

The Americans Nobody Wants

By LESTER VELIE

EVERY fall, when it's cotton-picking time in California, the schools and the cotton fields fight for the children. On the side of the schools there is the truancy officer who sometimes polices as much as 300 square miles.

On the side of the cotton fields there are the employer and the labor contractor with cash in hand and the farm-worker parents, hard pressed to lay by some of that cash for an idle winter.

The cotton fields often win.

Factories no longer employ child labor. But in California's mass-production agriculture, which hires workers at piece and hourly rates as many factories do, children still labor. And the laboring child's father gets little more protection than the factory worker of 200 years ago. For him there is no workmen's compensation when he gets hurt, no unemployment insurance when he's idle, no minimum-wage-and-hour law to set a floor under his earnings, no National Labor Relations Board protection for his right to form a union and bargain with the boss.

Barred from the gains won long ago by other Americans, and forced to compete with a growing surplus of workers, the seasonal farm laborer's plight has sunk so low over the years that it has been described as a "permanent disaster." Last fall, work in the fields (and earnings) gave out three months earlier than usual because of a new, earlier-blooming cotton and more mechanical cotton pickers, and because state officials recruited some 40,000 factory workers to swell the surplus in the fields.

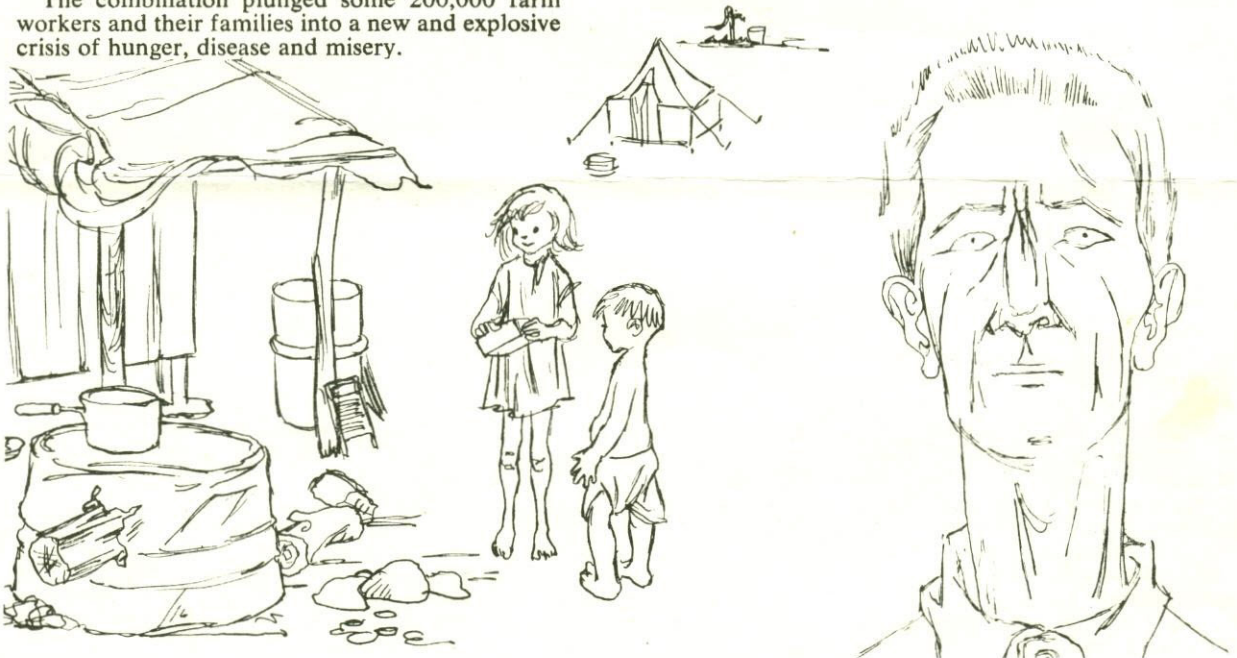
The combination plunged some 200,000 farm workers and their families into a new and explosive crisis of hunger, disease and misery.

From the classrooms of the Mendota elementary school this writer went to the labor camps near by—the "homes" of many of the pupils.

In such labor camps, provided by the large farm operators and by labor contractors, about 25 per cent of the field laborers in the San Joaquin Valley live. The remaining 75 per cent live in shantytowns that ring the cities, or in clusters of tents, lean-tos and jacked-up trailers along ditchbanks or beside the roads. Many, during the harvest, sleep in their cars, or in the open under bridges, or under groves of eucalyptus trees.

In theory, the farm worker lives in labor camps only during the harvests and then moves on. But late in January many camps were half full and some were three-quarters full. Stranded without money, without food, without jobs—and with no place to go—the "migrants" had stayed on, the unwanted guests of the employers who provided the free shelter and of the county which provided belated relief or no relief at all.

Nurseries are another luxury the camps don't provide. Afraid to leave their children in camps bordered by unfenced ditches and open, scum-topped cesspools, some mothers take their children to the fields, where toddlers follow them down the rows of cotton or are locked for hours in parked cars. "Occasionally," the Fresno Bee reported recently, "a child is found tied to a post or stake out in the open under the hot sun."



Miles from the large shopping centers, the camp dweller buys his necessities at the camp store or at the nearest crossroads hamlet where, during harvest time when money is plentiful, he is frequently charged boom-town prices.

"Seems as if those store fellows kind of guess right to the penny what you have in your pockets," one farm worker said. "It can be \$8 or \$15. That's what your groceries will cost you."

This is, of course, an exaggeration. But I did find in Huron—a one-street hamlet of stores and saloons that serves some 20,000 farm workers in near-by camps—that frankfurters sold at 25 cents. In Fresno, the same size hot dog cost 10 cents. A bowl of chili costs 30 cents in Huron, only 20 cents in Fresno.

I checked further with farm laborers, social workers and storekeepers. The cut of bacon that had cost 70 cents during harvest time had come down to 35 cents in January. But for the loaf of bread that cost the city dweller 21 cents, the "migrant" still paid 23 cents. Eggs, 58 cents a dozen in January, had cost 80 cents when the field hands were in the money.

Lonely and squalid huddles of bare boards and canvas in the midst of vast stretches of flat cotton land, the labor camps lack even such primitive amenities of community life as police and health protection.

The grower or labor contractor who builds a camp usually needs no permit from the county. He doesn't even have to clear with officials the purity of the drinking water or where he puts the privies. County officials say they don't hear of the existence of some camps until conditions become so insufferable that complaints are lodged.



The Roosevelt Administration did build 20 farm-labor communities in the thirties to take the farm workers off the ditchbanks and give them health and medical services other Americans enjoy. But these services have since been killed.

Ranging from permanent tin units to adobe cottages and three-room apartments with inside plumbing, the housing—under government operation—provided clinics and doctors, nurseries for working mothers, de-lousing and sanitary stations and community-wide recreation. Prodded by farm operators the Eightieth Congress turned the camps over to private operation. Now the clinics, doctors, nurseries and community recreation programs have gone. The farm-worker communities have become camps. But the neat shelters remain. The reason given for taking the government out of farm-labor housing was economy. An American Federation of Labor official commented:

"I didn't see the Eightieth Congress economizing on the millions of dollars paid in price-support subsidies to some of these 1,000-acre farmers."

Left out of many things other Americans take for granted, the farm worker is also left out of medical care. His meager earnings, insufficient even to buy food and shelter, can't buy regular private medical care, and local taxpayers, understandably, are reluctant to foot medical bills for what they regard, often mistakenly, as a floating population.

While health assistance plans incubate, medicine for most farm workers continues on a strictly cash-and-carry basis.

During the harvest when there is cash, mothers take their ailing children to the nearest private doctor, usually some miles away, where they plunk down \$5 for penicillin shots just as their regularly employed and better-off city neighbors do. During the winter when cash runs out, medical care is hard to get.

Care for expectant mothers?

Joyce P—, eighteen-year-old wife of a twenty-one-year-old farm worker near Hanford, expects her first baby this month.

A gentle, golden-haired girl, the young expectant mother went to the Kings County General Hospital to ask for the prenatal examination and advice which she could not afford to buy. Hospital aides sent her to the county welfare office.

"The welfare director told me, 'You're not a Californian.'"

"Not a Californian!" Joyce exclaimed. "Why, my parents brought me here 12 years ago when I was six."

Even the intercession of a minister who had befriended Joyce and her jobless husband didn't help. The young expectant mother got no medical examination, no prenatal care.

When her time comes, the young wife will be rushed to Kings County Hospital where, as an "emergency case," she will have to be admitted. But if complications have arisen due to lack of prenatal care, that will be Joyce's hard luck.

For the farm worker's inability to buy the health and medical care he needs, other Californians who contract his diseases pay a price which no one has yet been able to reckon up.

The La Follette Committee, after a long and painstaking investigation, reported in 1942 that its own and others' probings "disclosed, with monotonous regularity, a shocking record of human misery for the farm worker and his family."

Others, equally appalled, have called the farm-worker problem a social and economic cancer. This year the cancer had grown to such malignant proportions that influential Californians took the first important steps to do something about it.

A county grand jury at Fresno looked into the way the farm workers live. Local newspapers courageously described the despair in their midst. Governor Earl Warren, alarmed by the deaths of farm workers' babies, sent health officers and nutritionists into the cotton country. And, the Fresno Bee reported "grass-roots pressure from all sections of the valley" to find a solution.

What could be done?

For years, well-intentioned would-be solvers of the farm-labor problem have limited their solutions chiefly to demands for public assistance of one sort or another. One large farm operator, as has already been noted, wants the state to provide adequate housing.

Another farmer, Lionel Steinberg of Fresno, who is also president of the California Federation of Young Democrats, has urged a program based chiefly on state and federal aid. All over California, I heard this refrain:

"The problem's so big that only the federal government, the state and the counties working together can solve it."

From this type of public-assistance solution or solution-by-government, there has been at least one vigorous dissenter, the La Follette Senate Investigating Committee, whose study of the farm worker is the most complete to date.

"Too often, it has been the tendency to confine suggested measures of solution to raids on the taxpayers' purse," the La Follette Committee reported to the Senate in 1942.

While food, medical and housing assistance will be necessary as long as the farm worker continues in his tragic economic plight, such help is only a palliative, the La Follette Committee said. The ailment requires more thoroughgoing treatment. The real cure lies in making the farm worker self-supporting like other Americans, the Senate probers indicated.

How?

Extend "industrial democracy" to the farm worker, answered the La Follette Committee. The farm worker although hired at hourly wage rates or piecework has no voice to talk up to his boss or to the community or state in which he works.

Ernest Galarza, a Ph.D. from Columbia University who resigned as adviser to the Pan American Union to become educational director of the California Farm Labor Union, A.F. of L., put it this way:

"The steel or automobile worker isn't a charity burden to his county year after year like the farm worker." He has a union and a written understanding with the boss. You don't see the steelworker fighting for his job every morning against a horde of hungry competitors clamoring at the factory gates—or being left out of unemployment compensation, Social Security, workmen's compensation—everything."

Important church groups advocate collective bargaining for farm workers, among them the Catholic Rural Life Conference and the Home Missions Council representing twenty-three Protestant denominations which have long worked among farm laborers.

"We feel the seasonal farm worker needs union organization to give him the voice and protection which, as an individual he can't give himself," said Monsignor Luigi G. Liguitti, the executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

Yet it was not until recent years that conditions developed that would permit the farm worker to organize effectively.

To understand why, it is necessary to take a quick look at the kind of farming in which the farm worker seeks his living.

Half of California's farms are the traditional small farmsteads where a farmer gets by with his own and his family's labor. But the bulk of the \$2,000,000,000 of vegetables, fruits and cotton which make California one of the nation's leading agricultural states is produced in assembly-line agriculture, which was born in California but is now spreading all over America.

In the San Joaquin Valley are farms so vast foremen use airplanes to make inspection rounds. One grower operates more than 80,000 acres of cotton, barley, wheat—a big business in which he has invested some \$7,000,000 and from which last year he is reported to have netted, before taxes, nearly \$3,000,000. This sort of bigness is not unique. On the west side of the dry San Joaquin Valley, where wells must be sunk as much as 800 feet and cost \$30,000 apiece, farms must be at least 3,000 acres to be profitable.

On farms like these—and in the great vegetable- and fruit-growing operations throughout the state—the traditional hired hand who was once maintained the year around on a small farm is replaced by gangs of laborers. They are called in as needed at hourly wages or piece rates to do specialized jobs: chop cotton or pick it, prune grapes, pick peaches, lettuce, and harvest potatoes. When the job is done—it may take several days or weeks—the laborers are laid off. The farm hand, once rooted in the land as a way of life, has become a labor cost as in a factory, a casual laborer who goes from employer to employer, from potatoes, to cotton, to fruit, from county to county, from valley to valley.

The farm hand has become a factory hand, but with an important difference. He has no job security. And to make matters worse, the labor pool is always overflowing.

First, there are the job-hungry and land-hungry Americans who have been pouring into California for years. Since 1940, California's population has increased 53 per cent. Then there are the recruiting efforts of the farm operators and labor contractors who have chronically feared a shortage of field labor to harvest perishable crops.

Mexican nationals no longer are imported into the San Joaquin Valley. But under a State Department agreement with Mexico, they are still brought into the Imperial Valley where, so Americans charge, they undercut and displace American citizens. The latter are forced to move north into the San Joaquin where they intensify the scramble for jobs there. An American Federation of Labor official showed this writer a contract between a group of Imperial Valley growers and a Mexican laborer. It called for 50 cents less per 100 pounds of cotton picked than was being paid in the San Joaquin.

Lately, state employment officials have tried to discourage farm operators and labor contractors from recruiting workers from out of state. Yet as late as last spring, some large farm operators tried to bring in additional labor from Puerto Rico, a move that was blocked when Governor Warren objected. But the state's Employment Department officials went to San Francisco, Oakland and Los Angeles and brought some 40,000 idle factory workers into the fields and so heightened this winter's crisis.

It is this endless flooding of California's farm-labor markets that prevents the solution of the farm-labor problem, the La Follette Committee and labor leaders agreed, because it threatens the existence of the stable resident farm worker who already provides the nucleus of a permanent and self-supporting labor force.



Phil Tarrezas, a war veteran who lives with his wife and three young children in a neat stucco cottage at Delano, is such a resident farm worker. He is proud of the house he built with his own hands and of the taxes he pays. But a cloud hangs over ex-G.I. Tarrezas. Since December, when cotton picking gave out, he has been able to get only infrequent odd jobs. The week before I saw him, he had harvested potatoes for one day. But because there were so many others fighting for the work, the labor contractor limited Tarrezas to only one "stub," a sack of 53 pounds. His wage for the day was 12 cents.

By late January, Tarrezas had not paid his children's milk bill for two months. Credit at the grocery store had been cut out when the bill topped \$300. But the thing that most worried him was that he might lose his home. To buy building materials, he had borrowed \$1,400 from a finance company. The interest rate was 12 per cent. (Tarrezas couldn't get a G.I. loan, because he lives in an unimproved section.) If Tarrezas loses his home, it's back to the road for him.

With resident workers like Tarrezas, labor organizers hope to build the farm workers' union which they and the La Follette Committee say will stabilize farm employment.

Labor leader Galarza explained it this way:

"The migrant had to evolve into a resident worker, sink roots and stay put before he could organize himself into a union with staying power. More than half of the seasonal farm workers have pulled themselves into a precarious resident class. Now, they can organize like other wage earners."

The Farm Labor Union, a national union affiliated with the A.F. of L., can show fewer than 2,000 dues-paying members in California as yet—a mere handful of the 500,000 who work in the fields in the peak month of the year, September. But the union halls that now are springing up in the San Joaquin Valley, the revival-pitch organizing drive now going on and the growing respect with which local officials treat union spokesmen show that times have changed since the thirties when vigilantes fought union organizers.

Farm operators are not happy about the coming of the union. They no longer form associations for the sole purpose of blocking unions—as the La Follette Committee said they once did.

Most operators, however, are still convinced that farming and unionism don't mix.

When a manufacturer refuses to deal with a union, the union can ask the National Labor Relations Board to cite him for unfair labor practices under the Taft-Hartley Act. But the farm worker is specifically barred from this legislation. He can't bring legal pressure on nonunion employers and must go it alone the way the unions did before the coming of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act in 1935.

The farm worker has other organization problems. When he strikes he must contend, in some California counties, with local antipicketing ordinances, a hang-over from the thirties.

Last fall, when farm operators tried to reduce the cotton-picking rate from \$3 per 100 pounds to \$2.50, the fledgling Farm Labor Union spearheaded a strike which it claims kept some 20,000 laborers out of the fields until the \$3 rate was restored.

This winter, union spokesmen banged on county supervisors' desks, demanding help for farm workers. One county, heeding union demands, instituted a work-relief program and ordered more relief food.

The union's main objective, labor leaders said, is to stop the flooding of California's valleys with surplus job seekers. This the union hopes to do, when and if it achieves sufficient strength, by negotiating preferential working rights for resident workers. Some union men even talk of supplying farm workers through hiring halls patterned after those of the longshoremen.

They say this will stabilize working conditions and help make the farm worker self-supporting.

The union, if it gets sufficient political muscle, could be expected to fight, too, for compulsory unemployment compensation and other social protection. But these may come even without union agitation. Many farm operators, long opposed to compulsory unemployment insurance, are now coming out for it or at least are not opposing it. Governor Warren, who has tried for years to win compulsory unemployment compensation for farm laborers, may succeed when he next tries again.

A solution that will make the farm worker self-supporting cannot be long deferred.

Cotton acreage is going to be cut one third in California this fall, and there will be more mechanical cotton pickers to compete with the human hands for the smaller pickings. The story is the same elsewhere. Because cotton production is going to be cut in the South, and because more machines will be used, thousands of sharecroppers and dayworkers were told in February there'd be no work for them this year.

The farm laborer, it turns out, isn't only a California problem. As machines grow on the land and America's farms grow bigger, the little 40-acre farmer, the tenant farmer, the sharecropper, the hired hand—men who had lived on the land as a way of life—become displaced everywhere. They must live, not as farmers, but as laborers employed by the hour as in a factory.

The next few years will show whether these men and their families will continue to be displaced persons—with all the misery this means—or whether they can be fitted into the American scene with all the privileges and standards that other Americans enjoy.

THE END

