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No Migrant Problem Here

By ANDRÉ FONTAINE

HOOPESTON, ILL., is a pleasant little city that sits in an oasis of trees amidst the flat, rich, black fields of America's corn belt, about 100 miles south of Chicago and seven or eight from the Indiana line. The impression you get is that it's clean and healthy, with white-painted lamp posts along its broad Main Street and cars angle-parked in the business district. North and south of Main Street the brick-paved residential streets are cool under huge elms. Clipped lawns stretch back to neat white houses. Yet five years ago Hoopeston was a sick town.

It was sick with a social ailment that festers today in thousands of similar towns which make their living from food production and temporarily harbor at harvest time America's 2,500,000 migrant farm workers. In most of these towns migrants are jammed into outlying areas that can be smelled a quarter of a mile away. Since the towns stretch from Maine to California, the collective odor was so strong that President Truman ordered a commission to study the problem and make recommendations for federal action.

Five years ago Hoopeston had such areas; in one camp migrants lived in tents pitched in churned-

ITINERANT workers may be a headache to some places—but not Hoopeston, Ill.

up muck. Sanitation and cleanliness were virtually impossible. Children were undernourished and, since they weren't allowed in the public schools, uneducated.

The migrants were considered third-class citizens. They were segregated in the balcony of the local movie, were not allowed in the parks or swimming pools and in the stores many of the merchants wouldn't wait on them. One woman summed up the town's attitude when she saw a group of them on the street and squealed to a friend, "Ooh, those Mexicans! I'm going to keep my doors locked."

Today, Hoopeston has cured its social sore. Edith Lowry, executive secretary of the division of home missions of the National Council of Churches, who knows as much about migrants as anyone in America, says that Hoopeston has done the best job of any town in the country.

"It no longer has a migrant problem," she said, "because it grasped its migrant opportunity."

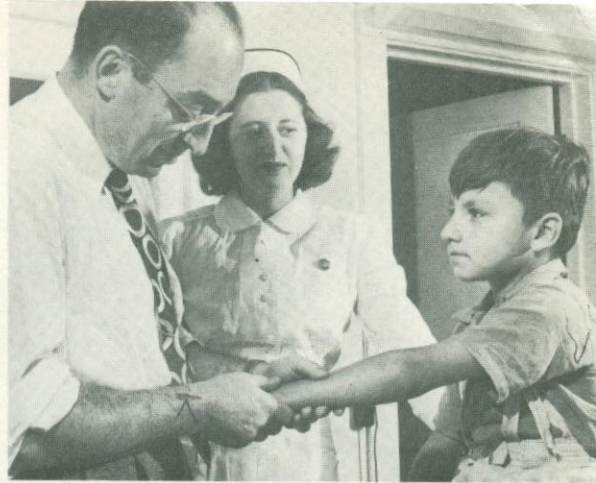
The change started three years ago with a meeting in the Chamber of Commerce rooms called by Helen Meserve, a dark-haired, brilliant girl of 25 who had been sent into the migrant camps by the home missions division. She invited representatives from each of the town's social and professional groups—two ministers, two doctors, two each from the senior and junior women's clubs, two from the Chamber of Commerce and one from each of the two canning companies.

One basic fact became clear: without the migrants Hoopeston could not survive. The town makes its living from the canning companies, their huge farms and affiliated industries. Mike Fish, personnel director of the Hoopeston plant of Stokely Foods Company, best described it when he said:

"Most people think of these migrants as a temporary necessity. But they're not—they're going to be with us from now on. Why? Because you can't get local labor to



Mike Fish realized the need for migrant help was great



The doctors, headed by Dr. Fleisser, gave physicals

go out into the corn and asparagus fields and bring in the crops. Every year before we recruit any migrants down in the Rio Grande Valley, we run ads in the paper asking for local workers. We get maybe four or five applicants. We need 400 or 500."

Since the migrants were doing so much for Hoopston, it was agreed, it was up to the town to give them the best it had—equal citizenship. Thus the Hoopston Migrant Council—with representatives from the churches, medicine, business, the canneries and the women's organizations—came into existence.

The basic trouble was that the Hoopston people and the migrants were so different. The migrants were American citizens recently come from Mexico. Few spoke English. In winter they lived primitively in the Rio Grande Valley—sometimes two or three families in a single-room shack. They knew virtually nothing about modern sanitation, medicine, or about the proper feeding of children. For them it was a constant, desperate struggle to keep families housed, clothed and fed.

Hoopston, on the other hand, is a little inland city, "populated," said Mrs. Clayton Jones of the Council of Church Women, "mostly by children of people who've always lived in this particular spot. They are not used to seeing dark-skinned people and to hearing a foreign language spoken on their streets." It's not a wealthy town, but it is well-to-do, and its 7,000 citizens are a comfortable, hard-working, church-going people.

What the council had to do was to cut down the differences between the two. They had to teach the migrants American ways of hygiene, sanitation and health, improve their English and ideas of democracy. In turn the townfolk had to be taught to look beyond the darker skins, the difference in language, the alien ways.

"The first thing we had to do with the migrants," said R. L. Cragg, a quiet, slight, businessman who was then secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, "was to clean 'em up so when they came to town the people wouldn't be prejudiced against them just because their clothes were dirty."

The doctors, headed by Werner Fleisser, a young man educated in Germany, gave physical exams. Nurses, aided by Mrs. Lewis Hott, an ex-Army nurse, and other Hoopston mothers, gave the kids baths and organized classes in baby care for the mothers. After awhile migrant babies began getting milk instead of coffee in their nursing bottles.

Other women gave courses in nutrition, English and hygiene. Migrant mothers learned quickly. "All you had to do," said Mrs. Jones, "was to show them a better way, say, to wash clothes than over a board and they'd grab it. They were eager to learn; the trouble was they just didn't know our ways of doing things."

"In the past two years," added Dr. Fleisser, "there hasn't been a single baby born in camp—all the women go to the hospital, and they used to have babies without even a midwife. Apparently they like it, too, because you never have a woman leave here pregnant so she'll have her baby in Texas."

The children learned quickly,

too, and before very long, said Cragg, "you began to see boys carrying combs in their pockets. Just before they got into town they'd take 'em out and give their hair a good combing."

When council members recruited volunteers they had an ulterior motive: They wanted to get as many townspeople as possible into contact with the migrants—figuring that if the local people got to know the migrants they would like and respect them. Volunteers run the nursery at the Illinois Canning Company camp, the arts and crafts classes for older boys and girls and the movies, as well as the hygiene and English classes. The men have helped out with the ball teams. Lou Ratzesberger, president of Illinois Canning, has conducted Sunday services in the camp and his daughter, Marise, helps with the girls' craft classes.

The motive began to pay off. The migrants are a gay, warm, affectionate and proud people; they promptly endeared themselves to everyone who got to know them. One reason is that they like to pay their own way. When their children's heads are inspected they pay a nickel each for the service. They pay admission to camp movies and nominal prices for the used clothing that the volunteers collect and display at Saturday afternoon "Thrift Sales."

The job of getting business support fell to R. L. Cragg



Eliminating segregation is Leland Bergstrom's mission



Mrs. Jones wants to see our democratic principles work





The migrants soon learned to clean up before going into town



The church plays an important part in the Hoopeston program

As more townspeople came to know the migrants, the real clincher in the council campaign—word-of-mouth advertising—began to take effect. Women told neighbors about the migrants over supermarket baskets and their husbands over dinner tables. The husbands swapped stories at the mid-afternoon coffee sessions.

"My wife tells me these people keep a lot cleaner than some of our own—and it's harder for 'em, too, because they don't have any of the conveniences," said one.

Cragg, a charter member of the group, heard this sort of talk and kept it going. He had the job of siphoning contributions for the council program out of the businessmen and he did it by selling the donor-to-be on the migrants. He was helped by a slogan tossed off one night by Helen Meserve: "Learn 50 words of Spanish and increase your business 150 per cent."

"I don't think the businessmen actually learned much Spanish," he said recently, "but what that idea did was to change their whole attitude toward the Latin Americans. Instead of looking on them as a necessary evil they began to see them as customers and you know—the customer is always right." George Cohen, owner of a clothing store, caught on fast; he hired a Latin American girl to wait on migrant customers.

The new attitude paid off. W. C. Calvin, manager of the A & P Supermarket, says migrant business pushes his sales above sister stores that usually beat him—and does it in the summer when grocery business ordinarily slumps.

There are no accurate figures on just how much the migrants do spend in town, but an average weekly payroll amounts to about \$25,000—and the canning companies estimate they spend about 75 per cent of it in Hoopeston.

All this money doesn't go to the food and clothing stores, either.

"You should see the things they

take back to Texas with them," Cragg said.

THE keynote of the campaign to get Hoopeston to accept the migrants was—move slowly and don't put pressure on anybody. And while the long process of education was going on, they had to prevent any major outbreak of prejudice. Mike Fish of Stokely and Leland Bergstrom, personnel manager at Illinois, were the leaders in this phase.

One day a teen-age migrant youth with very light skin came up to Fish with a grin. "I went to the movies last night, Mike," he said, "and instead of going to the balcony I sneaked in downstairs. Got away with it, too."

Fish's eyes narrowed. "If I'd been there you wouldn't have," he said flatly.

The youth's grin faded. "Hell, Mike, I thought you were our friend."

"I am your friend—and that's why. I'm not interested in one or two of you guys getting away with sitting downstairs. I'm shooting for the day when any one of you people can go in and the most bigoted old maid in town can come in and sit next to you and think nothing of it. That takes time and a lot of people are working on it and I won't have any of you young punks jeopardizing it. From now on when you go to the movies, you sit in the balcony!"

Mike's theory proved out; today there is no segregation in the theater, yet nobody had protested to the manager and nobody can name the exact date when it ended. Segregation hasn't completely died out yet at the swimming pool and in Hoopeston's 30-acre McFerrin Park, but it's passing.

Leland Bergstrom is working on that angle. Each year Illinois Canning throws a big employe picnic there and at first they didn't invite the migrants, but in May, 1950, it

seemed time to try it. The foremen, all Latin Americans, were skeptical—thought there might be trouble, especially when the dancing started. Bergstrom explained:

"I don't think there will be. You see what we're trying to do is to get as many townspeople as possible to know you folks. We figure that if they know you they can't be prejudiced against you. And this seems like a good chance for large numbers of them to see you in the park."

THE picnic was held and there was no trouble. Only about half the migrant families came, but this year many more did. Bergstrom hopes that as a result of this it won't be long before the park will be open to them completely.

Probably the chief reason Fish and Bergstrom have succeeded in convincing the migrants that patience and self-restraint are a necessary part of living in a democracy is that they and other council members also have accorded them the privileges of democratic life. Mrs. Jones spoke for the whole council when she said:

"I have no glorified ideas about the migrants. My interest is to help prove to them that our general principles work—that they're what makes America."

Foremost among these is the self-respect a man gets when he knows that other people respect him. Bergstrom and Fish have shown their respect in different ways. Fish has been tough.

But there isn't a day that he isn't in the camp talking to the people, advising and helping them. If they get sick, he takes them to the doctor. Once, when he found a girl neglecting her baby, he blistered her ears, took the baby away, mixed its formula and fed it himself.

But most migrants know he's their champion because they've seen the results of his battles to

improve living conditions. The Rev. Ellis Marshburn, Midwest regional director for the division of home missions, says the Stokely camp is one of the finest in the country. The sanitation is excellent, showers are available, with hot water night and day and there are adequate laundry facilities.

Some migrants still live in a big, quonset-shaped warehouse with wire-enclosed cubicles for each family, but cement flooring has replaced the original dirt. A move is under way to install movable plywood partitions. Fish has had built large mess halls where each family has a stove, pantry locker, compartment in an oversize refrigerator, dining table and benches, all paid for by the Stokely Company.

Still he isn't satisfied. "What is adequate housing?" he asks. "Hell, I want the Stevens Hotel for my people. But you have to move slowly."

The home missions staff—this year headed by David Sheldon, a young Chicago theological student, and comprising also two girls, Grace Adolphsen and Jolee Fritz—has taken the lead in teaching the migrants the self-government side of democracy. Especially good progress has been made with the youngsters.

Recently Sheldon had to leave his group of a dozen ten-year-old boys alone in the basement of the Christian Church. Before he left he put the duly elected "president" and the "policeman" in charge.

He walked in an hour and a half later to find the room immaculate and most of the boys sitting quietly in a semicircle of chairs facing front.

Over on one side four chairs were placed with their backs to the rest; this was the jail and in it were four small convicts.

The "president" explained soberly that these boys had been bad—and had papers to prove it. On an old envelope he had written, "too bad," and underneath the names—"Alberto, Pedro, etc."

The self-respect that this sort of

thing has built is visible in many ways.

One of them is in the eagerness with which covets of small Latin American boys scurry around town earning a few nickels by shining shoes.

Frank Mills, publisher of the *Hoopeston Chronicle-Herald*, in his daily column duly records incidents which help build the town's respect for the migrants. When a little migrant girl has a birthday party it appears in the personals column and last year when two Latin American couples were married in St. Anthony's Church, the story, with pictures, had the lead position on the society page.

The climax of the council's campaign for the migrants came last year at a meeting in the high school. A federal law had been passed prohibiting the employment of children during the school year and the Hoopeston Board of Education had made plans to start the migrant children in school on Monday, May 1. (The families arrive in late April.)

The Saturday night before, a spokesman for a group of parents on the west side of town called Superintendent of Schools Jared Lyon to say that plenty of people were mad over the idea and wanted a hearing. The Board scheduled a meeting for Sunday afternoon and Lyon spent the morning phoning council members, doctors, lawyers, preachers and cannery officials, telling them what was up. About 150 persons attended and all the gripes that had ever been voiced against the migrants were aired again. But the Board was ready for them.

One man got up and said he'd heard 90 per cent of the migrants were syphilitic. Dr. Fleisser arose, said he'd been examining migrants for three years and there was no more venereal disease among them than among Hoopeston natives.

"It was important to have the experts there," Lyon said later. "If I'd given that man the same answer he wouldn't have believed me. But when the doctor said it, he did."

That's the way it went. "We answered all their questions fully," Lyon said, "and they exhausted themselves against our answers." Finally one mother said she thought the children didn't want the migrants in school.

Miss Imo Cheney, principal of Lincoln School, answered her: The children, she said, were enthusiastically looking forward to the newcomers. "Here," she added, "is an invaluable chance to teach our children the intercultural friendship that otherwise we could only talk about."

When she sat down Buzz Davis, who also lives on the west side, stood up. "I've known Miss Cheney for 20 years," he said. "If having these children in our schools is good enough for her, it's good enough for me."

That ended the opposition. The next day some 50 migrant children entered school and promptly hung up a record that amazed their teachers and made most of the natives of Hoopeston proud.

The majority of Hoopestonites not only accept the migrants now, they're proud to have them and know that the Latin Americans enrich their town's life, both financially and culturally.

Hoopeston kids are beginning to learn Spanish on the playgrounds; as they discover the language and customs of another culture, the narrow bounds of their provincialism shatter and they begin to understand that the world is a broad place and people are much the same everywhere. The Latin American children are benefiting, too. Formerly, said Helen Meserve, they were under such social and financial pressure that all their thoughts and efforts were concentrated on taking care of Number One. But one day a little girl, Francesca, got hurt. The next day, when they were riding in a jeep to the park, one of the girls said, "Let's all pray for Francesca."

"For the first time," said Miss Meserve, "the pressure was off enough so that they were able to think of someone else."

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