



Families in the Fields

Sweat, tears, and rural-slum living
are the lot of migrant workers

By JAMES L. VIZZARD, S.J.
Condensed from a Catholic Hour Radio Address*

I stood in the middle of the biggest strawberry farm in the world. With me was the manager of this 2,000-acre farm factory. "Doesn't it break your heart," he asked, "to see these beautiful berries rotting in the field?"

My answer shocked him. "No, it doesn't break my heart to see berries rotting in the field. What breaks my

heart, and has been breaking it for a long time, is to see people rotting in the field."

The strawberries were indeed rotting, by the thousands of crates, for there unquestionably was a shortage of pickers. Growers figure that they need one and one half pickers per each acre of strawberries. Last year more than 3,000 braceros from Mex-

* May 23, 1965, and July 10, 1966. © 1965, and reprinted by permission of the National Council of Catholic Men and the National Broadcasting Co.

ico worked in the vast reaches of the 2,000 acres. This year there were hardly more than 500 pickers, far too few.

By decision of Congress, the bracero program had ended as of Dec. 31, 1964. The large-scale growers of strawberries, and of many other crops in various parts of the country, are faced with the necessity of finding their labor force from among U.S. citizen workers. They can hardly be said to have done a good job of recruiting.

As long as the braceros were available, growers had been under no pressure to improve wages and working and living conditions. They simply made job offers so impossibly bad by American standards that workers drifted to other areas where they thought they could do better.

The growers then could claim labor shortage, and, under provisions of federal law, call on the U.S. and Mexican governments to supply them with all the braceros they needed. For these desperately poor Mexicans, even the miserable wages and working conditions offered were better than anything at home.

Meanwhile, the unemployed U.S. workers who moved to other areas depressed the wages and working conditions there to their own detriment and to the considerable advantage of the employers.

For more than a decade, then, a relative handful of mostly large growers, never more than 50,000 in the whole nation, were able to use

the poverty of Mexico to their own benefit and the disadvantage of our own migratory workers.

Most of the migrants are members of the two minority groups: the Negro and the Mexican-American. Interstate migrants come mostly from the Southeastern and Southwestern states. Each year they leave their city and rural slums to look for something better than the extreme poverty at home.

Each year about a half million migrant laborers, with wives and children swelling their number to a million or more, move up the Atlantic seaboard with the season, or follow the sun and crops through the Midwest, or move northward on the Pacific coast. From five to nine months a year they live in make-do housing, a few days or weeks here, a month or so there, working on the fruit, vegetable, sugar-beet, and cotton farms.

Hundreds of thousands of other seasonal farm workers migrate only within a day-haul radius of their slum and shack-town home bases. Most of these workers have made efforts to put down roots in a permanent community. But when lack of education and job skills denies them city employment, they drift back to seasonal farm labor.

Every responsible study about migrant workers has called them the poorest and most underprivileged group in the nation. The late former Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell called the continuation of the migrants' plight "the shame of

THE BISHOPS SPEAK

At their regular fall meeting in Los Angeles Oct. 14 the Catholic bishops of California stated:

"We note with approval the settlement of the strike at Delano through the free, supervised elections whereby the worker himself decided on the union of his choice.

"Justice and equity demand that every reasonable method be employed to bring this matter [the farm labor problem] to a peaceful and just solution. Wherefore, we earnestly ask the growers and the unions to agree on free elections as a pledge of good faith in effecting a peaceful solution in this most serious situation."

The *Monitor* (20 Oct. '66)

America." Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio described it as "America's badge of infamy."

Wages range from 40¢ and 50¢ an hour to an occasional high of \$1.50. Even long hours of continuous work yield only meager income. But continuous work of this type is impossible. The work is seasonal. Moreover, the crops and jobs are far apart; when one job is finished, the next may be several hundred miles away.

Migrant farm workers are able to find work for only a third of the year. Their average annual income in 1963 totaled \$868. Of this sum, \$657 was from farm jobs and \$211 was from an occasional day of non-farm employment. An average day's

farm work brought the migrant \$5.95; for his unskilled nonfarm work, he received \$12 a day.

It is usually necessary for the children of migratory families as well as the women to work in the fields. Social workers, attempting to enroll five and six-year-olds in day-care centers, often hear: "We need them to work here with us." They live in hovels, are clad in castoffs, underfed, and subject to diseases and injuries at rates at least five times that of other children.

These grim details do not reveal the whole story. The migrant farm workers have been systematically excluded from almost every piece of protective and welfare legislation, both state and federal, enacted in the past 30 years. They are expressly excluded from the legislation that protects labor unions and collective bargaining with employers. Every attempt to improve the lot of the migrants through legislation has been opposed, mostly successfully, by the growers and their associations.

Bills formulated by Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey and his Senate Migratory Labor subcommittee have been placed before Congress. They include a national minimum wage for agricultural workers; protection of their right to union organization and collective bargaining; bringing migrant children under the provisions of the child-labor laws; development of a federal voluntary recruiting service for better planning and filling of

jobs; the creation of a National Advisory Council on Migratory Labor to make continuing studies on migrant-worker needs; and a special tax incentive for growers who construct decent housing.

There are programs of the Area Redevelopment administration and the Rural Areas Development office which, through grants, loans, and technical assistance are helping to create new jobs for them.

The Labor department's Office of Manpower, Automation, and Training has been successful in develop-

ing more highly paid job skills. Several federal housing programs provide favorable loans, and in some cases even grants, for migrant housing. Finally, one area of special emphasis in the Office of Economic Opportunity, the War Against Poverty, and particularly for the now-beginning Domestic Peace corps, is the unmet human needs of migrants.

If the programs outlined are put into effect there may be hope that "the shame of America" can be abolished.



Resource ID 8059

Families in the Fields: Sweat, Tears and Rural-Slum Living are the Lot of Migrant Workers

Shirley, who had been reared without a religion by her fallen-away mother. My cousin decided that her own daughter was not to be also so deprived, and sent Shirley to Sunday school with a little neighbor.

There was no Catholic church in the town, but there was one two towns away; the dentist, the only Catholic in our town, went there to church, once, evidently, on Ash Wednesday.

After a couple of months, the little neighbor came to ask why Shirley was not going with her any more. My cousin was astounded. Shirley told her, "I go to the church of the ashes, with Doc Duffy." My cousin said she

was not to bother Doc Duffy; but to the

my cousin
pany.
priest
if he
tholic
holic.
parents
saw to it that she practiced her religion.

My cousin assured him she would, and she and Dr. Duffy's non-Catholic wife took Shirley to instructions every Wednesday. By the time Shirley was to be baptized, my cousin and Mrs. Duffy were ready to take instructions themselves. At length, my cousin and Shirley's baby sister and Mrs. Duffy and her four babies were baptized. Shirley died two years later, at the age of 11.

Her sister grew up, married a man who became a convert before they were married. Then his mother, his two sisters, and a brother and his father became Catholics. Shirley's