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MIGRANT FARM LABOR

by

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DISTRESS among migrant farm laborers in the West has drawn renewed attention to a problem which caused national concern during the 1930s: how to assure enough seasonal labor to produce needed food supplies without subjecting the workers to the worst hardships of irregular employment and a migratory existence.

Maricopa County, Ariz., juvenile authorities reported in March that 100 children in a farm labor camp had been found suffering from "first degree starvation or malnutrition,"¹ and the National Farm Labor Union (A. F. L.) told President Truman that at least 100,000 children of unemployed farm workers in the nation as a whole were in a similar plight. In the same month California authorities estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 families in the San Joaquin Valley had been unable to tide themselves over between cotton picking and commencement of work on spring crops.²

Such reports offer evidence that the "Joats" whose plight stirred the public conscience during the depression are again becoming a serious problem. With the high employment of World War II, thousands of former migratory laborers found jobs in industry, and farm workers were imported from Mexico and the British West Indies. Now, with inadequate opportunities for employment in industry, the number of native migrants seeking farm work has increased.

Migration in search of land or work on the land has gone on throughout the country's history, but the need for seasonal labor considerably in excess of the local supply was felt only when staple crops began to be raised on large acre-

¹ A committee of the Arizona Senate said, Mar. 18, that accounts of this incident were exaggerated, that "adverse and to a great extent untrue publicity which has circulated throughout many parts of the United States has been injurious to the welfare of Arizona."

² Deaths of 28 infants in the San Joaquin Valley, mostly children in Mexican cotton-picker families, were reported, Jan. 4, 1950, by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. State health authorities attributed the deaths to the ignorance of parents and restrictions on county health services; other observers laid at least 10 of the deaths to malnutrition. Lester Veltz, "The Americans Nobody Wants," *Collier's Magazine*, Apr. 1, 1950, p. 1. The *Fresno Bee* warned that the condition of California's migratory workers might "become a national scandal."

ages and specialty crops like vegetables, fruits, and nuts were grown on a commercial scale. By 1915 it was estimated that 150,000 transient workers were employed in California alone, many of them in fruit picking, while the American and Canadian grain harvests required about 250,000 transients.

Up to about 1930, however, there was little recognition of a "migrant problem." A congressional committee investigating interstate migration during the depression (Tolan Committee) attributed the lack of public concern to the fact that the dominant factor in migration theretofore had been the "pull of opportunity." With the prolonged drought of the 1930s and the mechanization of wheat and cotton farming, the "push of poverty" became the dominant factor. "Blown out" or "tractored out" residents of the Great Plains poured westward in search of work, greatly outnumbering available jobs and overtaking community facilities.³ Western states, which had previously welcomed new citizens, sought to protect themselves by turning back migrants who were without cash resources. California enacted a law to penalize any person or group assisting persons who might become public charges to enter the state. This practice was declared a violation of the Constitution in 1941 when the Supreme Court said its continuance "would prevent a citizen, because he was poor, from seeking horizons in other states [and] might thus withhold from large segments of our people that mobility which is basic to any guarantee of freedom of opportunity."⁴

TRENDS IN TRANSIENT LABOR SUPPLY AND DEMAND

For American agriculture as a whole, most seasonal labor requirements can be met by members of farm families with the aid of local workers hired for short periods. However, relatively large-scale specialized production requires at peak seasons many more laborers than can be recruited nearby. An industrialized farm or orchard may need 10 to 15 times as many workers in the busy season as at the slack of operations. The large-scale enterprise must rely heavily on labor which comes from outside. Such migratory labor is needed to cultivate and harvest a high proportion of the

³ See "Reconstruction in the Dust Bowl," *E. R. R.*, Vol. II 1937, pp. 89-108. New dust storms have recently been reported from parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado.

⁴ *Edwards v. State of California*, 314 U. S. 160 (1941).

land planted to vegetables and fruits and to such field crops as cotton, sugar beets, and hops.⁵

A survey by the Agriculture Department in September 1948 showed that over a third of the migratory laborers then at work were employed on farms which used eight or more man-years of hired labor annually; only a fifth of the migratory workers were on farms which hired less than a full year of labor in 1948. Hence the majority of employers of migrant labor were outside the category of the "family-size farm."

Large-scale enterprise, both as regards size of farm and value of output, has formed a steadily increasing proportion of American agriculture during recent years. Farms of 500 acres or more made up a third of all farms in the United States in 1920, over half in 1945. In 1940, 58,000 farms had a production valued at \$10,000 or more; five years later, with prices received by farmers roughly doubled, 83,000 farms had production valued at \$20,000 or more.

While crop limitations operate to reduce the total acreage devoted to price-supported crops, there are no present curbs on fruits, vegetables and other crops which require large supplies of migrant labor. The improvement in American dietary habits, which has greatly increased per capita consumption of fruits and vegetables, is not likely to be reversed. New methods of shipping and preserving perishable foods are constantly being developed.

On the other hand, mechanization of agriculture has reduced the need for migratory farm labor in some areas and this trend is likely to continue. The mechanical cotton picker has cut the need for transient labor in the South and Southwest, and in time may lower total labor requirements in cotton by more than half. The Agriculture Department estimated in 1944 that the need for hand labor on all crops might fall by as much as a third in 10 years.⁶

The rate of mechanization has varied both as between crops and as between different stages of production. Extent of mechanization in fruits and vegetables is not nearly so great as in cotton, wheat, and corn. Within the same crop, when cultivation is mechanized but harvesting is not, the effect on need for migratory labor is quite different from the situation where all or most stages of production are

⁵ Louis J. Ducoff, *Socioeconomic Backgrounds of the Migratory Agricultural Labor Situation*, address before a conference on migratory labor, Chicago, Sept. 27, 1948.

⁶ M. E. Cooper, G. T. Barton, and A. P. Brodell, *Progress of Farm Mechanization* (1947), p. 29.

mechanized. Moreover, mechanization is expensive and its spread may be checked in times of falling farm prices.

Future trends in supply of migrant labor as well as in demand will depend in part on the general state of the economy. The number of migrants seeking farm jobs is estimated to have increased 40 per cent between 1945 and 1948 as opportunities for other types of employment declined from wartime levels. Preliminary data indicate that there was a further increase in migratory job-seekers in 1949 although crop production was slightly lower than in the preceding year.

WIDESPREAD NEED OF MIGRANT WORKERS ON FARMS

The Department of Agriculture estimates that in 1948, latest year for which data are available, some 880,000 different individuals were migratory workers on farms at some time during the year. They formed about one-fifth of all hired farm workers, thought to number about 4.4 million.

Contrary to the impression created by distress in California and Arizona, the West is not the chief user of migrant farm labor. In 1948, half of all migratory workers were employed in the South, with heavy concentrations in Texas and Arkansas during cotton picking. Northern states employed 27 per cent of the migrants, western states 23 per cent.

Most states where agriculture is important use migratory labor at one time or another during the year. Forecasts of demand for 1950 by the U. S. Employment Service show a need of transient labor in at least nine states in the months when demand is lowest (January and February); in September 44 states⁷ are expected to need larger or smaller numbers of transients.

Studies of migrants themselves have been limited for the most part to small groups or small areas. But sufficient information is available to indicate that about two-thirds of all migrants work only in one crop and in one area, which is often within driving distance of their homes. Among this group are low-income city dwellers who seek supplemental income at off seasons or want "a vacation in the country." Others may be students or other young people without regular jobs who want to "see the country."

The remaining third are the "professional" migrants whose principal source of income is work in successive crops

⁷ All states except Vermont, New Hampshire, Georgia, and Florida.

and areas. Most of them have homes from which they set off and to which they return when there is no opportunity for work. They may travel several thousand miles a year in search of farm employment.

MAJOR ROUTES OF ANNUAL LABOR MIGRATIONS

The regular farm migrants usually follow one of six major routes in their annual travels.⁸ One large group leaves Florida after working in fruit or vegetables during the winter and follows similar crops north, often as far as Maine. Their numbers are swelled by others who join the stream in the southeastern states. Most of them are members of Negro families; they total perhaps 20,000-25,000 workers.

A second group leaves Texas in April and May for the sugar beet fields of North Central and Mountain states. After beet cultivation is finished in July, they pick fruit or work at non-farm jobs until time for beet harvesting in September and October. These 40,000-60,000 workers are mostly members of Spanish-American families.

The third migratory movement is that of the 30,000 men who operate the 5,000 or more combines which follow the wheat and other small grain harvests from Texas to Montana and North Dakota and even into Canada. These are mostly single men or men who have left families at home, but there is a growing tendency for families to follow the combines.

Cotton pickers move out of Texas in two directions: westward through the Rio Grande Valley and on to California; eastward to the Mississippi Delta. These migrants are mainly Spanish-American families, with perhaps 60,000-80,000 workers in all. A smaller group (10,000-30,000 workers) moves from the South Central to the North Central states to pick cherries, peaches, tomatoes, and apples.

Some migrants who work in the West start from South Central states in early summer and return in the autumn. Others work in Arizona and southern California in the winter, following the crops west and north. Many workers move from one part of California to another throughout the entire year. Most of these 60,000-120,000 workers travel as families. More than half are native whites; a fourth are Spanish-American or Mexican, with smaller groups of Indians, Filipinos, Negroes, and Japanese.

⁸ U. S. Extension Service, *Preliminary Survey of Major Areas Requiring Outside Agricultural Labor (1947)*, pp. 204-207. Estimates for the various groups are for 1947, when migratory laborers were fewer in number than at present.

Most of the "professional" migrants originate in the South and Southwest. A high proportion are members of minority groups whose usual difficulties in obtaining employment are intensified by the lack of opportunity and generally low income of the states from which they come. The native whites among them are mainly small farm operators in the South Central states or migrants from towns and farms of the Great Plains who compete with minority groups for available jobs.

Economic Status of Farm Migrants

ALTHOUGH the work of migrants is essential to the agricultural economy, they today form one of the country's most depressed labor groups. Demand for their services fluctuates not only with the seasons but also with weather and crop conditions, and with the state of the market. Unlike most other workers, the migrant must make arrangements with a series of employers, and these arrangements last for only a few weeks or at most a few months. The migrant's difficulties are increased when he is a member of a minority group whose patterns of living are not those of the community in which his work is done. His problems are intensified in any time of general unemployment, when workers displaced from other activities compete for available farm jobs.

Almost all migrant farm workers are believed to fall within the lowest income group in the country. A recent study for the congressional Committee on the Economic Report stated that migratory farm laborers form a part of the estimated 10 million families with cash incomes of less than \$2,000 a year.⁹

An Agriculture Department survey showed a national average wage of 80¢ an hour for migrant farm laborers in September 1948. In the North the average was \$1.13; in the South and West, 78¢. But migrants lose much time in going from place to place, in finding employers, and in work interruptions due to weather or condition of crops. A study in the San Joaquin Valley showed average employment for

⁹ *Low-Income Families and Economic Stability* (Senate Document 146, 1950), p. 4.

a migrant family (including 2 workers) of 243 days a year.¹⁰ It was estimated that annual earnings amounted to about \$1,200 for household heads and single men, about \$1,800 for families with women and children able to work in the fields.

INADEQUACY OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR MIGRANTS

Some of the migrant farm worker's economic difficulties result from the lack of such legal protections as are now afforded to the majority of non-agricultural workers. Farm laborers are not covered by minimum-wage provisions of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, or by the wage-hour laws of any state except Wisconsin.¹¹ The average wage of 80¢ noted above exceeds the 75¢ minimum set for other workers by the Fair Labor Standards amendments of 1949, but an average of 80¢ means that large numbers earn far less than that amount.

The only important legal protection of migrants' wages is that afforded by the Sugar Act of 1948, which empowers the Secretary of Agriculture to set a "fair and reasonable" rate at which producers must pay labor in sugar beet and cane fields in order to qualify for benefits under the act. Local farmer committees make spot checks to determine compliance before applications for benefits are certified. Violations may result in denial of benefits to whole areas. Wage rates set for work in beet fields in 1950 are 60-65¢ an hour. In Florida cane fields, 1950 hourly rates vary from 38¢ to 55¢, depending on the worker's sex and type of work. Louisiana rates vary from \$2.25 to \$4.80 per 9-hour day, depending upon sex, type of work, and the price of sugar.

Migrant workers, along with other agricultural workers, are excluded from the state-federal unemployment insurance systems¹² which enable many workers in other industries to tide themselves over jobless periods. However, Gov. Warren has urged passage of a California law to provide unemployment compensation for farm workers, and

¹⁰ W. H. Metzler, *The Agricultural Labor Force in the San Joaquin Valley, California, 1948*. Cooperative study of U. S. Department of Agriculture and University of California.

¹¹ The Wisconsin law sets minimum hourly wages of 38-45c for agricultural workers depending on the area. A dozen other states set minimums for women or women and minors in agriculture, but these laws are seldom strictly enforced. Workers imported from abroad under international agreements must be paid the "prevailing wage" in the areas in which they work.

¹² Only the District of Columbia, where agricultural labor is virtually non-existent, covers farm workers in its unemployment insurance law. Many processing workers in Florida and California are covered.

similar action by all state legislatures has been urged by numerous organizations and agencies.¹³

Only three jurisdictions—Ohio, Hawaii, Puerto Rico—require employers of farm labor to provide compensation and medical treatment for injured workers.¹⁴ The migrant laborer is at a special disadvantage if he is injured on the job, for low income prevents accumulation of savings to pay for either treatment or legal action for damages, and time lost from already irregular employment reduces total income still farther.

The Taft-Hartley Act follows the Wagner Act in withholding from agricultural workers the guarantees of collective bargaining rights that apply to workers in other fields. The A. F. L. National Farm Labor Union, the only union now organizing migrant farm workers, has a dues-paying membership of 25,000.¹⁵ Because employers are not required to bargain with the union, its success in preventing wage cuts and in obtaining better working conditions for migrant labor has depended largely upon the voluntary cooperation of employers.¹⁶ The union states that organized opposition among employers and the vigilante tactics revealed by the Senate Civil Rights (LaFollette) Committee in the 1930s are disappearing as more migrants are gaining legal residence and voting rights in the farm states. But exclusion of agriculture from federal and state labor relations laws continues to handicap organization efforts.

DIFFICULTIES OF RECRUITMENT AND PLACEMENT

Even in the absence of legal protections, much can be done to raise the low incomes of migrant workers by reducing irregularity of employment through improved recruiting and placement services. Bringing the right numbers and types of workers to given jobs at the right time is also of great assistance to the employer and will prevent indiscriminate

advertising by farmers who want to make sure they have enough labor available.

Recruitment of migrant workers is difficult at best because they must often be brought hundreds of miles for jobs lasting only a few weeks. Some employers make their own arrangements by mail or personal contacts with crew leaders or labor contractors. The farm placement division of the U. S. Employment Service assists in both recruitment and placement. But the situation is complicated by haphazard and unsolicited migration of thousands of workers who move on their own initiative without adequate information on where and when their services will be needed. These "free-wheelers" frequently glut the market in one area while farmers lack field hands in a community not far distant.

U. S. E. S. is now attempting through an extensive information campaign to help workers plan their 1950 migrations. Stations have been set up along the main migration routes to inform workers on current local needs for labor, wages paid, housing and other working conditions, also on prospects for work further along the route and on the way back. In towns between information stations volunteer workers, usually merchants, help to guide transients to farmers needing help. Maps showing locations and probable dates of crops calling for migrant labor are distributed in large numbers. Radio and press announcements are used. By these various devices U. S. E. S. aims to help workers find jobs with the least possible travel, thus making the most economical use of available labor, and to assure farmers of adequate labor supplies.

Community Services for Migrant Families

THE migrant worker has little choice as to the environment in which he lives. Housing may be furnished by growers or labor contractors, sometimes free but more often on a rental basis. In some areas camps built by the Farm Security Administration during the depression are still being operated. Workers who can find no better accommodations may rent quarters in shanty-towns on the fringes of farms or cities or camp out in the open.

Housing provided by farmers varies from good to very poor. In California, according to a *New York Times* dis-

¹³ See *Interstate Migration*, report of the Toian Committee (1941), pp. 105ff; *Migrant Labor, A Human Problem*, Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor (1947), p. 7; *Recommendations for Social Security Legislation*, Advisory Council on Social Security (1949), pp. 142ff.

¹⁴ The occupational death rate in farming in 1946 was 74 per cent above the average for all occupations, being exceeded only by mining and construction. S. J. Axelrod, "Health Problems in Industrialized Agriculture," *American Journal of Public Health*, September 1949, p. 1173.

¹⁵ The Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union, expelled in February from the C. I. O., organized processing workers rather than field workers.

¹⁶ Union spokesmen claim that, when an attempt was made in California in 1949 to reduce the cotton-picking rate from \$3 to \$2.50 a hundred pounds, the union spearheaded a strike which kept 20,000 workers from the fields until the \$3 rate was restored. Lester Velle, "Home Is a Dream," *Collier's Magazine*, Apr. 8, 1950, p. 57.

patch, Mar. 16, 1950, such housing "ranges from accommodation somewhat inferior to an Army camp to the worst kind of squalor, with a large family living in one room or a tent, without plumbing." Of 166 farm labor camps inspected by the California state housing division in January 1950, only 17 were classed as good, one-third as bad. In New York and Illinois converted barns and warehouses have been used as quarters for migrants. An investigator in Texas reported that cotton pickers were "expected to camp in fields and ditches or under bridges; housing that was provided consisted for the most part of unrenovated barns and chicken sheds."¹⁷

Crowding a family into a one-room shack, with a filthy privy several hundred feet away and the only water supply a ditch or creek, not only makes cleanliness virtually impossible but contributes to the spread of disease. Colds and other respiratory ailments abound among migrants; tuberculosis rates are thought to be double those of the general population.¹⁸ Digestive disturbances often result from poorly refrigerated or unclean food; deaths from infant diarrheas occur in alarming numbers. Families can seldom afford doctor fees; public medical care is often limited to such emergencies as difficult childbirth.

A way out of such conditions is suggested by the permanent labor camps built by the federal government and now operated for the most part under temporary leasing arrangements. Typical camps have one- or two-bedroom units with bath and toilet, a few apartment structures accommodating 20 to 50 families, and one- or two-room shelters with a bed, stove, table and chairs, for which central toilet, bathing and laundry facilities and safe water supplies are provided. Rent charges to the occupants are low.

Ten of the government camps have been sold at 10 to 20 per cent of appraised value to nonprofit associations of growers or to state or local public or semipublic agencies. The housing bill enacted by Congress in April authorizes the Public Housing Administration to rehabilitate camps not yet sold and then to transfer them to local housing authorities for operation as low-rent public housing, mainly for farm workers.¹⁹ About 40,000 persons can be accommodated in the camps subject to transfer.

¹⁷ Pauline E. Kibbe, *Latin Americans in Texas* (1948), p. 149.

¹⁸ S. J. Axelrod, *op. cit.*, p. 1175.

¹⁹ About a dozen camps are so operated at the present time.

During World War II, the U. S. Public Health Service maintained 250 clinics for migrants, but responsibility for health measures now rests solely with states and localities. Concentrations of migrants often occur in counties which have no public health services even for permanent residents. New Jersey operates state clinics for migrants, and New York state makes public health nursing available. Similar action is contemplated in Texas. Special state grants to areas with large seasonal populations have been proposed in other states.

RESIDENCE REQUIREMENTS AS BAR TO RELIEF

The low incomes of migrant workers frequently put them in need of public assistance, but the residence requirements commonly set by states and localities often act to bar public aid to migrants who move from state to state in search of work and may become stranded at some point along the route. In the federally-aided program of old-age assistance, the Social Security Act stipulates that states obtaining federal grants may not require applicants to show more than five years' residence out of the preceding nine years. Half of the states still require this maximum; about one-third require a year's residence; only Kentucky, New York and Rhode Island have no residence requirements.

Needy persons who cannot qualify under federally-aided programs must rely on general assistance (relief), but here again residence requirements tend to rule out aid for migrants. Half the states require only a year's residence, usually with one to six months in the county where application is made. But some states with high concentrations of migrants (including Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, Oregon) require three years' residence.²⁰

Heavy reliance on local financing tends to restrict the amount of general assistance available, for county funds may be exhausted by widespread need in an emergency. According to *Tax Digest* (March 1950), migrant relief is costing one California county \$100,000 a month, and requires financing from county reserves. Some California counties are providing work relief at 50 cents an hour in food or grocery orders, while others are giving out only federal surplus foods. Even this assistance is limited to persons who have lived three years in the state, one year in the county.

²⁰ The laws of some of these states allow counties to give relief to nonresidents in cases of extreme emergency.

One method of meeting the relief problem would be to do away with residence requirements, but prospects for such action are not bright because states which are more liberal in their interpretation of need and the amount of assistance provided fear an influx of needy persons if no residence is required. Another remedial measure would be assistance to local authorities by larger and wealthier units, such as state and federal governments. Both New Jersey and New York reimburse counties for relief given to non-residents. Federal aid for general assistance has been urged by public welfare groups, but was not included in the bill to amend the Social Security Act passed by the House in 1949.

EDUCATION AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

The gravest social aspect of migration from one farm area to another is its effect on children. The ceaseless movement of migrant families interrupts schooling and diminishes the security of family life. Low wages force mothers and children into the fields. Crowded and often insanitary housing, lack of play space, and poor diets prevent normal physical and social development.

Children of Negro migrants working in Florida in the winter may receive "crop vacations" from school; by the time the families reach the northern states, schools are not in session. Among migrant families studied by the Children's Bureau in Hidalgo County, Tex., only half of all children six to 15 years of age were enrolled in school.²¹ The National Child Labor Committee found that a third of the children of migrant strawberry pickers studied in Arkansas and Kentucky had not been in school at all during the preceding year; attendance of those who had gone to school had been so spotty that, if it continued, these children would receive less schooling than their parents, who on the average had completed only the fourth grade.²²

The federal Fair Labor Standards Act forbids employment of children under 16 during school hours in agriculture whose production goes into interstate commerce. But only a few state school laws²³ specifically require attendance of children who are not residents.

Even where attendance of all children is required, the pro-

²¹ A. A. Warburton, H. Wood, and M. M. Crane, *The Work and Welfare of Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, Texas* (1943), p. 37.

²² National Education Association, *Children in the Crops* (1948), p. 21.

²³ Those of California, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia.

vision may be honored principally in the breach. Or the migrant child may find himself so far behind others of his age that he does not wish to attend. Short periods of attendance on the part of retarded children offer serious problems for the school, which must either largely ignore these children or adapt its own curriculum to their needs. One authority in this field believes that classes in schools likely to have seasonal peak enrollments should be of small size. Brief units of study which could be closely related and yet so planned that they need not be studied in a fixed order would give migrant children an opportunity to progress as they can hardly do when they must drop in and out of a continuous year-long program in each of half a dozen schools.²⁴

California as early as 1921 recognized these problems and enacted a law authorizing special classes for children of migrant farm families to be financed by the state. New Jersey for several years has conducted experimental summer schools for children whose families come to the state to pick vegetables. Attention is given both to catching up on tool subjects and to learning principles of good diet and health habits and home-making methods which can be adapted to life in crowded quarters. Methods of teaching home-making and infant care to children of migrants are also reported under study in Texas.

In New York special attention is given to child care centers for young children whose mothers work in the fields. Such centers were initiated by the Home Missions Council but are now operating under state auspices. They obviate the need for taking very young children to the fields, where accidents are common, or leaving them in the care of family members who are too young to work but not old enough to give intelligent care.

Only limited progress can be made in educating and caring for children of farm migrants so long as they are permitted to work in the crops. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act and most of the state laws which govern child labor on farms cover only school hours. This gives no protection after school, on holidays, or during vacations, when child labor may be heavily used. The Sugar Act of 1948 provides that no children below age 14 (other than those of a farm owner) may work in cane or beet fields; between 14 and 16 a child may be employed for not more

²⁴ W. H. Gaumnitz, "Educating Migrant Children—Some Proposed Solutions," *School Life*, December 1946, p. 11.

than eight hours a day. Violations are punishable by deductions from the producer's benefit payments. Nine state laws now prohibit work by young children outside school hours.

Progress in eliminating child labor will be speeded by higher wages or steadier employment for adult migrants, so that children no longer need to contribute to family support. In the Hidalgo County study it was found that over half the children aged eight and nine years (one-sixth of those aged six and seven) worked in the fields at some time during the year; average family income for the year was \$365.

Postwar Efforts to Better Lot of Migrants

THE postwar years, with an increasing supply of migrant labor, occasional periods of acute distress due to oversupply, and a tendency toward lower wages, have seen a renewal of efforts to remedy some of the worst problems of migrants and of the communities where they work. Growers in some areas have come to believe that fair wage rates, better housing and improved working conditions yield dividends in the form of a dependable labor supply. Good permanent housing is being built by growers in increasing quantity.²⁵ Velie reports that some California growers who formerly fought unemployment compensation for their workers are ceasing to oppose it or are actively supporting the proposal.²⁶ New York growers share the cost of state child care centers.

There is evidence too that communities are coming to believe that migrants who contribute to local prosperity should share in services available to local citizens, or have community programs designed especially for their needs. Geneseo, N. Y., organized a recreation program for both migrant and town children from 10 to 14 years of age. Freehold, N. J. set up a child-care program for migrants' children, financed by local service clubs. A summer program of recreation and education for children of Spanish-American migrants is being planned by women's and service clubs of Waupun, Wis., with support from local and state funds.

²⁵ J. M. Powell and M. W. Gwaltney, "Permanent Housing Attracts Migrant Crews," *Employment Security Review*, March 1950, pp. 8-10.

²⁶ Lester Velie, "Home Is a Dream," *Collier's Magazine*, Apr. 8, 1950, p. 57.

Impetus for the program is said to have come from public concern when these children were barred from a local swimming pool in 1949.

In attacking the many-sided problem of migrant labor—jobs, housing, health, welfare, education—advance along one line may be hindered by lack of progress along others. Where a governmental agency carries responsibility for migrants along with the general population, funds or personnel may be inadequate to deal with migrants' problems adequately. Several states with high concentrations of migrants have set up programs to deal with many phases of their problems through cooperation of various state departments, with responsibility for coordination carried by an agency set up for the purpose.

New Jersey in 1945 established a bureau of migrant labor in the state department of labor and industry, and set up an advisory migrant labor board with representation of various other state agencies, business, labor, voluntary charities, and other citizen groups. Inspection and policing of labor camps, special clinics and health services for migrants, schools, recreation and welfare services have been carried on under the state bureau. New York's interdepartmental committee on farm and food processing labor carries on many of the same activities, with special emphasis on child care and protection programs. Texas also is organizing an interagency committee on migratory labor.

In March 1950 a National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor was organized by representatives of church, labor, and farm groups to serve as a clearinghouse on problems of migrants and to push for remedial action by federal and state legislatures. President Truman has been asked by members of the California delegation in Congress to establish a federal commission to study the scope of migrants' problems and recommend measures for their solution.

MEANS OF REDUCING PROPORTIONS OF PROBLEM

Adjustment of farm production so that there will be a sequence of crops has been tried in some areas as a means of regularizing employment for migrants. On the great DiGiorgio fruit holdings in California it has been found possible to plan production so as to give year-round jobs to 1,000 workers, thus cutting the need for seasonal workers to about 2,000. Ability to make such adjustments varies

greatly with climate and the size of land holdings, but successful cooperative efforts of many farmers in the same general area have been reported from Florida and other specialized-farming states. Establishment of small industries which can offer employment in off seasons of farm work is being considered in California.

Some of the problems raised by the oversupply of migrant labor might be alleviated by putting a brake on forces which tend to flood the farm labor market, such as the slow increase in opportunities for work in areas with a high rate of natural increase in population. Federal aid for industrialization of such areas has been proposed in legislation offered in the present Congress. Extension of the program of loans to small farmers to enable them to put their operations on a profitable basis is another suggestion for checking the flow into the migrant labor supply.

One way to reduce the oversupply of farm workers in relation to jobs currently available would be to stop importing alien workers. To meet farm labor shortages during World War II, Congress authorized importation of Mexicans and natives of the British West Indies under international agreements. This program is still being continued on a reduced scale to meet seasonal needs; importation is chiefly from Mexico, about 100,000 persons having been brought in at some time during 1949. Director Goodwin of the Bureau of Employment Security said, Apr. 13, that it was still uncertain how many certifications for foreign labor would be issued this year but he was sure the number would be smaller than last year.

The National Farm Labor Union has asked the President to abrogate the wartime agreement with Mexico, but members of Congress from ranch states are said to be seeking increased certifications. In addition to legal admissions, the farm labor supply is swelled by large numbers of illegal entrants from Mexico. The Immigration Service believes 10,000 Mexicans are entering California illegally every month, and that nearly 400,000 crossed the border during 1949.

