End child labor now!

A. E. Farrell

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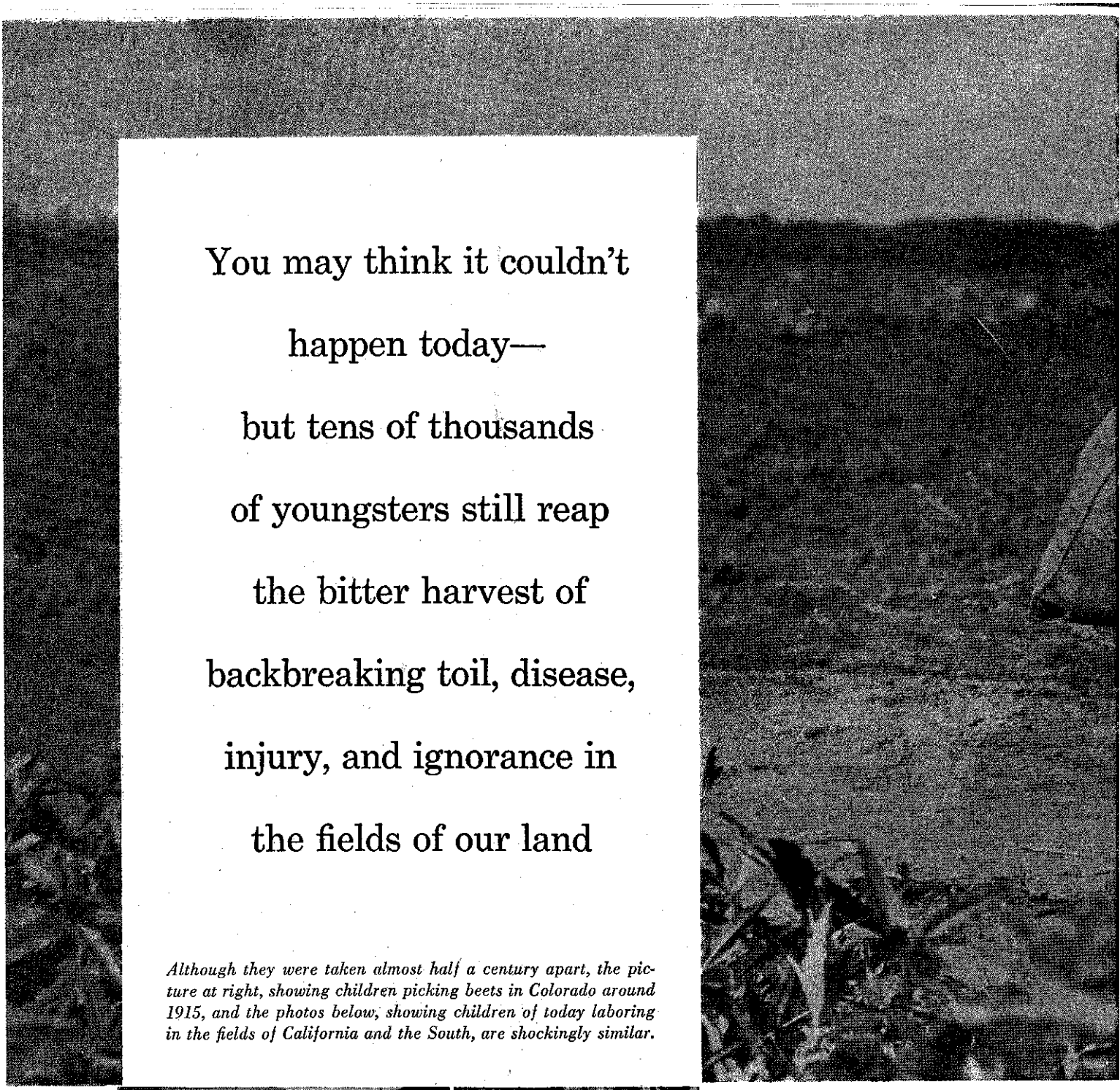
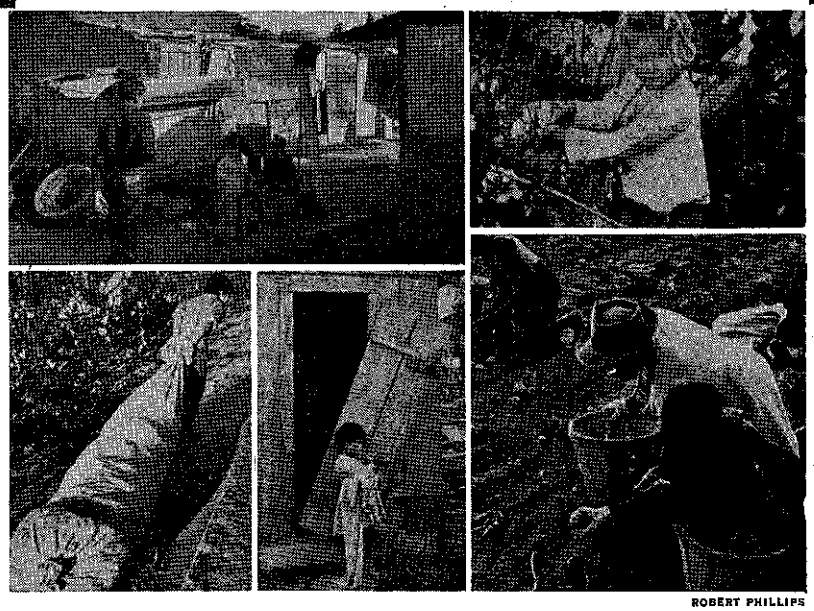


You may think it couldn't happen today— but tens of thousands of youngsters still reap the bitter harvest of backbreaking toil, disease, injury, and ignorance in the fields of our land

Although they were taken almost half a century apart, the picture at right, showing children picking beets in Colorado around 1915, and the photos below, showing children of today laboring in the fields of California and the South, are shockingly similar.



THESE PHOTOS COURTESY NATIONAL CHILD LABOR COMMITTEE

ROBERT PHILLIPS

BROWN BROS.

■ American children, we are constantly told, are the best-dressed, best-housed and best-fed in the world. Primped, preened and pampered, most of them do in fact grow up without tasting a moment of real hardship. But for several hundred thousand American youngsters, life is vastly different. Housed in hovels, clad in cast-offs, they are underfed, undereducated and overworked. They are viewed with suspicion and hostility by the communities around them. They call no place home. They are shunned by society today and condemned to poverty tomorrow. They were born unlucky.

These are the nation's youngest workers. The strawberries you fixed for breakfast this morning may have been picked by one

of them. The vegetables you feed your children may have been plucked from the field by hands that should have been holding a doll or a schoolbook instead of filling a field sack.

HARD to believe? Then listen to these reports received not long ago by the National Child Labor Committee from ministers, teachers and parents all over the country who were asked to survey child-labor practices in their regions:

"I have seen children as young as seven working in the field alongside adults. They are there at seven A.M. and as late as five P.M., a matter of ten hours in the heat and dust of the fields. No farmer would treat his own children so cruelly." —*Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.*

"We provide (summer) day schools for children. . . . We have learned from experience that it is no use preparing for children who are old enough to be in fourth grade because anyone that old or older will be out in the orchards picking cherries."—*Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin*

"I am aware of scores of children as young as four and five who work for too many hours in the hot sun without rest periods . . . sanitary drinking water . . . restrooms. . . ."—*San Jose, California*

The N.C.L.C. received dozens of similar reports from all parts of the country. Today it is estimated that 1,500,000 children from 10 to 15 years of age work on farms each summer. Of these, approximately one-third work for pay. These are not sons and daughters helping out on the family farm. They are laborers hired by the day or by the piece to bring in the harvest.

Most pathetic of this group are the children of domestic migratory farm workers who travel from state to state, following the crops. Nobody knows for sure how many of these nomad children there are. The estimated minimum is 100,000. There may be twice or three times that many, and a substantial percentage of them work. Other kids may hold jobs from choice; these displaced children work from stark necessity.

The adult migrant farm worker, says Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell, "can expect . . . the lowest wages in the entire American economy, less than $900 a year. He can expect to be unemployed . . . about half the days of the year. . . . He can expect that his children will be forced by economic necessity to work beside him in the fields." Often the need is cruelly specific. Not long ago a church worker approached a migrant mother and asked her to enroll her four-year-old in a day-care center. The mother pointed to the child working alongside her, and replied bitterly: "Of course not! Why do you think I brought her along? She's working for her snow suit next winter!"

RECENTLY this reporter and a photographer visited migrant camps in North Carolina. We saw dozens of kids as young as seven picking potatoes under a blistering sun. They were performing hard, adult labor, working rapidly, mechanically, without pause, dripping sweat as they stripped potatoes from the plants.

The children had picked beans all morning. They moved into the potato field late in the afternoon, with the temperature still in the high eighties. They were glad to leave the bean field. I asked 11-year-old Willie Cloud why.

"Beans is the hardest," he told me. "They's so many on the vine you have to pull off, it takes you too long to fill a hamper." Willie said he had picked 16 hampersful that day—a quarter of a ton.

When the children arrived at the potato field in the dusty, ancient bus that transported them from their "camp," they dashed to a waiting truck where they picked up empty burlap sacks and wooden baskets. Then they ran out to the rows where a digging machine had already begun uprooting the plants. The children, along with their elders, fell to. They picked in silence, with intense concentration. They stooped, crawled and stretched, taking no time for rest or chatter, except when the machine broke down.

Like the adults, the children worked at backbreaking piecework rates. As each 30- to 35-pound basket was filled, the child would lift it and empty it into a field sack, two baskets to a sack. Each sack, filled, would net the child's parents seven pennies—about one mill per pound.

Willie Cloud and the others we saw are a part of the great East Coast migrant "stream," a river of men, women, and children that flows north each year from Florida, spilling into ten East Coast states as far north as New Jersey and New York. Similar streams start in Texas, Louisiana and California, surge north and spread out through almost every state in the West and Midwest, from Ohio to Oregon, on 125,000 farms.

There are approximately 500,000 American migrants, plus an undetermined number of their children and dependents, in these streams. They are Negroes and Puerto Ricans from the Southeast, Indians and Mexican-Americans from the Southwest, and "anglos"—native whites from Arkansas and Oklahoma. This wandering mass of humanity is supplemented by an almost equal number of "braceros" —Mexican nationals brought in under a special treaty with Mexico. Thus over a million migrants work throughout the U.S., harvesting everything from cotton and corn to apples and asparagus.

Today agriculture remains the last "big business" in the nation in which children form a substantial part of the labor force. And the plight of these children is the last lingering remnant of what used to be our child-labor problem. Agriculture is the only remaining important industry which is specifically exempt from the federal laws designed to protect child workers. Except in the sugar-beet fields, the only federal restriction with which farmers must comply is a 16-year-old age minimum for work *during* school hours. Even this regulation is violated thousands of times a year. Outside of school hours, farmers may legally employ children of any age, and may work them for as many hours and under whatever conditions they choose, subject only to relatively weak regulations in some states.

Often, too, when local farmers need additional help, obliging school boards will simply call a "crop vacation." With the schools legally padlocked, there is no education to interfere with the growers' labor supply, and the federal regulation barring employment during school hours is neatly side-stepped.

Not only does agricultural work deprive children of their chance for an education, but it frequently exposes them to injury and even death. On October 12, 1959, Christine Hayes, age 12, was picking potatoes with other children on a farm near Blackfoot, Idaho. These children were not migrants, but local school children out on a crop vacation. Christine's pony tail caught in the whirring parts of a potato-digging machine—much like the one behind which Willie Cloud works in North Carolina. The machine ripped off Christine's scalp, ears, eyelids and cheeks. Rushed to the Latter Day Saints Hospital in Salt Lake City, Christine died, despite the desperate efforts of a team of plastic surgeons to save her.

IN California alone—the only state to collect such statistics—more than 1,000 children were seriously injured while doing paid farm labor between 1950 and 1957.

Many farmers defend the practice of child labor on the grounds that it is good for children to work. Said one grower recently: "Nine- and ten-year-olds working —that's the best thing that ever happened! It's honorable to work. I started working when I was nine. That's what made this country strong. Work never hurt nobody!"

Doctors disagree sharply with this theory that hard work is harmless, at least as far as very young children are concerned. According to Dr. Haven Emerson, the late head of the Columbia University School of Public Health, strenuous work can, indeed, hurt young children. "Children in industry, whether indoors or out, show in exaggerated form damage to growth," Dr. Emerson said. Other medical authorities concur. In 1951 a subcommittee of the American Medical Association urged that a general 14-year age minimum be set for employment. The U.S. Department of Labor agrees that "children under 14 are generally too young and immature to assume the discipline and responsibility of a job." Yet uncounted thousands of youngsters labor like adults in the fields.

The teen-age boy who works behind the soda fountain of the corner drugstore for a few hours a week will probably not be hurt by his job. He may, in fact, be learning to handle responsibility. The girl who clerks in a department store or does part-time office work may be broadening her range of experience. But there is nothing in common between such youth employment—regulated, supervised, limited in hours—and the work of the migrant child.

The squalor and emptiness of a child laborer's existence is readily apparent when his life is viewed first hand. Let us follow a migrant crew as it leaves its home base in Belle Glade, Florida, on its annual trek north in search of work.

Loaded like cattle on the back of a truck, the children and their parents are jammed in with foot lockers, cardboard boxes, oilstoves, rusty bedsprings, washtubs and other paraphernalia.

The crew leaves Belle Glade at 8:45 P.M. At 11 it stops for a meal in Fort Pierce, Florida, but is told by the owner of the diner to move on. At 1:10 it stops in Melbourne, Florida, for gas, but crew members are not permitted to use toilets. At 1:55 A.M. there is a "bathroom" stop in the woods. At 6:20 A.M. the trucks stop at a country store outside Daytona Beach for "breakfast." The children are fed bread, soft drinks and a few cold cuts. At 12:00 noon another stop is made for water at a spring. The water turns out to be polluted with sulphur. State troopers follow the truck through many towns. At 8:00 P.M., another stop at Bay Harbour, South Carolina. State troopers make the crew remain on the truck during the stop. At 11 A.M. the following morning the crew finally arrives at the grower's camp.

This is the actual trip record of a typical crew. Everywhere the migrants are unwelcome strangers, eyed suspiciously by residents and police. For the children the trip is unusually wearing. They arrive dirty, cranky and tired. No wonder one ten-year-old complained wistfully to me: "I don't like travelin'. When I gets sleepy I can't sleep. Too much noise and not enough room. Don't get enough to eat. No milk. . . ."

The trucks lack seats. Dilapidated, they break down repeatedly. Because time spent on the road is unpaid time, drivers race against the clock. Federal and state highway regulations for the transportation of migrants are minimal. Consequently, highway safety records are blood-splattered with mass-accident cases involving migrants on the move.

WHEN the agony of the trip is over, migrant children and their families move into quarters provided by the growers. Migrants have been found living in chicken coops, tar-paper shacks, abandoned railroad boxcars, even in pigpens. At a camp in Camden, North Carolina, we saw a crew of about 50 "head"—as the crew leaders refer to the workers—housed in two rows of attached wooden shanties. Single small rooms are shared by entire families. In one shack we found 15-year-old Effie Mae Davis, staying home from the field because of illness. With her was her 16-year-old sister, suckling a newborn infant. They live with five other persons in the same room.

Two double beds and two rusty cots take up most of the floor space. Clothes hang on nails on the wall; there is no closet. A portable two-burner oilstove is used for all the cooking, and for heating water drawn from the single spigot that supplies the entire camp. A dirty drainage ditch runs between the rows of shacks. A pile of garbage and a discarded bedspring lie behind them, near a pair of primitive outhouses.

This camp was considered by North Carolina Employment Security officials and by the grower who operates it to be relatively good, by local standards. (At least there was new screening on the windows.) And in comparison with other camps it, indeed, might be considered "good." I saw another camp in which 40 or 50 people, men, women and children, live in a single Quonset hut, griddle-hot under the sun, with only burlap sacks strung up on wires to provide "privacy."

Lack of family privacy is a serious problem, for migrant parents, especially since the migrant streams attract floaters, drifters, drunks, prostitutes and bums along with stable, hard-working family groups. The moral hazards to which the children are exposed under such circumstances are obvious. Another serious problem is lack of bathing facilities. Bathing is done in a portable washtub, usually in full view of those sharing the hut.

Conditions in other parts of the country are just as bad, frequently worse. Recently the San Jose (Calif.) *Mercury* charged: "Village conditions in Pakistan are no worse than in some California camps . . . migratory families (are) living under conditions similar to refugees in Seoul. . . ."

It is no surprise, therefore, that so many migrant children are below par in health, too. Food spoils without refrigeration. Disease spreads because of congestion. Nutrition is bad. According to the American Academy of General Practice, there are nearly five times as many cases of amoebic dysentery among migrant children as among the same number of urban children; nearly four times as much whooping cough; and nearly 44 times as much diarrhea!

Nor is ordinary medical care always available to the migrant. "Time and again," reads a report of the Door County (Wisc.) Christian Society for Migrant Work, "we encountered people in need of medical attention who wouldn't ask for it because they couldn't pay for it." What happens when they do ask? Field workers of the National Council of Churches report cases in which "The hospitals closest to them will not accept them. . . . The local doctors do not receive them cordially. . . . They are usually known not to have money, so service is poor."

FACED with poverty and, all too often, raw race prejudice, the migrants withdraw from contact with the outside world. Segregation, enforced and voluntary, is the pattern among both Negro and Mexican-American migrants. One effect of this, and of the general hostility the migrants face, is that virtually all migrant children, in the words of a report of the Oregon Bureau of Labor, "suffer from the sense of 'not belonging.'" Moreover, they lack toys, games, books, even the simple solace of pets.

Because their families are always on the go, the migrant child misses months and often years of schooling. He spends a short time in a school, and then before he has become even partially adjusted he must move on to another school. For this reason, these children form what the U.S. Office of Education has described as the nation's "largest single reservoir of illiteracy." Currently, according to Chairman Harrison Williams of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, more than 100,000 school-age migrant youngsters are one to four years behind other students of the same ages.

Just how their enforced travels shatter the normal school experience is dramatized by a poignant letter received by a Michigan teacher. It came from a 13-year-old boy who had come to the Michigan school from Texas in the fall. Pleasant, courteous and ambitious, Joe was chosen by the principal to serve as a safety-patrol monitor for the second semester. It was, for Joe, a major event in his life.

But four days before he was to assume his duties, his family started back south. After he had gone, his teacher found this note:

Dear Boys and Girls—You have been nice to me but a got to go to Taxes. I wanted to stay but they didn't let me stay. You were good to me when I was here but now that I was going to be a safety I'm going. What luck.

To Miss Field—your the best teacher I ever had. You been very good to me. Please write to me.

(Signed) Joe the guy who was going to be a safety

A teacher in Nampa, Idaho, describes one of her pupils: "Clyde Wilson is a nine-year-old boy with bright red hair, freckles, and blue eyes. He is a very friendly little fellow. . . . He is of first-grade level in reading and has very little knowledge of arithmetic. . . . He is large for his age and works in the fields most of the time." Clyde, the teacher continues, "averages four moves a year. He was born in Alabama and says 'home is just where he happens to be.'

"I have seen the problems of the migrant child first hand," this teacher writes. "I know how unwelcome he is, when he arrives in the middle of the school term, far behind in his work, shy, dirty, and unwanted."

The rejection that most migrant children suffer has lasting effects. According to a report prepared for the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth—which devoted many hours to the problems of the migrant child—"a child who is constantly made to feel that he is not worth bothering about . . . may regress from bewilderment to belligerence or, even more tragically, to an apathetic acceptance of his apparent worthlessness. Such a child becomes virtually uneducable." This child, adds Secretary of Labor Mitchell, "hasn't much of a chance to develop his talents, to be useful to himself or his country. This is the ugliest kind of human waste."

In terms of health, safety, education and decent family life these children are being punished. Their "crime" is not that they are juvenile delinquents, or that they are lazy, or that they are mentally inferior. Their "crime" is that they happened to be born to parents who are migratory farm workers.

The problem is not one that can be solved by the wave of a magic wand. The system is deeply rooted in the mores of

American agriculture, and migrants will be needed for many years to come. If the shocking plight of these children is to be improved, it will take the aroused concern of all. Much can be done.

One approach is legislative. Today spokesmen for many leading organizations like the National Education Association, the Y.W.C.A., the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the National Council of Jewish Women, the AFL-CIO, the National Consumers League, the National Child Labor Committee, and others, say that the time has come to nail shut the legal loophole that permits the employment of small children on farms. These organizations are backing the principles in a proposal made last year by Senator Pat McNamara of Michigan and cosponsored by 15 other senators of both parties. The bill would apply the 14-year age minimum to agricultural work done outside school hours. It would affect only large farms, and would not apply to children who work on the family farm. This bill, which died in Congress last summer, will be reintroduced when Congress reconvenes.

But even if Congress, prodded by letters from parents, teachers and ministers, does at last outlaw the paid employment on farms of children under 14, at least two other steps must be taken to insure that the law is enforced. First, summer schools and day-care centers must be provided so that migrant parents have somewhere to leave their children while they work. They cannot safely leave them unattended in a deserted camp. States, already strained financially, need federal funds to help them create these facilities.

Even more important, unless something is done to boost the painfully low wages of adult farm workers, it is inevitable that thousands of children will continue to work, legally or illegally. Unionization of migrants, now being attempted on the west coast, may help. But many experts feel that a federal minimum wage should be established for agricultural work, just as there is one in industry. Despite a finding by the Department of Labor that such a minimum is both "feasible and desirable," legislative attempts to enact one have been smashed repeatedly by farm-bloc pressure. Only public pressure will convince Congress that it should act.

EVEN such measures would make only a small start toward cleaning up the migrant mess. Nobody has all the answers. But—in the words of one enlightened Californian, a member of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor and himself the operator of a 1,000-acre farm—the absence of laws protecting the children is "a barbaric survival from the dark ages. A healthy industry cannot be built on the backs of children."

Some communities have organized special clinics for the migrants and their children. In Plainfield, Illinois, one grower organized the rest of the farmers for the purpose of buying textbooks for the children, to encourage enrollment in school. In Crookston, Minnesota, the Catholic Diocese operates a month-long boarding school for 200 migrant children.

Perhaps the most ambitious program of all—and the only one that is really national in scope—is the Migrant Ministry, run by the National Council of Churches. Staffed in large measure by more than 8,000 volunteer workers, the Migrant Ministry operates 17 day-care centers for the migrant children. It has established vocational-type training centers in New York and New Jersey. It furnishes recreational materials to the camps. It works to develop community understanding of the problems of the migrant child.

In Oregon, the Migrant Ministry and other organizations got together on an all-around program of aid to migrants. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls and church camps accepted migrant children. One PTA held a "summer round-up"—talking to parents and children, urging the kids to enroll in the local schools. Other religious, fraternal and service organizations pitched in.

In programs like these, there is a constant need for volunteers. If you would like to help, the first thing to do is learn the facts about the migrants in your community. Where do they come from? How many are there? When do they arrive and when do they leave? Just because you don't see them does not mean they aren't in your community. Migrant camps are often located out of sight on side roads. There are migrants in 875 counties, often within a few miles of major cities like Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco. You can find out about conditions near you by writing to the President's Committee on Migratory Labor, Department of Labor, Washington, D. C. The Committee can either answer your questions or refer you to those in your community who can.

Next, go out and have a look for yourself at the conditions of the migrant children near you. Find out whether your state or county sets at least minimum standards for the housing and transportation of migratory labor. What are your state's child-labor laws, if any? Are they enforced?

The answers to questions such as these will point up local needs. Next, contact the others in your community who are working to improve the lot of the migrant child. The easiest way to do this is by writing to your state Council of Churches. If there is no local migrant program near you, you can help start one. If there is such a program, there are many things you can do to help carry it out. You might, for example, teach elementary reading and writing skills to the youngsters. You can start a crusade to urge that your schools and local organizations open their doors to the migrants. You can help set up a day-care center or summer school. You can help initiate a vaccination program. See that your local recreation department permits migrant kids to use the parks and playgrounds.

When Dr. Cyrus Karraker, a teacher of history at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, heard about the conditions of migrants in his county, he went, himself, for a first-hand look. Jolted by what he saw, Dr. Karraker called a campus meeting to tell his students and fellow professors about his findings. The result was the formation of the Pennsylvania Citizens Committee on Migratory Labor. A neighbor of Karraker's, Mrs. Lois Garvin, became executive secretary of the group. Since then the organization has helped activate an official state agency to concern itself with migrant problems. Karraker's students got to work too. By organizing bake sales and other fund-raising ventures, several girls' dormitories collected enough money to provide college scholarships for deserving migrant children. The work of these people has set off a chain reaction which has made Pennsylvania one of the more advanced states for easing the migrants' plight.

Yet much remains to be done. In our affluent America, with its tail fins, credit cards and suburban complacence, it is easy to forget that millions of us still, quite literally, eat the fruits of the work of little children. Perhaps that food will taste better if, as we eat, we know that we are doing our part to stamp out the last trace of child labor—the "dark age" blight in our fields. It is high time we remembered these hapless youngsters who have been, along with thousands before them, America's forgotten children. ◆

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

Although some migrant workers enjoy good working conditions, most are what I have called "The Excluded Americans." Caught up in a cycle of life in which poverty breeds poverty, their children are denied the educational and other opportunities necessary to improve their status. To this end the migrant worker and his family must be given the protection of the same beneficial type of social and labor legislation that now applies to most other workers. But laws alone are not enough. The communities through which the migrants pass must take action to help them. And all of us, in our role as private citizens, must accept the problems of the migrant workers as matters of our own conscience. Only then will the future brighten for these forgotten people.

—JAMES P. MITCHELL
Secretary of Labor