

*Migrants - Voluntary Organ.
" or Girl Scouts*

OPENING NEW DOORS FOR CHILDREN
OF MIGRANTS THROUGH A GIRL
SCOUT PROGRAM

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MUCH has been said about the plight of the agricultural migrant force—the estimated one million workers who roam the rich acres of America to cultivate the soil and harvest the crops which help to feed and clothe millions. These workers, with their wives and children, want the same things as other families—food, housing, health, church, school, a chance to belong and to be accepted in a community. The United States Department of Labor says, “One of the greatest handicaps migrant children face when they go into a new area is the lack of acceptance by the local citizens.” The chief victims, the children, are not only robbed of normal home and community life, but are universally handicapped by too early employment and by lack of educational opportunities.

It is hard to adjust to a new community, but particularly hard for children. Think of the child who must make this adjustment several times in one year, especially where there is lack of acceptance by the local citizens!

There are many organizations and agencies working with the migrant families. The Girl Scouts found that such organizations were helping the children, but mostly in the area of service projects, health, clothes, and gifts. Very few organizations, except some religious groups, were offering them membership geared to fit their particular situation and needs. There had been Girl Scout service projects for migrant children but

up to this time no special effort had been made to enrol them as members. A pilot study in the San Joaquin Valley in California was conducted to determine whether or not migrant girls *wanted* to become Girl Scouts. Results showed that there was a real opportunity for the Girl Scout program to enrich the lives of these children; that the girls wanted to “belong”; that volunteers in Girl Scouting would co-operate with a demonstration project; and that other organizations and agencies serving migrants in that area were eager to co-operate.

These findings led the National Girl Scout Organization to set up two projects, one in the San Joaquin Valley of California, and the other in the state of Colorado. The first project, in San Joaquin Valley, financed by the Rosenberg Foundation, began in March, 1954, to establish troops to which girls could belong as they moved from place to place. Migration here is predominantly within the Valley and usually follows a pattern. The second national project, in Colorado, was started in 1954 at the invitation of local and regional Girl Scout personnel. This site presented a different phase of the migrant problem. Here the migrants remain in one place only a short time—from one day to one month—and the migration is less predictable. In both projects there were Spanish-speaking Americans. A trained worker with some knowledge of Spanish was assigned to each project. Recognizing that migrant problems would differ in each com-

munity and state, the Girl Scouts selected varied areas in order to obtain experiences that would be useful to other youth-serving organizations and to Girl Scout councils elsewhere.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the projects was to determine how the Girl Scout program could be made available to the migrant girls. With the families "on the move" and in isolated living quarters, how could an ongoing program be made available? Would this experience contribute to their security, adjustment, and preparation for citizenship? With children living on scattered farms and far apart from other children, would it be possible to get a group of them together? Where could meeting places be found? Could the children pay the \$1.00 national membership fee? How could discrimination and prejudice be met? How would the language difference affect the project? Could indigenous leadership be recruited and trained? With what local, state, regional, and federal agencies and organizations could the Girl Scouts work to serve the needs of the children? How could they keep track of this traveling membership?

DIFFICULTIES

Many questions and problems were evident at the start. There was feeling from within and without the Girl Scout organization that this was an insurmountable task. Plans might be changed overnight, according to weather conditions. One community in Colorado, expecting the migrant families in June, recruited leaders, made plans for a Girl Scout troop to meet weekly in the Girl Scout house; then came the drought. Instead of a full camp, there were no migrants at all!

Distances to the migrant labor camps and to the farms and ranches seemed endless. In one community it was necessary for the volunteer leader to drive fifty miles to reach the Girl Scout troop meeting.

There was prejudice and fear on both sides. In one instance, the parents would not let their daughter attend the Scout meeting for fear she might not be accepted. On the other side, much interpretation was needed to counteract misconceptions about the migrants.

There was difficulty in finding leaders. The migrant families are large and when the mothers are not working in the fields they are taking care of the children and keeping house.

There were differences in culture and background. In the Spanish culture, the man in the family may object to having his wife or daughter leave home without him, even to attend a meeting of women.

There was lack of money. Equipment for troops—handbooks, handcraft materials—was needed. It costs a girl a dollar a year to be a registered member of the Girl Scouts of the United States of America. The income of the migrant family is not high. In some troops, the sponsors of the troop or interested service clubs have helped with the finances. In many troops, the girls have earned all or part of their dues.

RESULTS

It is obvious that the lives of many migrant girls have already been enriched through their brief experience in Girl Scouting. For many migrant children this has been their first contact with other children of a different cultural background. "This is the happiest moment of my life," said a thirteen-year-old girl of Spanish-American background, as her leader pinned a Girl

Scout trefoil on her dress. Perhaps for the first time in her life she could feel she "belonged" to some group besides her own family.

There is enthusiasm and interest among girls and adults who have had part in the projects. All the communities that participated plan to continue. One leader said, "This was the most satisfying experience I have ever had."

LEARNINGS

The Girl Scouts have made a beginning. There are still difficulties to overcome and many questions to be answered. Some of the information gleaned and some of the ways of working may be of value to other groups.

Teamwork is essential.—It is vital that all people, agencies, and organizations interested in the solution of the problem work together for the best interests of the children. The Girl Scouts have relied heavily on the advice and co-operation of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, the Roman Catholic Church, the National Child Labor Committee, the Children's Bureau, the schools, the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, as well as local and state groups.

When a new service or program is being inaugurated, one of the established workers can introduce the "new worker" to the migrant families. It is important that the migrant family meet new people through someone they already know and trust. The worker in California writes, "It was the Public Health Nurses who first introduced me to the migrants and their children on the West Side. I was immediately welcomed, as the nurse was their friend." In Colorado, the Red Cross worked closely with the Girl Scouts, with their Motor Corps Service. "Each day during the day camp

the Red Cross drove ninety miles daily picking up the children from scattered farms to bring them into camp." These two examples are only a few of many instances of close working relationships.

Recruitment of volunteers.—For the state and/or local committees, it is absolutely necessary to have a sincere, devoted, and inspired volunteer who can "spark" the project in each locality. This is hand-tailored recruitment! The going is slow—frustrating—but it *can* be done. There are people who are interested in work with this particular segment of our population, who would not necessarily volunteer to work with the average group of girls.

In recruiting indigenous leaders for the troops, it was found valuable to invite prospective volunteers to training sessions, letting them hear about the program before asking them to do particular jobs. One professional worker says: "It is important that there be a complete acceptance of interested adults *as they are*. Point out to them from your immediate observation how they could help a group of girls. This gives them the self-confidence they need. Many have had no experience in working with groups and therefore have no initial ideas how they could help." Many of the troop committee members were recruited from the migrant parents. It was found that the adults, who have very little social outlet, are gaining a great deal of satisfaction from serving on the committee. They can make a fine contribution—if they are given a chance.

Reciprocity.—There must be a complete understanding of the migrant family and his needs. One worker writes: "It will help you to visualize this project if you think of the migratory workers as individuals instead of as a class of people. Each one has the same needs, hopes, and

fears as the rest of us; they have much to learn and a great receptivity and desire for new experiences. In addition, they have a firsthand knowledge of the raw materials of life, and the courage and patience to live each day for exactly what it is and at the same time to keep hoping for something better." We "settled" residents have much to learn from the migrants! *We need them.* In the Colorado report there was this statement: "The value—to the children who are not migrants, who are growing up in a small world—is that they learn from minority groups how to get along with people of different cultures and points of view."

Prejudice and fear.—Much of this is due to differences in culture, background, and language. It was found that young Spanish-American interpreters were particularly successful in informing parents about the program. Social gatherings were popular where parents and children came together to hear about the program. The girls have no fear when they know their troop members make their own decisions. One troop, all girls of Spanish-American background, faced the momentous question of whether to hold its meetings in Spanish or in English. "We will hold them in English," they announced, "because it will give us the practice we need, and because some girls who cannot speak Spanish may wish to join." It was a wise decision, for the troop now has several girls who speak only English.

It was found that prejudice waned when tempered by direct personal contact. One leader admitted her prejudice at the beginning of the season because "those Mexicans are so dirty." She worked with the girls and found them scrupulously clean, "just like other children," and at the end of the season asked

if she could volunteer next season.

Program.—It was found that Girl Scout troops could be organized among girls coming from widely scattered farms as well as among those living close together. Some troops are composed of migrant girls only, simply because of geography. In other places, the migrant girls join troops already established in the communities. In some communities, the migrant girls are welcomed into Girl Scout troop activities and day camping without actually becoming Girl Scouts. The traveling Girl Scout member may take part in her Scout activities in any number of places. A worker reports: "In a community to which the family had gone to work in the sugar beet fields, the girls of the family attended Girl Scout camp. When the family moved on to another community to pick beans, the younger girls joined the Brownie¹ troop and the oldest became a Tenderfoot Scout. When potato harvest started in a third community, the oldest girl worked on the second-class rank under the guidance of the President of the Girl Scout Council. They had planned to move on to pick cotton, and a Girl Scout had written to invite them to come to visit her troop while they were in the neighborhood. That job did not materialize, and they went home to Texas. Here, the oldest girl goes regularly to Girl Scouts, and is finishing her second-class work."

Every member of the Girl Scouts receives a membership card. In addition, the migrant girl receives a record card to carry from place to place. The illustration of a covered wagon, on the card, gives a note of adventure to the life the girls lead. Space is provided for the girls to enter the names of places they have seen, with the hope that this will give

¹ Seven to ten years old.

the migrant girl an idea of something that she can contribute to any local troops she meets. The insignia on this special card reaffirms the fact that she "belongs" to the Girl Scouts of the United States of America and is part of a world movement of Scouting and Guiding.

Although an obvious fact, it should be emphasized that migrants are not all alike. The program is based on individual and group needs. It is interesting to note that the Girl Scouts found it unnecessary to make any change in the basic program. "In choosing activities, we tried to pick the ones that would have the most meaning to the girls in their kind of living and that would stimulate them to things they could do at home in the migrant camps. We stressed sewing and crafts—things they could make for themselves and their homes."

Working on their ranks and merit badges included learning and living the Girl Scout Promise and Laws. These especially appealed to the migrants. One leader said of the Promise,² "Why, that's what I've always believed but never could put into words."

Migrant Scouts learn about the flag of the United States; they plan projects for service to others. Sometimes a cook-out and a hike fit the mood of the group. A "good grooming" program is popular in one troop. As with all groups, singing and folk dancing are enjoyed. In some troops, the girls have elected their own officers; in others, the group works by small committees.

The hope for the future is that as techniques are found to make the program available, migrant children—wherever they are—will be welcomed into Girl Scout troops. However, it is evident that a great deal of time, patience, and money will be required. The job cannot be done quickly. It cannot be done by any one agency alone. It will take endless persistence and a concerted effort on the part of all agencies and organizations serving children and their families.

GIRL SCOUTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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² "On my honor, I will try: to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people at all times, to obey the Girl Scout Laws."

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