

"OUT OF THEIR POVERTY"

Written and Produced by Joyce L. Kornbluh
with the Assistance of Hyman H. Bookbinder.

Hearings on a Program for Farm Labor
February 5 and 6, 1959
Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.

CAST:

Mrs. Helen Gahagan Douglas, Narrator, with
members of the Catholic University Drama
Department under the direction of Mr. William
Schulte. Songs: Joe Glazer.

PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE DOCUMENTARY WERE TAKEN BY:

Jack Alford, Delano, Charles Harbutt,
Hetzl, Russell Lee, Lew Merrin,
David Myers, Len Nadel, Harvey Richards,
Laura Shotwell, Stan Wayman.

MATERIAL FOR THE SCRIPT COURTESY OF:

Division of Home Missions, National Agricultural
Workers Union, National Child Labor Committee,
National Consumers League, National Council on
Agricultural Life and Labor, National Council of
Churches of Christ, National Sharecroppers Fund.

8573

OUT OF THEIR POVERTY

(The hall is darkened. Several slides are flashed on the screen. Then the Narrator speaks.....)

NARRATOR:

This is a story which has had no beginning. It is a dirge which as yet has had no end. It is a story that has gone on for years with little change. There have been no great dramatic moments. Just the living of it, day after day. It is a story of misery in our midst. Of poverty in the land of plenty. Of cruelty, exploitation, neglect. Of fear. Bone-weariness. Hunger. It is the story of two million people -- hired farm workers in America ...

SONG:

RAGGEDY, RAGGEDY (1)

Raggedy, raggedy are we (oh Lawdy)
Just as raggedy as raggedy can be;
We don't get nothing for our labor--
So raggedy, raggedy are we.

So hungry, hungry are we,
Just as hungry as hungry can be
We don't get nothing for our labor--
So hungry, hungry are we.

So homeless, homeless are we,
Just as homeless as homeless can be
We don't get nothing for our labor--
So homeless, homeless are we.

So landless, landless are we,
Just as landless as landless can be
We don't get nothing for our labor--
So landless, landless are we.

Raggedy, raggedy are we (oh Lawdy)
Just as raggedy as raggedy can be;
We don't get nothing for our labor--
So raggedy, raggedy are we.

(The remainder of the slides are shown during the singing of the song).

MAN'S VOICE: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success."

WOMAN'S VOICE: . . ."and in the eyes of the people there is a failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage." (2)

NARRATOR: The open truck rolled on, mile after mile, rumbling and jouncing, day and night, grinding out the endless miles . . . Texas . . . Oklahoma . . . Kansas . . . Nebraska . . . Iowa . . . Minnesota . . . three days and three nights, over 1200 miles.

MAN'S VOICE: "It rained on us and we stayed wet for two days." (3)

WOMAN'S VOICE: "We had to travel sitting on a board for three days and nights. I had the baby on my lap the whole way." (4)

MAN'S VOICE: "The same driver drove all the way from Texas with no one to spell him. I can't see why he didn't fall asleep and kill us all." (5)

WOMAN'S VOICE: "They treat cattle better. My back aches when I think of it." (6)

MAN'S VOICE:

"My name is Manuel Martinez. I was one of 42 people on that truck - me and my wife and three children. The women and children took turns sitting on the planks on each side. The first night, Chuck the Boss, drove right thru with no stop. I banged on the cab and begged him to stop for the sake of the kids. He yelled, 'Sitdown -- how are we going to get the beets if we don't get a move on.'"

NARRATOR:

The Martinez family was headed to Minnesota, to the sugar beet fields. They were just one of thousands of Texas families -- native American -- turned migrant. The cotton crops at home were crowded with surplus hands -- the orange crop had been bad.

MAN'S VOICE:

Nice clean work in the sugar beet fields . . . \$25 an acre. A nice clean house to live in. Free electricity. Free water. Everything free.

NARRATOR:

When the truck finally reached Minnesota, the 42 sat there -- stunned, numb, wet. Only a few could jump out without help. Some were sick and fell to the ground. But here was Minnesota -- and the \$25 an acre. Free water, free electricity. And that "nice clean home."

WOMAN'S VOICE:

Our house was a wooden shed with a leaky roof and a rotten floor. They hung sacks across the middle and moved in Jesus Sanchez with his wife and five children. There was one outhouse in the camp for us and 60 other people. We had to carry our water from over the hill.

MAN'S VOICE:

I owed the truck driver nearly \$80.00. \$20. each for me and my wife and my fourteen year old son. \$6.00 each for the little ones. But \$25. an acre seemed like good money. Maybe if we all worked hard we could handle 15 acres or more.

NARRATOR:

The Martinez family were in debt the day they started. They would have to work their heads off, every last one of them, trying to get out of debt the ten weeks they were in the fields. \$50.00 was held back from their pay by the company to make sure they would still be there in the Fall when the time came to top the beets. What would be left at the end of ten weeks? Where would they go? This is the dirge of the Martinez family - - and thousands and thousands like them . . . not in the years of Depression, when the dust storms swirled across the plains and the grasshoppers ate their way from state to state forcing people to take to the road and try to make California. This is today -- 1959 -- when the horn of plenty has turned America into an affluent society -- except for 2 million hired farm workers. Who are these people?

MAN'S VOICE: They are Southern California Whites, including thousands who fled the dust bowl in the '30s. They are Southern Negro families who surge up the East coast to New Jersey, New York, New England. . .

WOMAN'S VOICE: They are Spanish Americans from Texas, streaming northwards to Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado. They are tenant farmers and sharecroppers. . . .

MAN'S VOICE: They are Pennsylvania mining families picking the crops of New York State. . . Kentucky hill people who dig potatoes in New Hampshire.

NARRATOR: They are Mexican Nationals, recruited below the border. . . . imported Bahamians and Jamaicans, making \$1.00 to \$1.50 a day. . .

MAN'S VOICE: "I've been in this business 25 years. Some years we've used day hauls of Poles and Czechs and Italians from the city. In the forties when there was no one else, I hired prisoners of war. We've imported Jamaicans and Bahamians and now we're using southern Negro families and Puerto Rican men. It changes from year to year. But there's one thing for sure. Whoever they are, they're always the people who, come Spring, are the hungriest. Who else wants to work that hard for that little money." (7)

NARRATOR:

For most American workers, 1959 means enjoying the fruits of the assembly line -- bathtubs -- cars -- refrigerators -- central heating -- television. But across the fruited plain of America, things haven't worked out that way for workers in assembly line agriculture, on factory farms. A refrigerator? You dig a hole in the ground and wrap your food in a wet cloth and put it there. Plumbing? You walk thru the mud to the privy. A bathtub? Cold water from a hose does it. Listen to a reporter for a New York paper writing just a few years ago:

MAN'S VOICE:

"Within a day's drive of New York City, thousands of men, women and children are laboring at near peon wages; living in hovels that would make a hog ashamed, and are being mulcted, fleeced and victimized from morning until night, Monday through Sunday. I saw women cooking over fires built in holes in the ground because farmers would not supply them with stoves. I saw babies living in filth, flies crawling in and out of their mouths and noses, because the tar paper and rotten wood shanties had no screens." (8)

NARRATOR:

Listen to the testimony a few years ago of the witnesses before the Humphrey hearings on Migratory Labor . . .

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"In a number of instances, people are living in old school bus bodies, old tents, or inadequately floored cabins . . . The beds, where there are any, consist of poor mattresses on boxes or bean crates." (9)

MAN'S VOICE:

"The chief objections to the houses we saw were overcrowding, lack of mattresses, leaky roofs, eating equipment consisting of tin plates that could not be kept free of rust, pumps too close to latrines, and absence of light facilities." (10)

WOMAN'S VOICE:

We have migrant workers living in the state of Arizona in tents with no floors, on canal banks without proper sanitation. . . I speak from experience, gentlemen. I have seen these things. I know. (11)

MAN'S VOICE:

Living conditions of California migrants have been the subject of news stories, movies, novels and sermons for years. None of this has made any great change. Habitation remains on the lowest plane of human existence." (12)

NARRATOR:

"These people are used to being exploited" declared one Texas farm owner to justify his own policies at a Congressional hearing. "Don't you think you could manage to disappoint them once in a while, asked the Labor Commissioner . . .

No, housing conditions for migrants haven't changed much. Just this past year, the San Jose Mercury described the ordinary housing situation for California migrants as "the longest slum in the world...."

Village conditions in Pakistan are no worse than in some of the California camps.(13) In New Jersey, at a meeting which the Newark newspapers just a few weeks ago described as the "rowdiest public hearing in years," 400 farm owners booted down the suggestion that they provide blankets, warm water and electricity for their hired farm workers. (14) And, crop freezes in Florida last year brought reports like this:

MAN'S VOICE:

". . . whole families are forced to live in the open . . . Many are making homes in cardboard or any other kind of makeshift shack in the woods . . .

"The Florida State Welfare Board has rationed enough staple food items to keep adults from starving. The children have not been helped enough, welfare officials say, because babies cannot be fed cornmeal, cheese, or beans. (15)

SONG:

GOIN' DOWN THE ROAD FEELIN' BAD

I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad,
I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad
I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad, Lord God
Cause I ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

My kids need three meals a day;
My kids need three meals a day;
My kids need three meals a day, Lord God
And we ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

I'm goin' where the climate suits my clothes
I'm goin' where the climate suits my clothes
I'm goin' where the climate suits my clothes, Lord God
And I ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad,
I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad
I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad, Lord God
Cause I ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

MAN'S VOICE:

Seems like these store fellows kind of guess right
to the penny what you have in your pocket. If its
eight dollars, or fifteen dollars . . . that's what
your groceries will cost. Hot dogs cost 35 cents here
in the village. Same size dog costs 20 cents up in
Pontiac or Lansing.

NARRATOR:

And after the harvest, what then? Savings run low,
clothes and cars are traded for food. It's a time
when sickness strikes. Asked by the District Attorney
in Bakersfield if a baby had died of starvation, the
California doctor replied: "no, he died of
malnutrition and dehydration caused by vomiting.
It is a common disease of the poor. We get twenty
cases a day when the cotton season brings the
migrants into the valley. (16)

MAN'S VOICE:

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE - April 9, 1958: "Emergency food rations were distributed over the weekend to 9000 members of storm-idled farm laborers' families. But even this mass distribution did not fill the demand. A 19 year old youth was hospitalized after he quit eating entirely so that his younger brothers and sisters could have his share."

NARRATOR:

Some families had been living for days on flour gravy -- flour cooked with grease, with water added. As one man remarked:

MAN'S VOICE:

"When you git down to your last bean, your backbone and your navel shakes dice to see which gits it." (17)

WOMAN'S VOICE:

County ain't big enough to feed all you migrants, the welfare lady told me . . . Migrants! We've been in this county 8 years! She gave me this. Food extender -- she said. Label says to use with stews and hamburgers. Stews and hamburgers. We had to boil it alone and nobody would eat it." (18)

MAN'S VOICE:

"My county has taken a firm stand against giving too much aid to these farm workers' families. We won't have more than the normal load of welfare cases if we don't advertise that we're giving things away." (19)

NARRATOR: So spoke the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors in one Western State. But another more sympathetic observer had this to say:

MAN'S VOICE: "The truth is that to call farm workers second class citizens is to raise their status. They are exempted from the protection of the Fair Labor Standards Act. They are not covered by unemployment compensation. They do not even have the basic rights provided in the Labor Management Relations Act." (20)

NARRATOR: Two million people, desperate for government protection... for public awareness.... for a decent standard of living so that they may help themselves.

SONG:

WE DON'T WANT YOUR LITTLE RAG HOUSES

I don't want your little rag houses
I don't want your navy beans
All I want is a greenback dollar
For to buy some gasoline.

We don't want to be no burden
On the people of this land
We just want to earn our money
And you people know we can.

So goodbye to all my neighbors
We are on the tramp
Many thanks to all officials
Of this migrant labor camp.

I don't want your little rag houses
I don't want your navy beans
All I want is a greenback dollar
For to buy some gasoline.

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"Beside Highway 99, was a clump of battered jalopies. We stepped from our heated car into the raw, January cold. From the first parked car rose the wail of children. Eight children, the youngest an infant of four months, stood, lay and crawled on the sedan's two seats, keening brokenheartedly for their mother. Running noses and tears had streaked the dirt on the little faces. Blue with cold, hungry and unattended save by a crying seven year old boy, the children had been locked in the car for over two hours. They would be there another four hours, their mother later told us when she came from her odd job in the field nearby." (21)

NARRATOR:

So wrote a reporter for *Colliers Magazine*. Occasionally, reports the Fresno Bee a child is found tied to a post or a stake out in the open under the hot sun. Frequent accidents have been reported -- two children burned to death in a locked car; baby killed by a mechanical cotton picker, children hurt playing on the highway adjoining fields where the parents worked.

And what about the older children. Take the boy named Joe, for instance. Hailing from Texas, he came into the fifth grade of a Michigan school last October, Pleasant, courteous, ambitious, he readily became a favorite of all the children. On January 15th, the principal chose Joe as a safety patrol for the second semester. On January 19th, his family started back to Texas. After he had left, his teacher found this note.

MAN'S VOICE:

"Dear Boys and Girls: You have been nice to me, but I got to go to Texas. I wanted to stay, but they didn't let me stay. You were good to me here . . . but now that I was going to be a safety, I'm going. What luck! I like it here very much. I had lots of fun with you guys. To Miss Field. You 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." (22)

NARRATOR:

Florida:

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"Less than 43% of the children within the compulsory school age range received as much as 30 weeks of schooling..." (23)

NARRATOR:

Colorado:

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"Thirty five percent of the children of school age had left school or had never been in school." (24)

NARRATOR:

Arizona:

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"Most migrant children entering classes were retarded in achievement up to 50% in comparison with their age level." (25)

NARRATOR:

Yes, when the average family income of farm workers is just a little over \$1000 a year there are more than a million children moving around, illiterate, disease-ridden, learning no useful skills in their long, back-breaking days of monotonous work in the fields. Forty states have no regulations at all for children working in agriculture during summer months. It was the Truman Commission Report on Migratory Labor which pointed out:

MAN'S VOICE:

"Hundreds of thousands of the children of migrant workers are today getting little or no education, and they face the prospect of being slightly, if any, better able to improve their earning power and raise their level of living than their parents before them." (26)

NARRATOR:

And it was Senator Douglas who noted that while Congress passed on a \$6,000,000 item for the care of migratory birds, it refused to allot a penny to the education of migrant children! Shocked by the conditions of migrant children in his state, one observer wrote this poem....

"The big, white house stands on the hill,
The people who live there are wondering still
Why the migratory children play
So hard, on such a rainy day!"

SONG:

(Children's group)

I'M GONNA JUMP DOWN

I'm gonna jump down, turn around
Pick a bale of cotton,
Jump down, turn around
Pick a bale a day.

Oh, lawdy, pick a bale of cotton
Oh, lawdy, pick a bale a day.

(Repeat with actions)

MAN'S VOICE:

"Most of us workin' from sun up until sundown and makin' less than 70 cents a day. There was many of us who said they would go out on stike. The planters got scared. They beat up men and women and they shot some and tried to scare us. They ran a lot of folks out. We marched through the plantations, cross country. As we were marching, we were asking, like somebody asked in the Bible, 'What you mean that you crush my people and grind the face of the poor.'"

NARRATOR:

Those are the words of John Handcox, Negro organizer, sharecropper and song writer for the National Agricultural Workers Union in its early days. This is the song he wrote about that strike:

SONG:

WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED

We shall not be, we shall not be moved.
We shall not be, we shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's standing by the water,
We shall not be moved.

We're fighting for our children,
We shall not be moved.
We're fighting for our children
We shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's standing by the water
We shall not be moved.

We're fighting for our freedom,
We shall not be moved,
We're fighting for our freedom
We shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the water
We shall not be moved.

We shall not be, we shall not be moved
We shall not be, we shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the water
We shall not be moved.

NARRATOR:

Yes, the farm workers have struggled to help themselves, to organize, form unions, win job security. But it isn't easy to organize people who move with the crops, whose living borders on the brink of starvation, who constantly must scramble for jobs competing with the imported alien contract labor brought in by the farm owners to keep labor costs down. It isn't easy to stand up for your rights when farm foremen are deputized to carry rifles, when strike leaders are pistol-whipped as an example to others to "keep in their place", when whole families are locked out of company-owned shacks and their pay withheld.

MAN'S VOICE: "What we want is a chanst to make an honestlivin' like what we was raised." (30)

WOMAN'S VOICE: "All our folks was tenant farmers. It's very little we ever have, but its a hope to work and live-for, all the year, just the same." (31)

NARRATOR: And there have been men and women of goodwill who have banded together in an effort to help the farm workers -- people from all walks of life and all religious faiths who year after year try to publicize the story of the farm worker, who have worked in their state legislatures, testified in Congressional hearings, who believe strongly as did Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

MAN'S VOICE: "All Americans want this country to be a place where children can live in safety and grow in understanding of the part they are going to play in the future of our American nation . . . If anywhere in the country any child lacks the opportunity for home life, for health protection, for education, for moral or spiritual development, the strength of the nation and its ability to cherish and advance the principles of democracy are thereby weakened."

NARRATOR: And there are people who echo in their deeds and prayers, the words of Senator Hubert Humphrey:

MAN'S VOICE:

"The greatest immorality of all is the exploitation of men, women and children -- wetbacks, migrants, people in the field. These are the 'least of us'..... living on the verge of impossible living. We cannot rest until we have done something about this evil situation."

NARRATOR:

Yes, we have seen some of their faces. We have heard some of their words. And the story has gone on for years with little change. It is a story which has had no beginning, a dirge which, as yet, has had no end. There have been no great dramatic moments. It just goes on from day to day. A story of misery in our midst; of their poverty as we face our tables of plenty; of second class citizenship; fear; weariness; hunger; cruelty; exploitation. When will it end? Do you remember Carl Sandburg's last lines of

"THE PEOPLE; YES"

"In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
the people march.

In the night . . . the people march:

'Where to? What next?'"

WOMAN'S VOICE:

"A human bein' has the right to stand like a
tree has the right to stand."

SONG:

WE WILL OVERCOME

We will overcome
We will overcome
We will overcome, someday
Oh, down in my heart
I do believe
We will overcome some day.

We will build a new world
We will build a new world
We will build a new world, someday.
Oh, down in my heart
I do believe
We will build a new world, someday.

The Lord will see us through
The Lord will see us through
The Lord will see us through, someday
Oh, down in my heart
I do believe,
The Lord will see us through, someday.

We will overcome,
We will overcome,
We will overcome, someday.
Oh, down in my heart
I do believe
We will overcome, someday.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) "Raggedy, Raggedy," written by John Handcox, Recorded for Library of Congress.
- (2) "Grapes of Wrath," by John Steinbeck.
- (3) (4) (5) (6) "What Next for New York's Joads?" Consumers League of New York.
- (7) Personnel man for highly industrialized Eastern Shore farm testifying before Humphrey Committee Hearings on Migratory Labor.
- (8) Allan Keller, NEW YORK WORLD, September 8, 1953.
- (9) Director, Field Social Service Work, North Carolina, testifying before Humphrey Committee Hearings, 1952.
- (10) Labor Commissioner, Michigan, testifying before Humphrey Committee Hearings.
- (11) State Health Officer, Arkansas, testifying before Humphrey Committee Hearings, 1952.
- (12) Representative, California Federation of Civic Unity, testifying before Humphrey Hearings, 1952.
- (13) SAN JOSE MERCURY, January 23, 1958.
- (14) NEWARK STAR LEDGER, Wednesday, January 7, 1959.
- (15) NEW YORK TIMES, January 19, 1958.
- (16) BAKERSFIELD PRESS, October 11, 1949.
- (17) From "An American Exodus", by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor.
- (18) From Article, "The Americans Nobody Wants" by Lester Velie, Colliers, April, 1950.
- (19) From Article, "The Americans Nobody Wants" by Lester Velie, Colliers, April, 1950.
- (20) From Article, "The Forgotten Farm Worker" by Patrick E. Gorman, IUD Digest, Winter 1959.
- (21) From Article, "The Americans Nobody Wants" by Lester Velie, Colliers, April, 1950.
- (22) (23) (24) (25) From "Will You Make a School", National Child Labor Committee.
- (26) President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report, 1951.
- (27) Quoted in "American Folksongs of Protest", by John Greenway.
- (28) From "The Disinherited -- Letters from Sharecroppers", National Agricultural Workers Union.
- (29) From "An American Exodus", Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor.
- (30) From "An American Exodus", Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor.
- (31) From "These Are Our Lives", a Federal Writers Project publication.