

TO THE REAR, MARCH! 1965-1940

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago a wave of public concern over the plight of the migratory agricultural worker swept the country. The Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency within the United States Department of Agriculture, was developing, in the areas of migrant concentration, a program (long since scuttled) of model camps, small homes, clinics, community centers and even hospitals for migratory workers. I was chief of this program for the State of Florida. I had previously made field studies of the migrant problem in California, Arizona, and Texas as well as in Florida and the Eastern United States. Because of my experience I was called to testify in May and August, 1940, before two Congressional Committees which were making a study of migrancy, the famous La Follette Committee, or Senate Committee on Civil Liberties, and the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, known as the Tolan Committee from its chairman, Representative John H. Tolan of California. The following text consists of excerpts from my 25-year-old testimony before these two Congressional Committees. The photographs depict the situation *today* in a typical migrant area, the San Joaquin Valley of California.

BY JOHN BEECHER

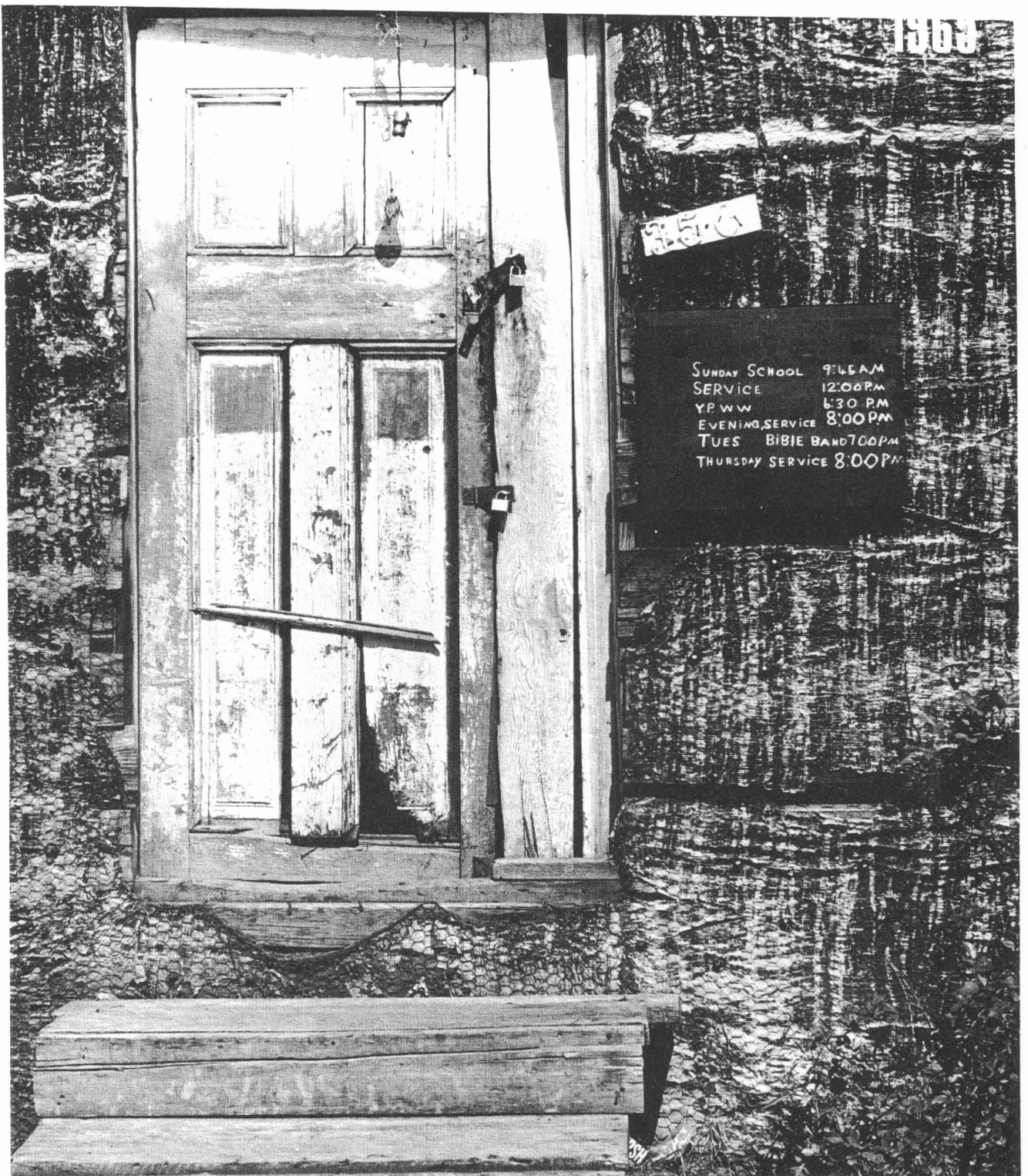
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1940

We find that a great many of them, particularly the Negroes, are transported by labor contractors in trucks from place to place, and, of course, it is usually to the interest of these labor contractors to have a surplus of labor on hand, and naturally that keeps the wage rates down, and they want the labor supply up to the maximum expectations of what the work in any particular locality might be. There is very little scientific measurement or calculation of what the work might be; it is very difficult to do that. Where crops are coming on in a given area, sometimes growers and contractors are liable to get panicky and say, "We won't have enough people over here to harvest the crops," and they will say that they need maybe 2,000 here and 1,000 here, and 500 over here, and by the time the harvest begins you will have a figure of 5,000 or 6,000 in that particular area as needed to harvest the crop, and when as a matter of fact that number shows up, it frequently turns out that they will only need a thousand.



1940

In the vicious complex of farm migrancy, along with instability of place, insecurity of employment, inadequate earnings, and bad housing are many subsidiary evils. Into whatever community the migrant goes his status is the lowest in the social scale. His labor is welcome but he is not. He and his family are feared as possible sources of physical and moral contagion, and even more as possible public charges should they become stranded there. In no sense does the migrant “belong”—he has no political rights and his civil rights have proved to be more theoretical than real on the rare occasions when he has tried to assert them. He and his family seldom participate in the normal social life of the communities through which they pass—they do not as a rule attend the local churches or frequent the local parks and amusement places. Special recreational devices are sometimes provided to catch their spare pennies—low-grade bars and dance halls, cheap fairs, medicine shows, and the like.



1940

In April of this year, the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.) opened its first migrant camp in the east at Belle Glade, in the Lake Okeechobee mucklands of extreme south Florida. At dawn of the opening day the people from the tent colonies, the trailer camps, and the rickety tourist cabins which local enterprise affords were lined up from the office back to the gate and on down the road outside.

First in line was a family of seven in their overloaded jalopy and two-wheel trailer heaped high with their poor belongings. Originally from Georgia, their wanderings had taken them over practically the entire country during the previous three years. The family head figured he had actually worked in 29 states during that period. In the last 12 months he had averaged one interstate move a month. At Christmas time the family had been in an F.S.A. camp in the Imperial Valley of California, near the Mexican line. Three months later they turned up over 3,000 miles away at the opposite geographical extreme of the country, having crossed Arizona, New Mexico, Texas — with a stop-over in the lower Rio Grande Valley for a few weeks' work — Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and about 700 miles of Florida down to Lake Okeechobee. Now that it is midsummer this family is probably working in the berries on the shore of Lake Michigan and accumulating a little stake to buy gas and oil for the next transcontinental hop — back to California perhaps by way of the cotton fields of Missouri and Arkansas. This family is driven back and forth across the vast length and breadth of the land by no sense of high adventure or love of the open road, but by the stubborn belief that somewhere waiting is a stake for them — a home, a piece of land they can raise a living on, something they can tie to. For, like most of the farm migrants, they are not following the crops because they like to; they are doing it because they have to in order to live. And the children pick strawberries from dawn to dark or pack beans from dark to dawn, not because the parents despise education, but because everybody has got to work to make a living and scrape up enough to get on to the next place. And most of the time they live in a one-room cabin or a boxcar or a tent or share a barn with several other families because Government camps are few and far between, and there are few other decent places for their like to stay.



1940

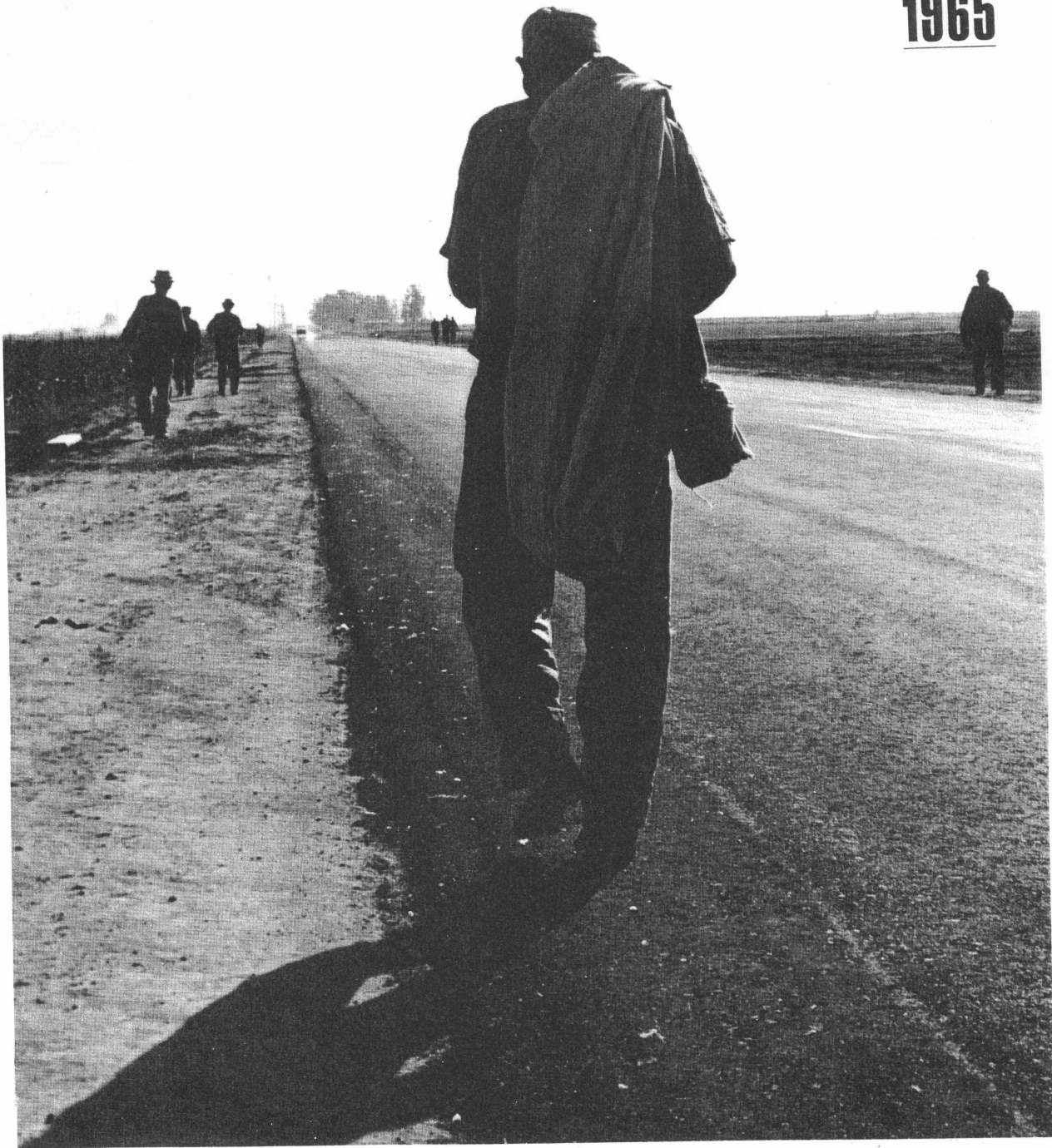
“Education is in competition with beans in this county, and beans are winning out.”

These are the words of the Palm Beach County Superintendent of Public Instruction, characterizing the situation in the Lake Okeechobee area. However, education apparently is not trying to give beans much competition.

After the disastrous freeze this winter, which destroyed all the growing beans, many of the Negro migrants put their children in school for the first time in the season. The enrollment of the Belle Glade Negro school, which has desks for 280 children, rocketed to 503. For a couple of months the school ran on a double shift. Then beans came in again. One week the enrollment was 485. The next week it was 20. Ninety-five percent of the children were in the bean fields. They had to be. It had been a hard time for folks to get through — two months with no work at all, and only a little government grant money to live on, pieced out with frost-bitten cabbage, rabbits and catfish from the canal. So when the picking started again, everybody that could pick, picked.

The children of the area receive little attention outside of school. In the case of the whites, where both the father and mother are working in the packing houses from early afternoon until some unpredictable hour at night, the children are usually without adequate care or supervision. Often older children are kept out of school to watch over the younger ones. Last season one of these 12-year-old acting-mothers lay down for a nap one afternoon while her parents were at work in the packing house, leaving the younger children playing. She was shot dead in her sleep by an 8-year-old brother, who had got hold of the family rifle. The Belle Glade nursery school cares for as many as 50 children whose parents are employed in the packing houses. Actually it bears a greater resemblance to an orphan asylum than it does to a conventional nursery school, for the children remain there night and day, week in and week out. The children of families who cannot afford to pay the school's 25 cents a day fee play unescorted along the roads and ditch banks. At night they sleep on the backseats of cars parked outside the packing houses. Not so long ago a 5-year-old boy tried to grab a stalk of sugar cane that temptingly stuck out of a sugar-cane trailer-train going by behind a tractor. He missed and fell underneath. The iron treads of the trailer passed over his body. Both of his parents were at work in the packing house.

As for the Negro children, the greater number go to the fields in the daytime. Sometimes parents take the smaller children along on the trucks with those who are big enough to pick. While the rest are working in the field, they play aimlessly around in the muck. They are probably better off than a group of children a camera caught in one quarter dabbling in the filthy, uncovered pits of last year's community toilets.



1940

In the Belle Glade hiring yard, the pickers gather at dawn, a couple of thousand of them crowded into two blocks — men, women and children of all ages garbed in fantastic costumes, many wearing leggings of inner tubes to protect them from the wet of the muck in which they will kneel all day.

Along one side of the street are ranged the trucks of the growers and labor contractors. On the truck platforms stand . . . barkers, or “broadcasters” as they are called, haranguing the throng on the merits of the particular field to which each truck is destined, telling whether it is first, second or third pickings, offering 15, 20, or 25 cents a hamper. One of the “broadcasters” is called “Two Dice.” He fills a truck fast. When there are perhaps 60 aboard and it would seem impossible to pack on another person, “Two Dice” bellows “Room fo’ fifteen mo’. Bes’ fiel’ in all de Glades. Beans hangin’ thick on de vines. First pickin’. Payin’ 20 cents a hamper. Come on folks, ride de prosperity truck. Room fo’ 15 mo’.” And fifteen more somehow crowd on. The chain is fastened across the end of the truck and it pulls out for the field. As it moves away, several men jump it and hang on outside. “Two Dice” gets up on the platform of an empty truck and bellows forth the glories of another field.

photographs by Ernest Lowe