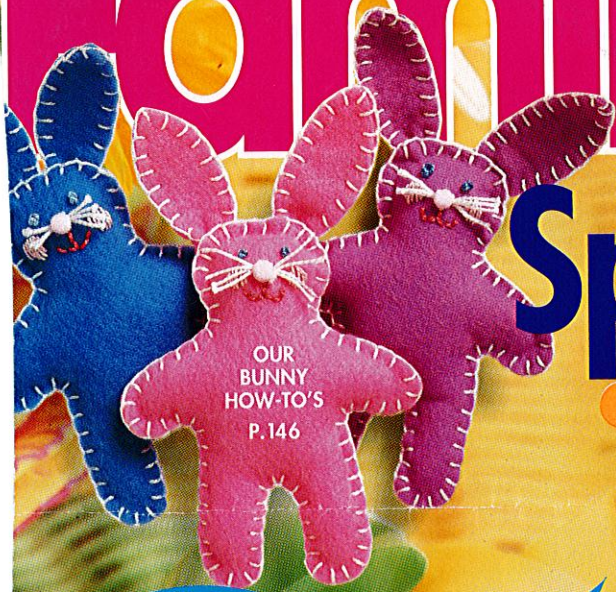


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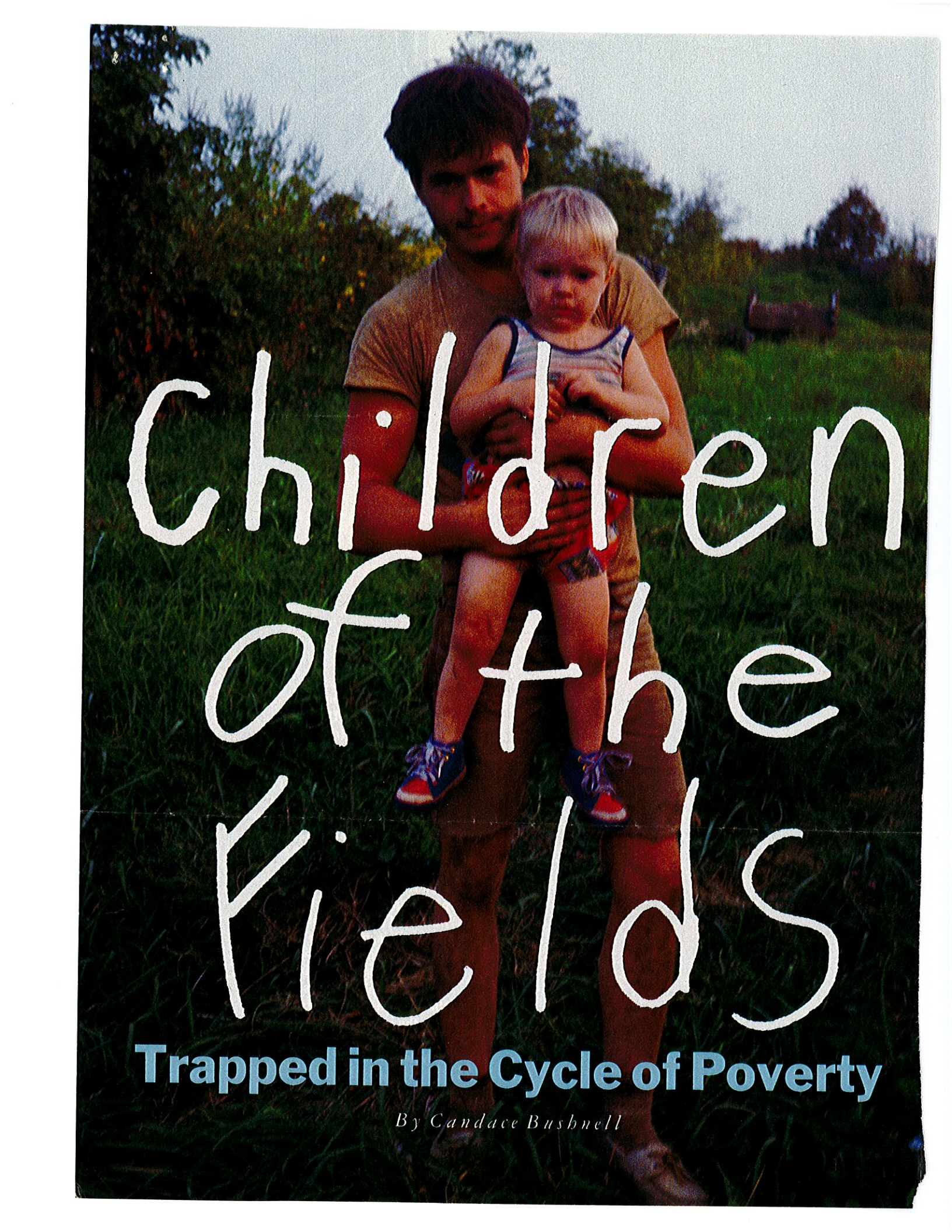
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Children of the Fields: Trapped in a Cycle of Poverty

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a light-colored t-shirt, holding a young child with blonde hair. They are standing in a grassy field with trees in the background. The man is looking directly at the camera, and the child is looking slightly to the side. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Children of the Fields

Trapped in the Cycle of Poverty

By Candace Bushnell

FAMILIES AT RISK

There is a distinct smell to poverty, an odor as memorable as that of death: heavy, sour and nauseating. In the hot August sun, the odor wafts out through the torn and dirty sheets that hang in the windows for curtains and curls under the doorjambes of the broken and rickety trailers and shacks. The smell permeates the atmosphere; it clings to the ragged clothing and the hair of the children, so that even when you walk away from the houses you can still smell it on yourself—the odor of decay and despair.

Then there are the mosquitoes, chiggers and flies—black flies that settle on the deeply wrinkled faces of the old grannies and on the chubby arms of the babies. When the babies cry, more than likely it is a child who picks them up—a child like Ray, a skinny boy with hungry eyes and a grin full of teeth. Ray knows how to change diapers, give a baby a bottle and jiggle him so he stops crying.

At 11 years old, Ray has already had a hard life. As the child of migrant workers (Ray's stepfather, Mark Adams, 30, works in tobacco and cuts wood), Ray has moved more than 25 times in the past five years. He has never been on a sports team, never gone to the movies, never gone to McDonald's. Ray says he doesn't care about moving. He doesn't worry about missing his friends. "Ain't got no friends." He shrugs. "But it don't bother me none."

Today Ray lives in a rundown house with his four younger brothers and one sister. Heaps of old clothes, cardboard boxes and broken toys are piled up around the house. A washing machine, hooked up to an outside faucet, sits haphazardly on the cement slab that is the porch. Ray shares a bedroom with two brothers and sleeps in an old metal bunkbed. The mattresses are stained and sagging. There are no sheets, just tattered blankets.

Although they happen to live in Kentucky, Ray and his family could be in Anystate, U.S.A.: Michigan, Oregon, Washington, New York, Florida.

Just before tobacco season began, Ray's family had no food. But now, in the middle of September, when there is plenty of work, there is food. Bologna and American cheese on slices of soft white bread. Ray eats his sandwich and tickles his 2-year-old brother, Mark, who eats half his sandwich and throws the remainder on the floor. A tiny puppy, who has been rifling through the piles of debris, rushes forward and gobbles up the sandwich.

"What's the puppy's name?"

Ray shrugs. "Dunno. Ain't got no name."

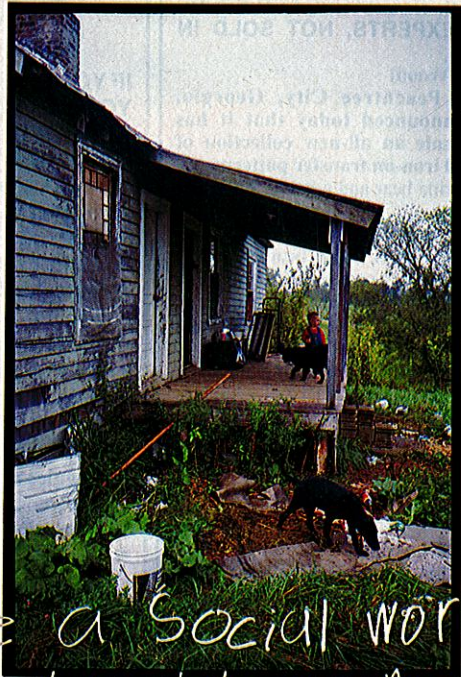
Ray's mother, Joy, a dreamy 26-year-old with big eyes and lightly freckled skin, wanders into the room carrying her 1-year-old baby, Roy. "Someone take the baby. I done held him enough today," she says.

For a moment, there is a tiny flash of defiance in Ray. "I already raised up one baby and I ain't raising up another," he gripes. But he takes the baby anyway.

"Ray worked in tobacco this summer. Settin' plants," Joy says, and there is a shy proudness in her voice. She begins peeling potatoes into a plastic bucket.

"I did real good, too," Ray says solemnly. The baby's nose is running, and he wipes it carefully with the bottom of his dirty T-shirt.

School's been in session for two weeks, and already Ray and his younger brothers, Joseph, 10, and 8-year-old Ralph, are having trouble on the bus. "The other kids hit 'em and put gum in their hair," says Joy. "Last week the kids wrapped something around Ralph's neck and choked him. At one school, the kids grabbed Ralph by the back of his underwear and ripped it to pieces. My kids get real scared about the bus and don't want to go to school."

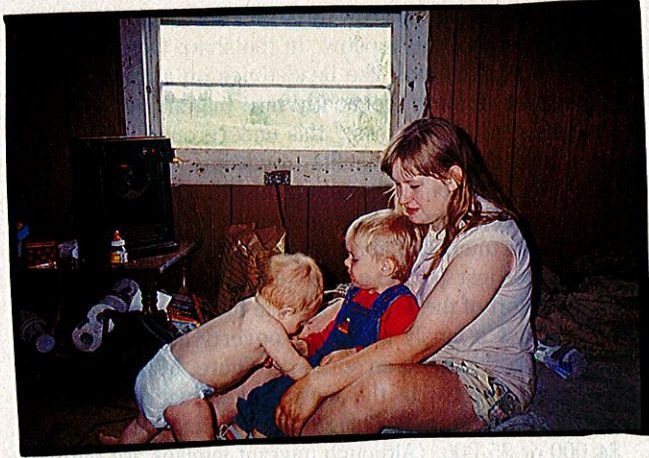


"once a social worker tried to take us away because she says we smelled like dogs."

"I just let the other kids beat me up now," Ray says matter-of-factly. "I don't mind it." He pauses for a moment, shifting the baby from one skinny hip to the other. The air in the living room is dank and fetid; the scraps of curtains are drawn against the sun. On the walls are family portraits taken at Sears: The boys, their scrubbed blond hair combed close against their heads, are beaming for the camera. Their stepfather, Mark, is smiling shyly—he's missing his front teeth. In the photographs, dressed in their neat but out-of-date clothing, the Adamses could almost pass for any typical American family.

But they're not. Ray, Joseph, Ralph, Mark, Roy and

FAMILIES AT RISK



"I Already raised up one baby and I ain't raising up another."

their sister, Virginia, 4—like an estimated one million other children of migrant workers—are modern-day children of the fields. Most Americans think migrant laborers are undocumented workers escaping bad conditions in their own countries who come here for better opportunities. But statistics show that 48 percent are legal immigrants and only 12 percent are not. In fact, the remaining 40 percent are American citizens for whom the American dream has not—and possibly cannot—come true.

In 1939, John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, chronicling the plight of migrant workers through the fictional Joad family. Called "Okies" because they traveled

from the dust bowl of Oklahoma to California, they were ostracized wherever they went, enduring terrible living conditions, below-poverty-level wages, hunger and disease. Their children, barefoot and dressed in rags, were shunned in school and usually worked alongside their parents. Amazingly, perhaps, more than 50 years later there are still "Joad" families on the road, traveling the countryside in their broken-down vehicles in search of farm work and laboring in the fields up to 14 hours a day.

What struck John Steinbeck 54 years ago was the bitter irony that the people who worked in the fields harvesting fruits and vegetables were themselves starving. Today, although one might be hard-pressed to say that migrant labor is "starving," the irony remains. "Migrant workers feed the nation, and yet they can barely afford to feed themselves," says Robert Lynch, director of BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center in Geneseo, New York. Economically and often physically isolated from mainstream society, "they're truly the invisible minority," says Pat Hogan, of the Office of Migrant Education, U.S. Department of Education, in Washington, D.C. "Rural poverty is hidden. And when you don't see it, it's easy to pretend it doesn't exist."

Although experts agree that education is the key to breaking the poverty-ridden cycle of migrant life, for the children this path is still fraught with roadblocks and prejudice. "Many teachers have the attitude that these kids can't learn," says Joyce Short, an advocate for migrant children in the Madison County school system in Richmond, Kentucky. Short does everything she can to help keep migrant kids in school, from bringing them underwear and sneakers to delivering medication to a girl who has been out of school for two weeks because she has lice and her family can't get to a drugstore. "To anyone who says migrant kids can't learn, I say make a home visit. See how these children and their families live,"

My Day's Pay: \$2.80

At 7:30 on a Monday morning, a time when most people are having their first cup of coffee and reading the newspaper, Diana Puckett and I begin loading sticks of tobacco onto a wagon. We bend over, pick up a wooden stick holding six plants, turn and hand the stick to a woman named Frida. Frida passes the stick to Leroy, who stands in the wagon and stacks the sticks. This is what we'll be doing for the next eight or nine hours.

Last September I spent three days working with Diana for Jim Carr, one of the 10 biggest tobacco farmers in Richmond, Kentucky. Although the work seems mind-numbingly simple, it's not as easy as it sounds.

Unaccustomed to field work, I find myself tripping over clumps of dirt and stray plants. "Hey, Big Apple," Leroy yells at me from the wagon. "Watch how you handle those sticks. You can put out someone's eye." Heavy with dew, some of the sticks weigh about 50 pounds—nearly half my weight. When I complain, Diana shrugs and says,

"Some of them sticks is real heavy and some is real light, and that's just the way life is."

Farm work is not for the weak, fainthearted or fussy. By 9 A.M. my clothes are soaked with dew and tobacco juice. My arms ache, and my hands are brown and sticky. With no bathroom facilities, we have to duck into a field of corn. We drink water from shared foam cups and eat our lunch in the tall grass next to the fields. We also work alongside mice, snakes and spiders. Few of the workers have cars, so the foreman picks them up in the mornings. But this means that once on the farm, they are there until the farmer decides they can leave.

I quit early that day. When I turn in my hatchet, the foreman asks how many sticks I've cut. Forty. Even though most men can cut 100 sticks in an hour, and it's taken me five hours to cut 40, he seems quite impressed. The only problem is the money. Because I'm being paid 7 cents for each stick I cut, I earn just \$2.80. —C. B.

FAMILIES AT RISK

Short says. "The problem is that migrant kids often don't fit in. They don't look like the other kids, and they haven't had the same experiences. We've had migrant children who have never seen an escalator. They're different, and they know it, and the regular kids know it too."

On a cool, brittle fall day in the black dirt region of Goshen, New York, an area dominated by onion and lettuce farms, workers are cutting the green tops of the onions with crude metal scissors. Next to the fields, their children sit in the cars—20-year-old gas guzzlers big enough to carry a man and his wife and children and their belongings cross-country. In the cars after school, the children listen to the radio, do their homework and talk and fight.

"That used to be me," says Rita Martinez, an 18-year-old Mexican-American who has been working in the fields since she was 7. Rita "got to 10th grade but dropped out. It was too much traveling, too much going here and there."

In the field next to the family's run-down trailer, the onions are boxed, the crates neatly lined up in rows. In a week or two Rita and her husband, Martin, and Martin's two cousins will travel to Florida to work in strawberries. Their neighbors—Lisa Leavins, 19, her fiancé, José Calvario, Lisa's 1-year-old baby girl and three of José's brothers—are planning to go to Florida too. José likes working in onions better than strawberries.

"Here you can work after dark—14 hours a day—and make \$400 a week. In Florida they stop work at dark, and you only make \$200." José concedes that working in the dark under the dim lights of a tractor is dangerous, "but we don't have accidents because we know what we're doing."

Lisa, who is four months pregnant, will work alongside José, "until I can't work anymore." She looks admiringly at him. "He's used to the fields. He doesn't like being cooped up. He'd go crazy if he had to work in an office."

Next door, Rita is making dinner. She would like to get her high-school-equivalency diploma, but wonders how she'll find the time. "Who else would do the work we do?" she asks, handing her 1-year-old baby, Martin Jr., to his father. "College students? Forget it. We do the work nobody else wants to do. I know I can get a better job, but I got a child to think of now. I want my son to go to

college. I want him to grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer." She glances out the window. In the sharp October light, the onion crates look like headstones on a mass grave.

Because farmers frequently hire migrant workers as "independent contractors," this underground work force often lacks the fringe benefits—overtime, unemployment insurance, disability benefits, health care, paid sick days—most Americans take for granted. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the average migrant family of four makes just \$6,500 a year—or \$542 a month—about \$7,800 short of the \$14,343 income the Government says would allow a family to escape poverty level. But even \$6,500 a year may be an optimistic figure. Mike Hancock, executive director of the Farmworker Justice Fund, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C., puts it closer to \$4,000 or \$5,000. (Although migrant families are entitled to food stamps, some refuse them out of pride.)

In August tobacco plants turn golden yellow and bloom,

the leaves spreading like giant petals. And in September, when workers start cutting down the plants and spearing them on wooden sticks, the tobacco sits drying in the fields in pale yellow teepees. The funny thing is you almost never see the workers, just their handiwork, unless you're out early in the morning. Then you might pass a pickup truck loaded with people, their skin dark from the sun, their clothes heavy with dirt and tobacco juice.

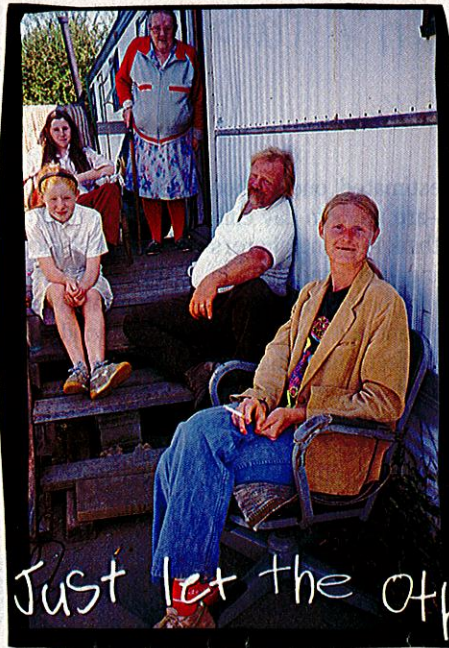
Two of those workers might be Diana and Bill Puckett, who, with Diana's two daughters—Leeann, 13, and Tina, 10—and Bill's 65-year-old mother, move around Kentucky in search of work. They currently live in a ramshackle trailer in a neighborhood of run-down mobile homes behind a shopping mall in Richmond, Kentucky.

While another child might dream of having his or her own room, Leeann and Tina dream of having their own beds—they share a narrow

single bed in a room no bigger than four by six feet. Although their current home has a bathroom with running water ("I wash my hair every day and my clothes every other day," Leeann says), most of the houses they've lived in have not. "Once a social worker tried to take us away because she says we smelled like dogs," Leeann says, flopping into a chair and lighting a cigarette.

"Them kids smelled like dogs because they used to sleep with the dogs," Diana shouts in defense from the kitchen. "That's why I don't trust strangers."

Diana, a wiry redhead who lost four of her front teeth in an accident ("The teeth turned (Continued on page 105)



"I just let the other kids beat me up now. I don't mind it."

CHILDREN OF THE FIELDS

continued from page 100

black and fell out"), earns \$6 an hour loading sticks of tobacco onto a wagon. Bill, who injured his arm years ago and can't do any heavy lifting, is paid \$3.50 an hour to drive a tractor. On a good day Diana and Bill take home about \$80, but the "good" days last only about two months. In November they will strip tobacco, pulling the dried leaves off the plants, a job that pays \$3 an hour. (By law, farmers are required to pay the minimum hourly wage—\$4.25—but there are still loopholes in the system.) Neither Diana nor Bill has ever had a phone, a checking account or a credit card; the money they have in their pockets right now is all the money they have in the world.

Next to the Puckett's trailer is a shopping cart filled with beer and soda cans; when she isn't working in the fields, Diana scours the neighborhood for empties to return to the supermarket for extra money. Inside, the trailer is filled with knickknacks and odds and ends Diana has picked from other people's garbage; her daughters are dressed in secondhand clothes purchased at yard sales.

"My kids is clean," Diana says proudly. Nevertheless, 10-year-old Tina didn't learn to brush her teeth until she was 6.

The issue of teeth, and of a host of other problems migrant families face—such as pesticide exposure—exemplify the complex, interlocking set of factors that keep workers and their children trapped in the migrant way of life. Joyce Short, the school caseworker in Kentucky, asks, "How can migrant children become middle-class citizens if they don't have their teeth? If they don't have running water so they can brush their teeth?"

According to the Government's Commission on Agricultural Workers, housing is a critical problem, and since there is an overabundance of workers, farmers have little incentive to improve conditions for them. "In Southern California and New Mexico, a highway underpass becomes housing," says Hancock of the Farmworker Justice Fund. Ken Ison, head of Kentucky's migrant education program, says that workers and their children have been found living in an old corn crib, an abandoned mine shaft and in their cars.

For three weeks, Bill Sykes and Tina Crahay, their two sons, Bill's sister Melissa and her daughter, and Me-

lissa's boyfriend, Mike, lived in a van parked next to the general store in the tiny town of Valley View, Kentucky. A farmer had promised Bill a job and housing, but by the time the group arrived from Washington State, where Bill had been working on a fish farm, the jobs were taken and the housing was gone. Eventually, another farmer hired Bill and Mike and also found them a "house"—a dilapidated, graying shack set at the end of a mile-long

Because the children have no toys, Bill tries to teach them about bugs and plants.

rutted dirt track—which they now rent for \$50 a month.

On a rainy Friday morning, Tina, 17, peers dispiritedly into a near-empty cement water cistern behind the house. Dressed in a dirty T-shirt and shorts, her arms and legs dotted with chigger and mosquito bites, she lowers a plastic bucket to the bottom of the cistern and attempts to skim water off the top of the foot-deep supply. The water is filled with little red worms, and Tina

isn't sure what she should do—the family can't afford the \$28 to get the cistern filled up again.

Inside the house Bill, 20, is playing on the floor with 2-year-old Bill Jr., using an empty glass bottle as a toy. The couple's younger son, 6-month-old Bryan, crawls over bits of plaster that have fallen from the ceiling. The "furniture" consists of one metal folding chair and two old mattresses abandoned by former occupants. Because the children have no toys, "Bill tries to teach them about bugs and plants," Tina explains. Bill's niece, Margaret, 4, sits outside on the porch, still as a statue, staring at the sheets of gray rain.

In the fields next to the house sit broken-down cars that might trade for a hundred dollars at the used-car lot. Earlier that morning, Bill and Mike got one of the cars going and drove three miles to the store. They came back with iced tea, soda and a couple of candy bars. Tina sits down and begins breast-feeding Bryan; Bill Jr. eats a candy bar. But there is no food for Margaret—not yet, anyway. At noon, Melissa, 19, gives her a little cereal and milk. The child eats silently. When she finishes, she goes back outside to watch the rain splash in dirty puddles around the house. (Continued)

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CHILDREN OF THE FIELDS

continued from page 105

Without running water—indeed, without any water—no one in the group has bathed for days. Tina sighs. “It’s hard to keep clean when you don’t have any water.” Behind the house is a rickety outhouse. “We try not to use it because we don’t know what might be in there—like maybe snakes or spiders,” Melissa says. Instead, the family has been “going outside” next to a corner of the house that offers them some small degree of privacy.

But today Tina is worried about more than snakes. In the past week Bill has been violently ill, vomiting for six hours at a time. (“I thought I was going to die,” Bill recalls. Mike shrugs it off. “Everyone gets sick working in tobacco. It’s nothing,” he says.) One day Bill wasn’t able to work, although the family desperately needed the money. Tina checks the contents of a small tin can sitting next to her mattress. A twenty, a ten, a couple of fives and some change spill onto the floor.

It’s exactly these kinds of conditions that have migrant advocates and health experts worried. Not only does this family not have access to medical care, but

their living conditions are a breeding ground for health problems most Americans never have to think about.

“A lack of sanitary conditions can cause gastroenteritis, salmonella poisoning, bacterial infections and parasites,” says Samuel Epstein, M.D., professor of occupational and environmental medicine at the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago. Indeed, a report by the Peekskill Area Health Center in Peekskill, New York, lists malnutrition, diarrhea and parasites as the three most common health problems of migrant children.

Ironically, migrant workers seldom qualify for Medicaid. “If they’re working when they apply, they may be above the income limit, or they don’t remain in the state long enough,” says Anne Kauffman Nolon, president of the Hudson Valley Migrant Health Program in New York State.

Other experts worry about workers’ increased exposure to pesticides. “Workers can be exposed to pesticides sprayed on crops simply by brushing against the plants, which means that even children who are playing—or living—next to the fields can be in danger,” states Marc Lappé, Ph.D., a toxicologist and professor of health policy and ethics at the Universi-

Bettina Francis, Ph.D., a toxicologist at the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, points out that pesticides can migrate through clothing and be absorbed by the skin. “Imagine what happens when workers don’t have a place to wash up or clean their clothes,” she says.

During the tobacco harvest, emergency room doctors at Berea Hospital in Berea, Kentucky, see about two to three cases a day of what they call “green tobacco poisoning,” says Terre Wilson Adams, M.D., director of the hospital’s emergency-room services. The symptoms—prostration, vomiting, headaches and an inability to

walk—can be so alarming that at times “doctors have called the Poison Control Center,” Dr. Adams says.

“Proving a worker’s symptoms are due to pesticide exposure is another story,” notes Jay Feldman, executive director of the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides. “If a worker does get medical help, it’s usually from a local clinic where they’re not equipped to diagnose or treat chemical-induced illnesses. It’s easier for medical personnel to diagnose the symptoms of pesticide poisoning—among them nausea, dizziness, headaches and rashes—as heat prostration or the flu rather than as

exposure to toxic chemicals.”

And in many cases, it’s easier for the workers to go along with the misdiagnosis. Juan Diaz, 21, who has worked on farms in California, Idaho, Oregon, Kentucky and Washington State, claims he’s never been sick from pesticides, but he does suffer from a mysterious “flu”—which, he says, comes from “being too hot and drinking cold water.”

Diaz’s response is typical, says Dr. Lappé. “In the world of the migrant worker, anyone who complains doesn’t have a job.” In fact, often the only times pesticide

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ty of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago. “Without bathroom facilities, women working in the fields may use plant leaves for personal hygiene; and workers eat lunch next to the crops.” (Under Federal law, farmers are supposed to station portable toilets next to the fields, but “the regulation is written in a way that tries to account for variability in field conditions,” says Mark Maslyn, director of Governmental relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation, a lobbying group that represents farmers and ranchers. “I suspect some farmers just don’t have them.”)

poisoning among migrant workers is diagnosed is when deaths or mass poisonings occur, says Feldman. He cites a case in Balm, Florida, in November 1989 where 75 workers got sick after being sent into a cauliflower field that had been sprayed with Phosdrin, a member of a class of chemicals called organophosphates, commonly used as insecticides by farmers.

These chemicals, cousins to the type developed by the Germans as weapons during World War II, attack the nervous system of insects, but can have the same effect on the nervous systems of humans, says Dr. Francis. Most of the Florida workers complained only of nausea, dizziness and headaches, and a few fainted, but organophosphates can also cause congestive heart failure, seizures and bronchial spasms. High doses can cause coma or death. Because of cases like this one, advocates like Hancock of the Farmworker Justice Fund pushed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for protection for migrant workers.

Last August the EPA finally issued rules requiring farmers to train workers in the handling of pesticides and also to post warnings, in both English and Spanish, of the risks involved. Farmers also have to provide protective equipment and a place to wash. According to EPA spokesman Al Heier, "The regulations are a real breakthrough for workers."

Yet others are not so sure. Dr. Lappé points out that the new regulations are "based on permissible air exposure, without assuming that people will absorb pesticides through the skin. Nor do they take into account the fact that children may be playing next to the fields after school—and children are more susceptible to damage from pesticide exposure than adults. In fact, it would be reasonable to assume that exposure to some pesticides could cause

learning disabilities in these kids."

The average migrant child is two grades behind, and half of these children never graduate from high school, according to the U.S. Department of Education. "Considering that these kids are faced with the recurring nightmare of having to attend a new school, and that parents often need their children to work, it's a miracle that the kids can graduate at all," says Hubert Broaddus, principal of the Foley Middle School in Berea, Kentucky. "We've had children who get up early to do chores, then sit at a desk all day, then work in the fields until dark. It's too much for anyone, even an adult."

at home—soap, shampoo, toothpaste?"

"I got Sat'day school again!" Leeann announces, looking outraged. "Some girl grabbed my hair, so I grabbed her hair and swung her around like a rag doll. If the assistant principal hadn't come along, I reckon I would'a choked her, too. Nobody pulls my hair and gets away with it."

Back home at the trailer, Diana defends her daughter's actions. "You done right, Leeann," Diana says. "The other kids make fun of my kids because we're poor and we live in a trailer and we work in tobacco. They say my kids stink," she continues angrily. "Sure, we get dirty—you spend five minutes in that 'bacca field

and you'd get dirty yourself. Some nights Bill and me come home and we're so tired, all we can do is go to bed." She pauses for a moment, twisting her long red hair into a ponytail. "I'm grateful a farmer is willing to pay me to work. Not everyone can be rich."

Although the family has moved at least four times in the past 18 months, Diana desperately wants Leeann and Tina to finish high school and go on to college. "I don't want 'em to make the same mistakes I made, dropping out of school in the 10th grade. I want 'em to have a choice. Me, I don't have no choice. Working in the fields is all that I can do."

Nevertheless, even though Tina says she wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up and Leeann a nurse or teacher, last summer Leeann didn't attend the migrant summer-school program. Instead, she worked in the fields with her mother. With the money she earned, the teenager bought socks, underwear and two cartons of cigarettes—and paid Tina to clean up their room. Says Diana, a fiercely proud woman: "I want my kids to be able to do whatever they want. But I gotta teach 'em what I know. And what I know is working in the fields." ■

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One morning in September, caseworker Joyce Short stops by Leeann Puckett's school. Surrounded by chattering classmates, Leeann is sitting by herself in the bleachers in the gymnasium. She's wearing purple polyester bell bottoms, and her sneakers are worn, the soles thin. Nevertheless, at 5'10" tall with long, straight dark hair, Leeann is a striking young teenager. She jumps up and rushes over to Short, embracing her in a hug. "Hi, Leeann. I just wanted to see how you were doing," Short says. "Do you and your sister have everything you need