Eight washtubs go along in the laundry unit. A community tent is provided for church services and other meetings, and sometimes there are special isolation tents for people with contagious diseases.

The mobile camps are set up on tracts of 20 to 40 acres, provided by groups of local farmers and merchants and leased to FSA for a nominal fee. Whenever possible, the camps are connected with regular city and county water systems. In Calipatria, Calif., the community donated a \$600 water tank for use on the camp site.

The first season of operation with the portable camps indicated that they are practicable and relatively inexpensive. Plans are now under consideration for building additional camps of the same type. It is interesting to note that the portable camps were designed in consultation with army engineers, and that they are transported and operated along lines which have been used successfully by the Army for many years.

LABOR HOMES

TO ENABLE at least part of the migrants to get settled down in permanent homes, FSA has built a number of small cottages—known as "labor homes"—near some of its permanent camps. These houses are rented for about \$8 a month to families who are able to find year-round work on nearby farms. Each cottage has a small garden plot, where the family can supple-

ment its income by raising much of its own food. The houses are served by the water and sewerage systems of the nearby camps.

Usually a camp with 350 shelters or tent platforms will have about 50 labor homes adjoining it. This ratio is based on long experience, which shows that year-round work should be available in the area for at least 50 families, and seasonal work during the harvests for about 350. The number of both shelters and cottages varies, of course, according to local conditions.

In a few instances, the cottage residents have been able to lease a tract of land nearby, which they farm cooperatively. The surplus vegetables, milk, and other foodstuffs which they produce on their farm usually is sold to families living in the migrant camp.

The labor homes are supervised by the manager of the adjoining camp, and residents in the cottages often take active part in camp life.

HOMESTEAD PROJECTS

IN A FURTHER EFFORT to help as many migrants as possible to get permanently settled, a few homestead projects have been built which have no connection with the camps. A small but fairly typical example is the Mineral King farm near Visalia, Calif. Here 10 families leased a 530-acre tract which the Government had bought from a bankrupt operating company. All of them were good farmers; 8 came from Oklahoma, where drought and dust storms had driven them from their land.

These families set up temporary homes in the dilapidated buildings which already were on the place, and formed a cooperative association to farm the land. They elected a three-man board of directors, got a \$5,000 loan from FSA to finance the purchase of equipment, and started to work. Most of the acreage was put into cotton, hay, and milo maize, and each family planted a large garden to supply its own food.

At the end of the first year, the crops had brought in nearly \$30,000. The co-op paid off its loan to FSA, met all of its

expenses—including \$3,700 rent for the land—paid wages to the members for the work they had done on the cooperative acreage; and still had about \$4,500 left over. The members could have divided this money up among themselves. Instead they decided to buy a herd of good cows, and to bring in five more migrant families to help handle the expanded operations.

The incomes of these 10 families average about \$800 for the year, which was twice as much as they had been making before. Now good credit risks, they have got another loan from FSA to build new homes. There is every prospect that they will be permanent, prosperous members of the community.

A somewhat similar homestead project for 32 families is in operation at Chandler, Ariz.; another is located at Casa Grande, Ariz.; and several more are scattered through Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.

These homesteads, like the migrant camps and labor homes, are promising first steps toward a solution of the migrant problem. They have attracted much attention in the Pacific Coast States, and in some cases the State governments are discussing similar projects of their own.

EFFORT TO HALT UNNECESSARY MIGRATION

THE MAIN EFFORT of the Farm Security Administration, however, is devoted to stopping unnecessary migration at its source. Throughout the country it has helped more than a million needy farm families to get a new start in their own communities.

Under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, it is making loans to tenants, sharecroppers, and farm laborers to enable them to buy farms of their own. Funds for this program are strictly limited, however, so that only about 7,000 tenants can be helped to become landowners during the 1939-40 fiscal year.

A great many more families are being helped to get a new foothold on the land through the FSA rehabilitation program, financed through emergency relief funds.

Small rehabilitation loans—averaging about \$300 to \$400 each—are made to needy farmers who cannot get credit any-

where else, to enable them to buy the seed, tools, and livestock they need to make a living. Every loan is accompanied by advice on good farming methods, so that the borrowers can make the best use of their money. About 800,000 families have received such loans; and nearly 150,000 already have paid off their loans in full, although much of the money is not yet due.

In cases of extreme distress, usually in drought and flood areas, FSA makes small relief grants to farm families to help them buy food until weather conditions improve enough for them to make a crop.

The rehabilitation and tenant purchase programs undoubtedly have been largely responsible for the gradual decrease in migration in recent months. Moreover, these same methods have been used to help migrants settle down on new farms, wherever good land can be found. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, more than 3,000 migrant families from the drought areas have been helped to locate individual farms and to get a new start on them through rehabilitation loans.

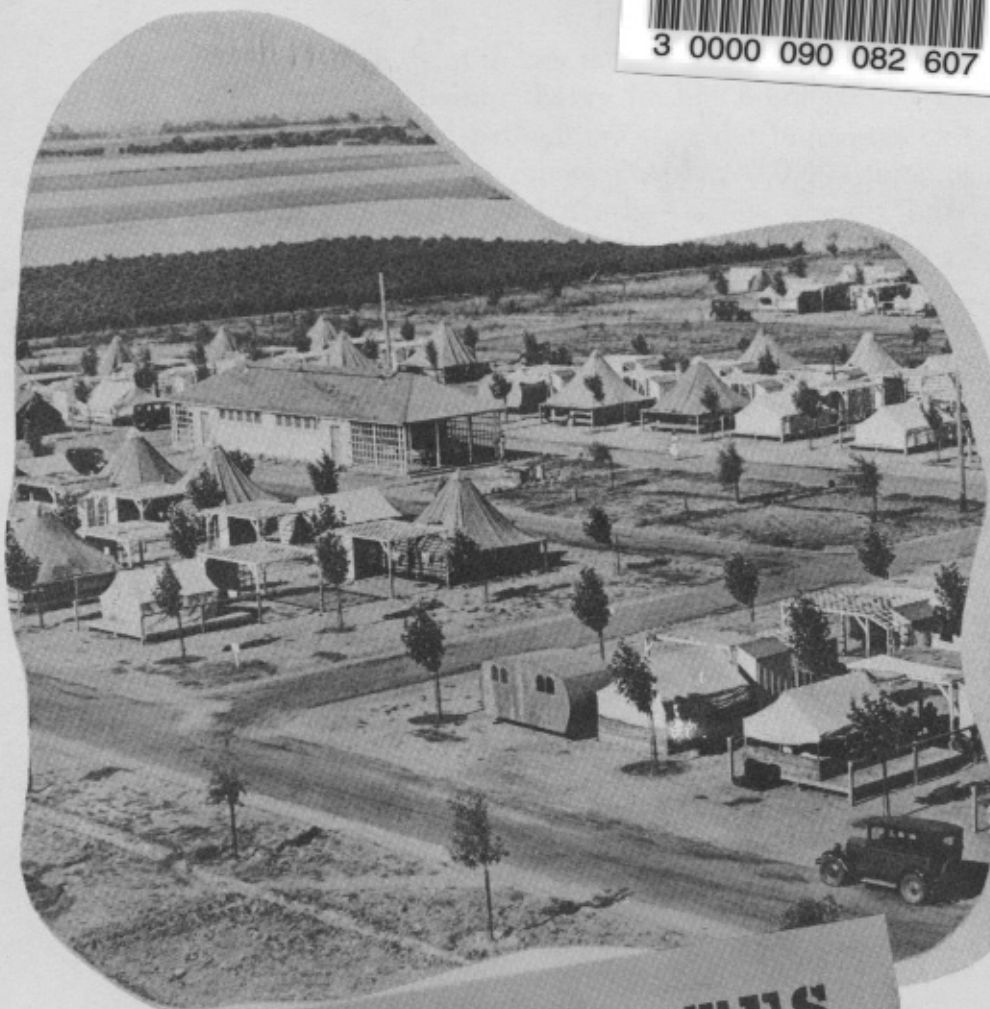
Further information about the Farm Security Administration program can be obtained by writing to:

**The Farm Security Administration
U. S. Department of Agriculture
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