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STATE COMMISSION STUDIES FARM LABOR PROBLEMS

The American Child for January 1950 quoted first-hand descriptions of unemployment conditions among migrant and other farm laborers in the San Joaquin Valley, California, from articles by James McClatchy published in the Fresno Bee. Mr. McClatchy continued his investigations as conditions grew worse, describing the hopeless struggle of the counties to meet even the bare relief needs of thousands of unemployed with no supplementation from any source except some government food surpluses. In the final article of this second series, reprinted below, Mr. McClatchy was able to report some constructive steps for state action. Following the publication of this report on February 14, the Governor's Commission, requested by the growers, was appointed and is now at work with a professional staff.

THE increasing public interest in the plight of the farm laborers of the San Joaquin Valley, growing week by week in December and January, finally has gathered enough momentum to give measurable support to agencies working for improvement in the lot of the workers.

Never before has there been as much general public agreement, extending to many special interest groups, that the situation demands constructive action. Grass roots pressure has come from all sections of the valley.

This development led to numerous conferences and meetings of county, state and Federal officials, leaders of the agricultural industry, and public spirited citizens of the valley. The problems of unemployment, health, housing, welfare, education and sanitation were discussed and many recommendations were made.

The most significant and one of the most promising meetings came last week in Fresno when a group of growers adopted a resolution asking Governor Earl Warren to name an independent state commission to study the situation.

The resolution asked that Warren "immediately appoint a commission to make an overall study of the seasonal worker problem, including unemployment, education, health, and housing, both on and off the farm, and recommend such joint, cooperative or public action as may be necessary and appropriate to provide these workers with a better standard of living."

The meeting, which was organized by the Central Valley Empire Association and the Agricultural Labor Bureau, was significant because most of the men participating, including some who farm many thousands of acres, always in the past have shied away from positions of public leadership. It is the first time a voluntary meeting of big growers

has publicly acknowledged the seriousness of the problem and appealed for outside guidance.

Though the action was taken with some reluctance, the organizers realized San Joaquin Valley agriculture has been receiving a steadily increasing amount of nationwide critical publicity. The meeting followed weeks of persuasion and planning, and though small in numbers, was important. Many skeptical observers, who have seen resolutions and political platforms adopted by the scores, doubt much will come from this development. However, these skeptics admit the state now has an opportunity, that never existed before, to recommend reforms and marshal public opinion to force them through.

Representatives of the AFL National Farm Labor Union met the development with reservations and said if it is sincere it is a step in the right direction. However, they also said they are afraid it is only a new method of "passing the buck."

The move by the growers was unanimously seconded last Friday by the San Joaquin Valley Supervisors Association, meeting in Modesto.

They adopted a similar resolution asking Warren to provide leadership in the study of the farm labor problems of the valley and in action to improve the situation. Nearly 75 officials from Kern, Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Mariposa, Merced and Stanislaus Counties participated. The supervisors also recommended the expansion of a

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Children of unemployed farm workers in San Joaquin Valley. Since January 15, 1950, when this picture was taken, such children have lived mainly on surplus food handouts.

Photo by Dave Myers



Photo by Dave Myers

Two girls, 10 and 11, photographed on April 15 at Lamont, California, as they got off a truck returning them to camp from the pea fields. They had gone out at 6 a.m. and picked peas all day for 1½ cents per pound. They could not remember how much they had earned. It could not have been much for adults are reported to make less than \$2.00 per 10 hour day picking peas.

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omy generally, the Council will also be concerned with questions of economic and social import affecting rural areas.

"The organization will pursue its aims by (1) dissemination of information on labor problems to...

Resource ID 8079

State Commission Studies Farm Labor Problems

STATE COMMISSION STUDIES FARM LABOR PROBLEMS

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program of pre- and post-natal care for women and their children in county hospitals, who normally would not be eligible for the services. The recommendation followed discussions by state health officers who said the infant death rate from diarrhea in the San Joaquin Valley is three times the state average.

At another meeting at the first of the year county and state health and housing officers recommended three specific improvements. They are the transfer of inspection responsibilities for labor camps from the State Division of Housing to the State Department of Health; authorization for counties to make and enforce regulations governing the construction, sanitation and operation of all camps; and establishment of a system of compiling information on the worker population, including employment figures, the flow of workers to and from the various working areas, and statistics on the families involved.

Early in January Governor Warren, following a series of meetings with experts, outlined a program to relieve some of the hardships experienced by the farm workers and in mid January the Fresno County Grand Jury recommended the clarification and strict enforcement of laws governing the labor camps.

On January 14 an official of the United States Department of Labor said his department is advocating national legislation to regulate private employment agencies and labor contractors operating in interstate commerce. At the end of the month sanitarians from the six southern counties met with officers of the State Department of Public Health and the Division of Housing to develop a program of coordinated enforcement of the laws regulating the camps.

Willard Marsh, manager of the Fresno office of the State Department of Employment, believes the general publicity resulting from these meetings and the accompanying valley-wide discussions of the situation did much to warn away thousands of surplus farm workers. As a result, most agencies believe they have been able to keep the situation in hand.

The problem now, as Marsh and many others see it, is to assimilate the increasingly permanent farm labor population into the valley's normal life. It will become even more urgent next year when the increasing mechanization of agriculture displaces more and more hand labor in the fields.