

Public Health News

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Seeds of Progress



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MIGRANT WORKERS: PEOPLE OR PROBLEMS?

By DR. HOWARD E. THOMAS
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I will venture to guess that no aspect of the migrant labor situation is approached with greater emotional bias or with more rigidly formulated points of view than the social facet. Any objective attempt to examine the situation in its entirety is perceived by some vested interest or other to be a "dirty" kind of thing. Americans are reported not to like "dirty" kinds of things. Besides, objective examination may deprive some of us of our reasons for doing nothing. But to understand the social aspect of the migrant workers' plight, one has to look at some of the facts which pertain to the situation; this for the simple reason that to understand a situation one must know, at least, a little about it. It goes without saying "the more limited our facts, the more limited our understanding."

I am experientially and painfully aware that some of the things I shall say may go "unheard," others may be distorted to fit a particular point of view, and that perhaps labels may be used to discredit a point of view which questions something dear to the heart of some well intending person or persons.

There are some principles, drawn from the social sciences, which can be helpful in deepening our understanding of the general situation in which the seasonal

migrant worker finds himself and in appreciating the reaction of non-migrants who are part of that situation.

Must Understand a People's Inheritance

One such principle is that people are made, are always in the process of being made what they are. Therefore, to understand a given people, one must know something of the factors which have contributed to their development. One contributing factor is their inheritance, particularly their cultural heritage, made up of ideas, ideals, attitudes, behavior patterns constituting their way of life. These are handed down from one generation to the next, and constitute the "right" (that is normative) way to respond to life's situations: i.e., how to catch game, how to win a wife, how to relate to others, how to behave when a

The papers in this issue on migrant labor were presented at a seminar, entitled "Seeds of Progress," held at Cherry Hill Inn, Merchantville, N. J. on February 23, 1961.

reducing tensions which result from anxiety, suspense, thwarting, and conflict.

Now, there are a lot of ways of manipulating situations and reducing frustration. For example, one may use force, beat people with a club or use, as we do in our society, more refined methods. We may demonstrate superiority through kidding, ribbing, hazing, jokes and stereotyping.

Unfortunately, many communities tend to manage situations involving migrant workers by speaking of migrants as "shiftless, lawless, thieving, irresponsible." This practice persists despite the fact that such points of view cannot be substantiated by evidence. But, as long as "they are bad; we remain (in our own eyes) good."



"When we judge others from our little cultural worlds, we are about as sensible as we would be if we were to say a lilac bush is defective because it bears no roses."—Howard E. Thomas.



With respect to migrants being lazy: this problem has two aspects. One is the fact that some migrants do not exert themselves to acquire things for the future, or even beyond their immediate needs. They quit working when pay day provides and they lay about camp for the next few days. The other aspect of this seeming laziness may be due to inadequate food, clothing, and housing which cause a diminishing of physical stamina in long continual working hours. The tendency of workers to complain that they "do not feel good" without being able to describe particular symptoms may well indicate a lack of vitality.

With respect to the migrant's use of money, studies have shown that gambling is closely associated with various types of undesirable employment and that gambling is often resorted to as a means of diversion from monotony. It serves as an escape from many of the realities of an unsettled life in an unpleasant situation. The tendency to

gamble or to spend earnings on pleasure is also explainable as a natural consequence of the lean years and of feelings of hopelessness.

Do We Protest Against a General Characterization?

"Now we all know that they (the migrants) steal and lie." How many times have we heard this? Knowing full well that it isn't true of all migrants, how many times have we protested against it? To many of us, stealing is wrong. But it is important to remember of the few who do steal, that some of their standards of right and wrong are as different from those of the local communities as their social backgrounds are different. Where this practice has developed and is observable, it is probably the result of a disruption of earlier community ties, or a protective means for survival under oppression. Yes, I mean oppression: oppression of an economic or social kind.

Of lying, workers may have done so in order to make a situation more agreeable under the immediate conditions than could have been done by telling the truth. His culture developed—undoubtedly—long ago this technique of compromise in order to adjust to the subjugation enforced upon it. Who made this adjustment necessary? Certainly not the migrant nor his forefathers.

At the luncheon meeting, Frederick P. Blackwell, Counsel to the United States Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, spoke for United States Senator Harrison A. Williams, of New Jersey, chairman of the Subcommittee, on the subject, "The National Approach to Meeting the Needs of Migratory Workers." Mr. Blackwell's presentation appears on pages 269-271.

Mrs. Madaline A. Williams, former Member of the New Jersey House of Assembly, and a member of the New Jersey Migrant Labor Board, presided at the luncheon.

However, there is another and, to me, a much more critical matter with which we must come to terms if we are to understand (understanding MUST precede helping) and to help the migrant. This area is the migrant family.

Our American attitudes towards the American Negro migrant family cannot be adequately understood without reference to his unique position as a member of the only ethnic group which occupied a slave status in our history. Most of our present attitudes of prejudice and hostility are traceable to the institution of slavery which depended for its existence upon a legal and psychological separation of Negro and white.

Also we must not forget that the Negro in America is a cultural and only secondarily a biological group and that his culture with all its variations is American and a product of his life in particular situations. The slaver destroyed his African culture and left the Negro to acquire our civilization from the peculiar and unfavorable position of the slave. About three-fourths of his American history have been spent in bondage. He has had "freedom" for only about three generations.

Left on his own in a confused and demoralized South, he slowly found himself enslaved in a rigid two-race caste system. Later he began moving to the cities and to the North. He was unaccustomed to and maladjusted in the urban environment. Circumstances have kept him at the bottom of the economic ladder, irregularly employed, badly housed, despised, diseased, and disorganized.

The story of the American Negro migrant indicates scant opportunity for developing permanence in his family relations. The absence of permanence in family relations implies a lack of social control over many of the socialization processes. The privileges of masters and the masters' sons during slavery, the tendency to "breed" slaves, the mobility of the reconstruction period, the privileges of the white under the two caste system, the inability to raise one's caste status by virtuous conduct, anonymity,

and lack of status have all contributed to alienate migrant behavior from accepted standards of other people in other places than the slave areas. Settled in a new status, the lower layer of a two-caste system, the norms of the white community are largely meaningless to the migrant. This may in a very real sense be due to his lack of education, income, and self-determination, which are necessary to develop these norms in his own relationships. The Negro migrant family, consequently, is the most loosely organized and easily broken in the United States.

A circle of resistance to change and no opportunity or encouragement to change has continued to keep most Negro migrant workers in submerged positions.

Another VERY IMPORTANT point to keep in mind is that the expression of prejudice and hostility towards the Negro migrant is socially facilitated in these United States, particularly through the medium of humor. The role of social approval and "permission-to-hate" has been clearly noted. Dollard points out the human inheritance of social traditions which define the objects and persons against whom one may aggress without incurring community displeasure.

Permit me to observe in closing, that the refusal of responsible leaders in American life to discuss matters affecting the relations of all of her people is a phenomenon unique in democratic living; that nowhere else in the world is the question of one's potential brother-in-law considered a fitting retort to a man's demand for equal pay, decent housing, or the vote; and, that when we judge others from our "little" cultural worlds, we are about as sensible as we would be if we were to say a lilac bush is defective because it bears no roses. May I remind you that while we must take appropriate legislative steps, each legislative advance should be reinforced and complemented by an educational program. Attitudes are learned, not legislated. Finally, in the words of a great American, Booker T. Washington, "You can't keep a man in the gutter without remaining there with him."