

A Helping Hand For Farm Hands

This Iowa community needs its migrant workers, and it is trying to make things better for them

MUSCATINE, IOWA

THE ROAD THEY TRAVEL is a long, hard one, from Texas up to Iowa and then down to Florida. It's especially long because these people carry an exceedingly heavy burden, composed of ignorance, superstition, fear, and grinding, self-perpetuating poverty.

They travel superhighways, and the backroads of the

country, these migrants, following the crops in their ancient, sputtering cars or in the back of stake trucks.

They're the modern counterparts of the nomads who have appeared throughout history, suffering persecution in one culture, and in another laying waste whole countries. In the United States, they're sometimes dis-

Harvesting of tomatoes has not yet been mechanized, but requires a discerning eye and nimble fingers as demonstrated by migrant worker.





The principal beneficiaries of the Muscatine Migrant Committee are children, who are given hot meals and introduced to supervised play.

trusted and feared. And this fear can take some very tangible forms; it's not at all uncommon for their caravans to be "escorted" by police cars to be sure they only pass through a town. Yet these same people are essential to the harvesting of valuable crops which cannot be picked by machines.

Recognizing their importance to the agriculture of the area, this Iowa community is learning to understand Spanish-speaking migratory workers and helping them adjust to contemporary American society.

The Muscatine Migrant Committee, founded with the help of the Iowa Council of Churches, has conducted for the past nine years an organized program of assistance to migrants. The program is built on a sturdy, nondenominational foundation of religion. In fact, the leaders of the Muscatine program feel so strongly that religion must be a part of their activities that they refused to apply for a federal grant for the operation of the migrant center because it would have barred religious activities from the center.

The Muscatine committee employs a summertime staff of 30 people to work with the migrants. The group includes professionals from local government agencies who coordinate their work with the program. Another 23 volunteers devote varying amounts of their time instructing migrants in the elements of hygiene, citizenship, health and even reading.

Migrants have been coming to the four counties that surround Muscatine for 20 years, picking the tomatoes, cucumbers and other vegetables that ripen all summer long in the area. Last summer 1,200 migrants—158 families—mostly Spanish-speaking Americans from southern Texas, came to work. About the same number will report this year.

The root of the problems of migrants can in most cases be traced to their nomadic existence. Spending three weeks in one spot, a month in another, they can afford neither the time nor the wages lost when a child is enrolled in school. Their poor health can be traced to similar sources. Medical records get lost; it's sometimes difficult to find a doctor in a strange town if you speak only Spanish; and food is more immediately important than getting a child immunized or buying medicine.

The nomadic existence also leaves little opportunity for a man to learn a trade. So the circle is closed.

Yet even with this rootless life, and with the father not having to exhibit in the fields any more sophisticated skills than his 14-year-old son, the family unit is strong, with the father its head. The Muscatine program is built on this fact of strong family ties. One of its principal features is the migrant center, located in a vacant business building in town, where whole families can come for recreation, counseling or educational help.

Each Saturday night the center holds a dance where a combo, *Los Migrants*, plays a combination of Mexican and American numbers. The youngsters, adhering to Mexican customs, are almost courtly in their merry-making. Girls, under the watchful eyes of duennas, sit in a row on one side of the room, while the boys gather on the other side, and so they stay between dances.

Counseling for adults and teenagers is an important feature of the center. Ministers, sociologists, government experts, teachers, and just plain citizens anxious to help are available for advice. Movies are shown to train families in the elements of hygiene and health.

Perhaps one of the most important features of the center is the thrift shop, where the migrants can buy good, clean, used clothing donated by the local churches.

The ladies of the area's many churches help at a day-care center for migrant children, preparing hot breakfast and lunch, and midmorning and midafternoon milk breaks. The school provides supervised play for children from two to five years of age, bringing many of them for the first time in from the fields and teaching them some of the social skills necessary to be a part of a group. For older youngsters, remedial school work

is provided in reading, arithmetic and social studies. The surprising thing is how often the youngsters—even with the liability of only sporadic school attendance—are capable of keeping up with their peers who live in town.

Two public health nurses and a sanitarian employed by the state work closely with the Migrant Committee. They make it their business to visit each of the 53 farmers who employ migrants to harvest their crops, to inspect the camp-sites which they provide. Since there is no Iowa law governing migrant housing and sanitary standards, farmers cannot be compelled to cooperate. Yet only one farmer refused to work with the sanitarian and nurses.

But there are frustrations. Perhaps the greatest of all is the terrible apathy of some of the migrants, which might well be numbered among the major afflictions of the very poor. The nurses, for example, knowing the fantastically high incidence of tuberculosis among migrants, arranged to have 136 persons tested. A terrifying 62 showed positive reactions, but of that number, the nurses could persuade only 22 to cooperate in further tests. The other 40 remained untreated.

Yet gains are being made. After all, 22 migrants did get the medical attention they needed, and some of the sanitarian's suggestions were followed. The adult education program wasn't as popular as the director of the center had hoped — not too many people are eager to study after a full day bent over in the fields. But it did introduce some casual visitors to the center to the idea that adults can continue their education and quite a few were helped with their reading skills.

But the children were probably the greatest beneficiaries of the program. Said Mrs. Frank Eakin, wife of the manufacturing superintendent of Monsanto's big nitrogen products plant outside town: "When a child tells you at the end of school term that he's sorry it's all over — and we had several kids tell us just that — then you can be sure you've done some good. One little girl told me that she'd never been treated so well — comments like that made my summer in the center one of the most rewarding of my life."

Monsanto's stake in the program is that of an interested industrial member of the community. In addition to the ammonia plant, there is a nearby Monsanto Agricultural Center, which sells fertilizer and pesticides in the same trading area as Muscatine.

Like Monsanto, the other industries in town, while not participating directly in the program, are interested observers. And one of the most important things that they have all observed is that there is a readiness to accept migrants reflected in the absence of tension between migrant boys and town boys.

The community, in a word, has found that migrants are not to be feared or mistrusted, and that they can be helped toward a better life. And that in itself makes the whole program worthwhile.



In any language word games spell fun.



A nurse, right, makes one of her regular calls.



Teenagers enjoy chaperoned dance.