

Wanderers on the Land

a look at Colorado's migratory farm workers and their problems

By MARK BEARWALD, *Denver Post Staff Writer*

SECRETARY of Labor James P. Mitchell has described the nation's migratory farm workers as "lonely wanderers on the face of our land . . . living testimonials to the neglect that is possible in a wealthy and aggressive society."

They live in "fresh air slums" and labor in "blue sky sweat-shops," as one labor leader put it. And Mitchell says "their lot most often seems hopeless."

These men and their wives and children hoe the weeds, pick the fruit, harvest the grain and vegetables, top the onions and sack the potatoes.

They come from shanty towns in Texas, the Southwest, the Deep South, the hill country beyond the Mississippi and from foreign lands.

In spring they swarm out of their winter resting places in search of work. When they find it, they labor long and hard for low wages. When they don't find it, their hard life often becomes desperate.

This unorganized army of about 800,000 persons includes Mexican-Americans, Negroes, Indians and whites. From abroad come 440,000 Mexican nationals and 15,000 Puerto Ricans, Canadians, Japanese, Filipinos and British West Indians.

In 1957, the U. S. Department of Agriculture found the average farm laborer worked 131 days and earned \$859, including what he would pick up in non-farm jobs. His hourly

knees as they snip the plump pods. Pickers get \$2.25 per 100 pounds.

A day's pay averages about \$6, although a good worker in a good field can make \$10 a day. Together, a family can earn \$30, \$40 or \$50 a day depending upon the number of workers.

But it's hot, hard work.

The camp is a wartime facility built by the U. S. government to house farm labor. It was given to the present owner and operator, the Weld County Housing Authority, after the war.

For \$4 a week, a migrant family gets a 12-by-18-foot, one-room frame cabin furnished with two bed frames, a small stove and a table. For \$5 a week, the same accommodations are available in cinder block row houses.

Camp officials try to limit the number of occupants to five per unit, but that is difficult to enforce with families of six, seven, eight or more.

There is no running water, no refrigeration in the cabins. A cold water tap is nearby, outside. Toilets, showers and laundry tubs are provided in community buildings. The camp has a daily garbage collection, police protection and an insect control program. The grounds are dusty, but clean.

There is an auditorium and service building which provide room for entertainment, religious services, rummage

issued a towel, toothbrush, tooth powder and comb. The children get milk and graham crackers early in the morning (which is the only breakfast many of them get) and a hot meal before they are returned to the camp at noon. They take showers at school three days a week.

Many of the children speak no English. Others, some as old as 10 or 12, have never been in school before. Attendance is closely linked to the harvest work.

When work is available, attendance falls off; when work is slow, attendance improves. It is always difficult to get the older children to come because their families need them in the fields.

As a group, the youngsters are about two years behind the school's regular students. That gap will widen as the migrant youngsters get older.

The curriculum here is strange, but tailored to the children's needs, Butler said. They are taught health essentials (like how to brush their teeth and how to use a flush toilet). They learn basic English, beginning reading and simple arithmetic (like how to make change for a dollar).

WHAT sort of people are these migrants? Where do they come from? Where are they going? Here are two:

Luz Moreno, 46, of Plainview, Texas, brought his family to Fort Morgan this spring to work sugar beets for the

pair and the family needs \$50 for the trip south.

Moreno has been a farm laborer all his life, but he doesn't like the migrant's existence. Four years ago, for example, he went to Idaho to work. But the work soon petered out. His wife, Philomena, got sick and had to be hospitalized. The family was stranded well into winter, living on welfare money.

The Morenos usually travel in spring and summer seeking work. In late fall, they work potatoes and save every penny possible. Moreno takes the money and buys the groceries to tide them over the winter.

Unless it's been a good year, the family can't afford the clothes and shoes the kids need for school. So they don't go. Moreno would like to get a steady job and quit traveling, but he said farmers don't like to hire farmhands with big families. The Morenos have 12 children.

A state employment service fieldman said the Morenos are "a real good workin' family." He said he watched Luz picking beans the other day. "He worked right through the noon hour—worked in that sun till I thought he was going to keel over. I told him—'Go eat a candy bar or somethin' before you pass out.'"

About the time Luz Moreno came north for the beet work, another migrant headed north too. He was Salvador Vargas Carrasco, 21, of Tejolocachic, Chihuahua, Mexico.

The growers, processors and some employment service officials deny that. They claim the number of domestic workers declines each year and it is increasingly difficult to hire sufficient local or interstate labor. Therefore, the hiring of Mexicans is justified.

By law, the Mexican "braceros" are an emergency labor pool that cannot be used unless there are no domestic workers available. Nor can Mexicans be hired where their employment would adversely affect the wages and working conditions of American workers. Both workers must be paid the same wage.

If braceros are working and a qualified domestic worker is unable to get work elsewhere, the bracero must be bumped in favor of the U. S. citizen. But this doesn't happen often.

Employment service officials say such bumping is an "emergency" situation. They add that work needs are so carefully determined in advance that there is work for everyone.

A veteran U. S. Department of Labor supervisor said the use of Mexican migrants tends to drive out domestic workers. The domestic people know that if they run into a tough field situation where the work is worth more than the prevailing wage, the farmer can replace them with braceros, rather than grant their demands for higher pay.

IRONICALLY, the bracero,

Some farmers will admit to a preference for Mexican nationals over the domestic migrants. They say the Mexican is an able-bodied worker, anxious to work, who must stay on the farm until the work is completed.

The domestic, they say, is less dependable; he may pull out in the middle of the night. Also the domestic worker usually has a sizable family with him, while the Mexican leaves his family at home.

Sickness, accidents and domestic troubles in a migrant family could place a burden on the employer. Then, too, the work output of a family must include the labor of women and children, who are less efficient than the men.

PRESUMABLY the domestic migrant's cloak of citizenship gives him protection and guarantees which even the bracero does not have. But this is not the case. The migrant has been consistently written out of much of the social legislation of the past 20 years.

He has a low income because farm labor is not included in minimum wage laws.

He must support himself when he is out of work; there is no unemployment insurance for migratory workers.

He has no labor union, no organization, little bargaining power. Federal and state laws which protect the workers' right to organize and bargain usually exclude farm labor.

And finally, his nomadic



tation, misery and hopelessness that dog the migrants' heels.

COLORADO is one of the states that play host each year to the seasonal visitation of migrants. From the migrants' point of view, it is one of the best.

Much has been done here by growers, processors, social workers and religious groups to improve the migrant's standard of living while he works in the Colorado fields.

But even here the picture is a bleak one. The migrant's status in Colorado illustrates the plight of the "lonely wanderers" and the problem that faces the nation, the states and the communities.

THOUSANDS of migratory farm workers come here each year to thin sugar beets, harvest beans, tomatoes and pickles and pick peaches.

Many find their way to the labor camp at Fort Lupton, one of the best facilities of its kind in the nation. About 1,100 of them are at the camp right now for the annual vegetable harvest.

They are now finishing up the annual harvest of snap beans. In a few days, they will begin picking tomatoes.

In the bean fields you find crews of 300 to 400 persons scattered among the rows of vines. They range from the very young to the very old.

Whole families make their way along the rows—either stooping or crawling on their

dedicated social workers from the Migrant Ministry of the Colorado Council of Churches led by Mrs. Marguerite Young of Colorado Springs.

The Catholics are represented by the Rev. James Overton of Brighton and a group of seminarians. These people work for the migrants in the limbo between federal, state and local government responsibilities.

Persons familiar with the migrant's life say the Fort Lupton center, as limited as it is, is far better than most housing for these transient workers.

In most cases, they say, the workers and their families wouldn't do as well at home in Texas, or out on the farms, or in the tin and tar paper shacks that used to dot Northern Colorado during the harvest season.

Before the center was established, migrant families used to camp along the South Platte River. Conditions there were "unbelievable," as one farmer described it. Every year, there was sickness and death in the river bottoms.

ON THE bulletin board at the Fort Lupton camp, there is posted a cordial letter, in Spanish, from Leo William Butler, superintendent of the Fort Lupton schools. It invites the migrant parents to send their youngsters to school during their stay in camp.

It's a strange sort of school. When a child enrolls, he is



CHILDREN HELP IN THE FIELDS

last long either. He had to buy a third.

After the beets were finished, the family moved to Fort Lupton to work beans. But the crop was late. By the time the harvest began, Moreno had used up most of his savings.

The family, which has five workers, made good money in beans at first, then they didn't do so well. One day recently, the five pickers returned to the camp before noon with only \$2.75 between them.

Moreno wants to go home. He is discouraged and feels the work is too uncertain; he can't get ahead of his expenses. But the car needs re-

the young beet plants for the farmers in Great Western's four-state area.

During his six weeks under contract, Vargas worked for four farmers in the Brighton area. He earned \$257.01, or about 96 cents an hour. He hoed beets as long as 10 hours a day, six days a week.

He spent very little for food and extras and took most of the money home to his mother, whom he supports. His earnings will buy groceries and maybe a cow or a pig.

At home, Vargas has trouble finding work. When he does, he gets eight pesos a day hoeing corn or beans and 12½ pesos (a U. S. dollar) per day at harvest time.

Does he like being a bracero, a migrant worker in the U. S.? He said the work is hard, but he makes good money. Will he return next year? "Si, por favor de Dios"—If God wills it, yes.

VARGAS and the other Mexican nationals who come here to work figure significantly in any discussion of the problems of domestic migratory workers.

The importation of Mexican citizens for field work in the U. S. has been sharply criticized by persons familiar with the migrants' troubles. They say the Mexican takes jobs away from American citizens, keeps wages low and destroys what feeble bargaining power the domestic migrant has.

Agreements between the United States and Mexico spell out wage rates, living standards, insurance, subsistence and transportation requirements for the Mexican worker.

The farmer who hires him must furnish transportation, living quarters and household essentials for his Mexican worker, but he is not required to provide these benefits for the domestic migrant. An exception is the beet sugar industry where the Sugar Act specifies equal treatment for both in some respects.

Mexican consuls and U. S. Department of Labor "compliance men" see that these standards for braceros are adhered to. Violations of the agreements could put the farmer on a blacklist and deny him bracero labor in the future.

Once the bracero is assigned to a farm, he stays there until his contract is completed. If he leaves, he becomes an illegal "wetback."

A troublesome bracero will end up on another blacklist and won't be hired again for over-the-border work. Few of them skip.

Most braceros come here to make a stake. They work hard and save their money or send it home. The braceros brought in by Great Western Sugar Co. in 1953 earned an average of \$255 during their six-week stay. That's big money in Mexico.

citizens of a state.

When a migrant family is hungry, out of work, sick or injured, it usually has no recourse but charity.

WHAT is being done to improve the lot of these 800,000 people? There has been some recent progress.

A long series of disastrous highway accidents brought a crackdown on unsafe transportation practices and some stringent federal and state regulations.

Some improvement has been achieved in living standards and additional legislation is being considered which would require employers to furnish the same facilities for domestic workers that are now required for braceros.

The U. S. Department of Labor, which must certify the need for foreign labor, reports it has tightened up on the authorizations for these workers.

What else can be done?

Friends of the migrant are in general agreement that the critical need is a minimum wage and some guarantees of a stable annual income for farm workers.

Secretary Mitchell said recently the migrant should be able "to take care of himself and his family without depending upon his wife and children to pick up needed money in the fields."

But it is difficult to help a man who is here today, in Nebraska next week and in

Denver Post Photos by Ira Gay Sealy

MIGRANT WITH A HOE

In the beet fields near Brighton

Michigan next month. Some states, counties and local communities feel no obligation towards these transient workers. They are sometimes considered to be necessary evils.

When the crop is ready, they are needed badly. When the harvest is done, communities are glad to see them leave.

It has been suggested that the federal government step into this no man's land of local responsibility and assist the migrant with grants for health, welfare and education, additional labor camps and even surplus foods and milk. But with a liveable income, the migrant could provide some of these needs for himself.

IF A HIGHER income is the migrant's greatest need, it is still not a panacea.

Growers and food processors stoutly maintain they are pushed to the wall by rising costs. A minimum wage in agriculture would break them; they claim they cannot pay more for labor.

What would they do? They would turn more and more to the ingenious machines that are gradually taking over the fieldhands' work.

Look at the beet sugar industry. In 1945, Great Western brought in 27,000 workers to

harvest beets. In 1954, mechanical harvesters took over the job.

And improved seed, mechanical thinning machines and scientific weed control are rapidly cutting down the need for hand labor in the early spring thinning and hoeing work.

Look at beans. This year Fort Lupton Canning Co. and the Kuner-Empton Co. of Brighton are using six mechanical bean pickers. One machine will do the work of 125 men. With the development of bean vines tailored for this machine picking, the use of mechanical harvesters will increase rapidly.

In other areas, growers are field-testing a tomato harvester that picks tomatoes by degree of ripeness. Another intricate apparatus harvests; tops, cleans, grades, weighs, packages, seals and crates carrots in one continuous operation.

Eventually, machines may take away the migrant's livelihood, but they will also signal the end of the long, tragic problem of migratory labor in the United States.

The migrants will have to find new jobs and a new way of life. And they will then acquire, for the first time, the full rights, benefits and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

