Age of Braceros Plowed Under

California's Decades-Old Disgrace In the Fields Is Near an End

By Frank C. Porter
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MOST AFTERNOONS about 4:30, Lotus R. (Ray) Buell climbs down from the spray truck he drives for the huge Irvine Ranch in Orange County, Calif., and heads for the showers.

The shower house and washroom are steamy but spanking clean. Pulling on a pair of fresh khaki pants, Ray puts his dirty clothes under an arm and pads to the single men's bunkhouse.

It is no Harvard dormitory, but it is neat and clean and each man has his own room. There are sheets on Ray's bed, curtains, an easy chair, a radio, pictures on the walls—no frills but comfortable living. There is even a namecard on the door.

A rangy, amiable man of about 60, Ray finishes dressing and slips into the easy chair to read a newspaper until the dinner gong, a big cast iron triangle, is sounded.

He walks to a nearby mess hall with about two dozen workers. The decor is plain. But the kitchen is spotless and modern and the dining room, adjacent to another where the office staff eats, is bright and pleasant. The men fall to an enormous meal, served family style, which consists of roast turkey, dressing, cauliflower, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, avocados, beets, radishes and a half-gallon carton of milk for every three or four men.

Ray Buell has worked for Irvine 16 years. He says he likes his job fine and has no intention of moving on.

Squalid Limbo

ADMITTING THAT Ray's social status is a notch above those who cultivate, thin and harvest the state's row crops in a perpetual stoop, his lot is in sharp contrast to the life led by most of California's more than 300,000 farm laborers.

Many live in decent work camps or private homes and eat well. But too many others are consigned to a squalid limbo of which urban Angelenos and San Franciscans are but dimply aware —a limbo of dilapidated shacks with a single water faucet serving the needs of four or five families, of filthy bunkhouses and infested blankets, of inadequate medical and school facilities, of callous employers and labor contractors.

"I'm a tramp but I don't like living in a pigsty," a clean but shabbily dressed worker confessed to a free lance writer after quitting a Salinas broccoli field last month.

"You ought to see them during the harvest peak," says a San Francisco labor official. "Whole families sleeping in a culvert or camping in the open by the roadside."

It is unfair to infer from such testimony that these conditions are universal throughout California's rich agricultural valleys. During a fairly superficial three days inspection last month I frankly saw little to turn my stomach. I had seen worse during a tour of Maryland's poverty pockets a year ago. (But again, I had the feeling I wasn't seeing all there was to see in California.)

Certainly the lot of the California farm worker has improved greatly since the 1930s, when grower groups kept him cowed with private armies, tear gas and clubs. He has come a long way since Carey McWilliams wrote in his "Factories in the Field" in 1939 of incredibly miserable living conditions.

But if conditions have improved in the ensuing 26 years—and if they are taken for granted by most Californians —they still shock many an outsider.

Such an outsider is Labor Secretary W. Willard Wirtz, who ranged from Sacramento to the Imperial Valley last month, visiting fields and labor

Photo by George Ballis, Pacific Scene

The land is generous with crops and oil in California's Fresno Valley, but it still takes the long reach of a human hand to dig potatoes.

camps, talking to hundreds of workers, growers and others involved in farming.

While giving credit to the better-run operations he visited, Wirtz was appalled by some of the things he saw. He was particularly incensed after a surprise visit to one labor camp. He said it was filthy and made him "ashamed that anything of this kind exists in this country." This was no one-shot deal, Wirtz explained, but one of 55 camps owned by a single contractor. They accommodate 10,000 workers.

Wirtz's mission was a difficult one.

Public Law 78, permitting the importation of low-wage Mexican braceros, had been passed in 1951 to ease a labor shortage induced by the Korean War. Congress let the statute die last Dec. 31 after extending it for a year in 1963 on the understanding that the time would be used to facilitiate transition to 100 per cent native labor.

With four million Americans unemployed, it was argued, the legalized entry of more than 100,000 Mexican

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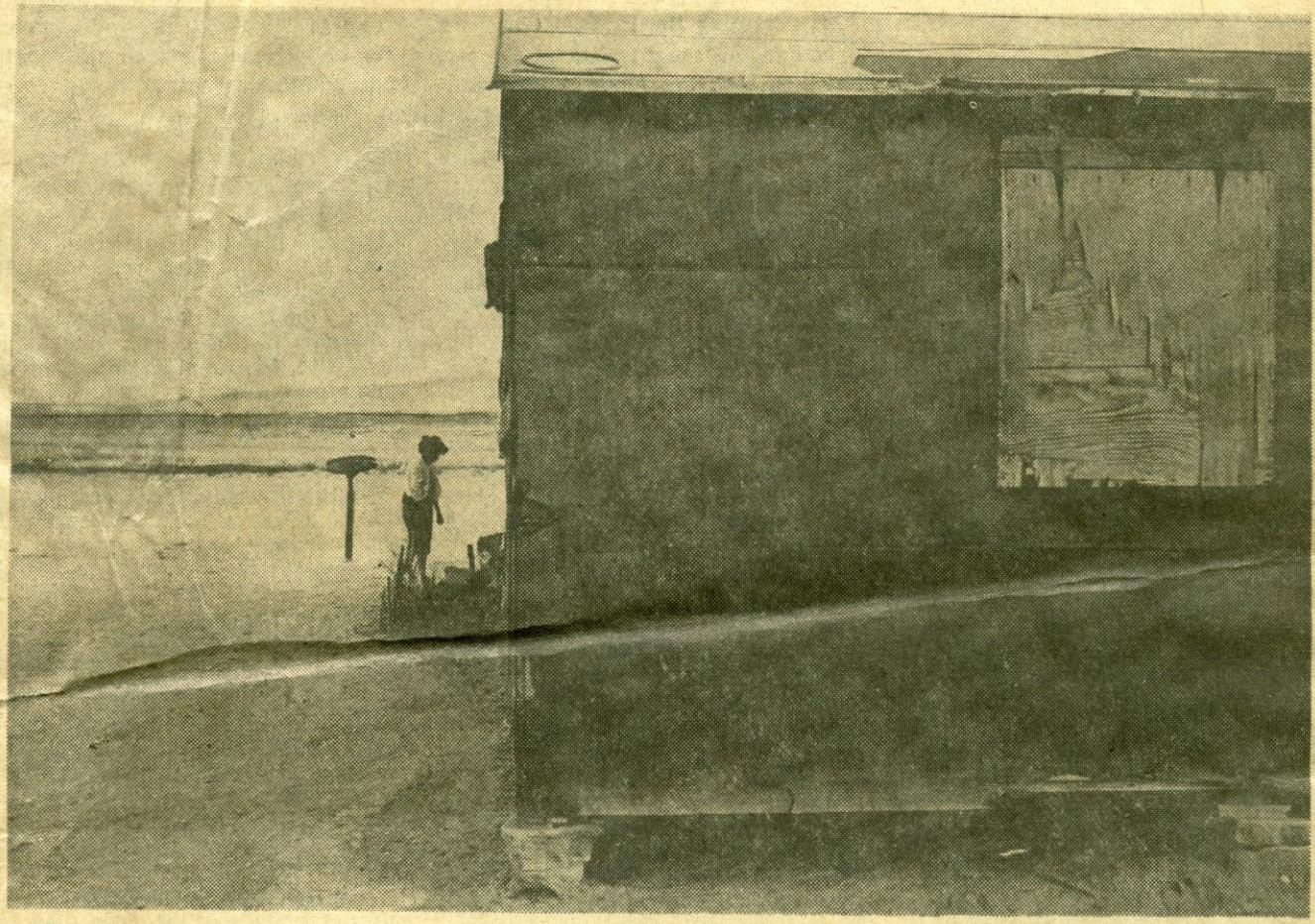
Sun Sets on Braceros



Photos by George Ballis, Pacific Scene

This farm laborer's shack seems somehow to fit its setting.

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The short hoe used in thinning sugar beets is a back-breaker.

workers was hardly equitable. As Rep. Jeffrey Cohelan (D-Calif.) recently put it, "there can be no justification . . . for that program or any program which breeds on the poverty in one country to perpetuate and extend similar conditions in our own country."

But another law, Section 414 of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, permits limited entry of foreign farm workers in specific instances where the Labor Secretary certifies that no Americans are available at fair pay and under good working conditions.

As soon as the bracero law ended, it became apparent that grower groups expected Section 414 to be implemented so as to continue the same flow of foreign workers as in past years.

Wirtz doggedly held that this was not the intent of Congress; that sufficient Americans (most workers are of Mexican descent) can be found to tend and harvest crops in almost all cases if they are assured adequate wages and decent working conditions. With minor exceptions, he has thus far not certified any foreign workers.

THIS BROUGHT a ringing protest from growers and their allies, who claimed that crops were rotting in the fields, that Mexicans are stronger and more efficient, that plantings were

The farm laborer's wife is, of course, a farm laborer herself.

down because of labor uncertainty, that the whole agricultural economy of California and Florida were imperiled.

Wirtz went to California to find out first hand if (a) the alleged labor shortage actually exists and (b) if satisfactory pay and working conditions are being offered American workers.

His answer: "The bracero program is dead." His message to the growers was clear: there may be some minor accommodation in hardship cases but the big job rests with them in making farm work attractive to Americans. He said there is no labor shortage yet.

The ball is now in the growers' court. No sooner had Wirtz returned to Washington than the Council of California Growers shifted to the defensive and issued a newsletter in which it conceded that Wirtz had not exaggerated the conditions he saw and called upon miscreants in the industry to clean up their operations.

"The facts are that once again responsible California agriculture has been clobbered by the black sheep, by the 'chicken neck profiteers,' by the operators of filthy, disgraceful farm labor camps, by growers who, incredibly enough, did not have toilet facilities in their fields," the Council said.

(The Los Angeles County AFL-CIO called the statement "itself incredible. They know toilet facilities in the fields are almost nonexistent in any area.")

GOV. EDMUND G. (PAT) BROWN, who had been treading a cautious middle course between growers and enemies of the bracero program, said the Wirtz trip has focused attention on the key issue—housing. He promptly moved to set up a special farm labor force, asked for a law setting up a State Housing Agency and instructed the state poverty chief to press for completion of ten migrant service centers and 1000 farm housing units to be built with Federal funds.

The grandmother of a farm laboring family receives a visitor.

There are those, however, who feel that an industry whose annual after-tax profit is estimated as high as $1 billion on $3.6 billion in sales is capable of doing the job itself.

The Irvine Corp., which owns more than 90,000 acres in Orange County, is a case in point. Spokesmen say the ranch phased out its bracero labor four or five years ago in the interest of building a stable work force. To enhance that stability, they say they concentrate on hiring married men, many of whom live with their families in company houses which are unpretentious but well-kept and attractive.

As for the single men like Ray Buell, they pay a mere $1 a day for room and board—the same rate initiated by Irvine some 40 years ago. "We lose money on the operation," says a company official, "but we believe in keeping the employes happy."