

Resource ID 8054

A Collegiate Assist in the Migratory Farm
Camps

**A COLLEGIATE
ASSIST IN
THE MIGRATORY
FARM
CAMPS**

Unique undergraduate project
financed by federal grant
holds promise for the future

By Janet Goetze '64

*RIGHT. Wash aflutter in the wind
frames cabin at migratory labor camp.
BELOW. "Cover Girl" Juanita Con-
treras talks with student Kristin Fletch-
er. BELOW RIGHT. Children of
migrant workers await immunizations.*

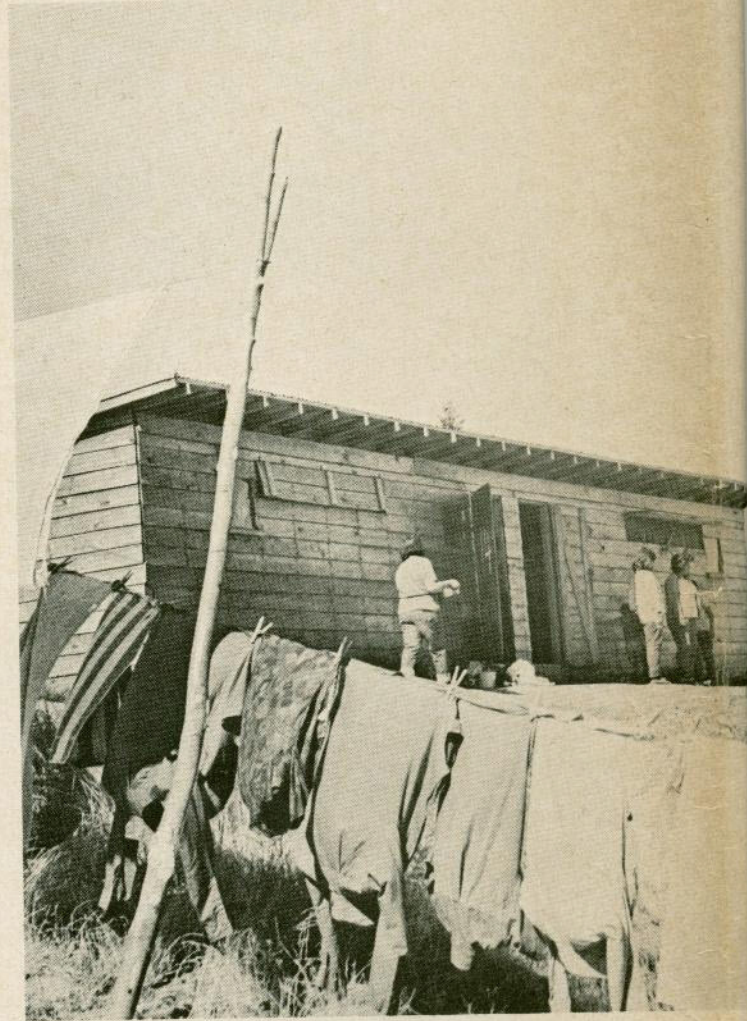


Photo: Henry Schainck, Register-Guard

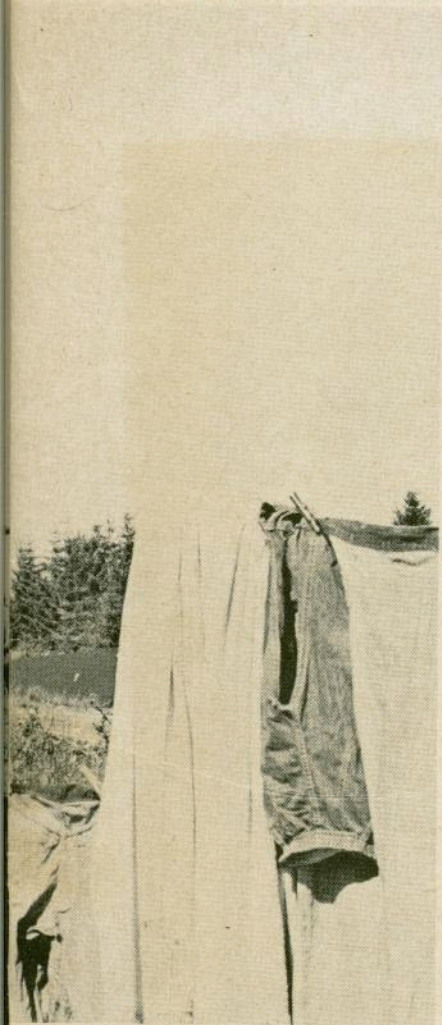


Photo: Frank Sterrett, Oregonian



THE OVERALL PUBLIC picture of the migratory farm laborer has always tended to be a negative one. The "problem" of the migrant worker and his family—largely one of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and ghetto living conditions—has often been "exposed" by any number of public investigating committees, newspaper and magazine articles and television documentaries, such as *Harvest of Shame* (CBS, 1960).

And yet, what has been the result of all this attention given to the plight of these families that scratch out a substandard living following the farm harvests from region to region? The President's Commission on Migratory Labor admitted in 1951 that "not much has been accomplished," in spite of a half-century of public concern with the problem. The situation is "largely the same today," echoed a U.S. Senate subcommittee in 1963. This committee blamed the condition on "fragmented knowledge" and "faulty communications."

INTO THIS PICTURE last summer stepped 15 University of Oregon students—10 women and 5 men. They promised a "new approach" to the migrant labor situation. While the approach is certainly unique, its promise is essentially a promise of the future.

Conceived entirely by University students, and financed by a special \$18,800 grant from the U.S. Public Health Service, this summer project put these young men and women into migratory labor camps in four northern Willamette Valley counties in Oregon. They lived among the migrants; they helped them in a wide variety of ways from teaching the kids how to brush their teeth to developing other methods of disposing of dirty wash water than just throwing it out the door.

One young man, who says he picked up a few culinary tricks while living in a near-campus apartment, showed some of the mothers how to save money grocery shopping ("You can save \$3 to \$5 a month using powdered milk").

The students spent hours scrubbing a cabin at each of several camps, partly to demonstrate the benefits of cleanliness and partly to utilize the cleaned cabin for training centers and for health service immunization clinics.

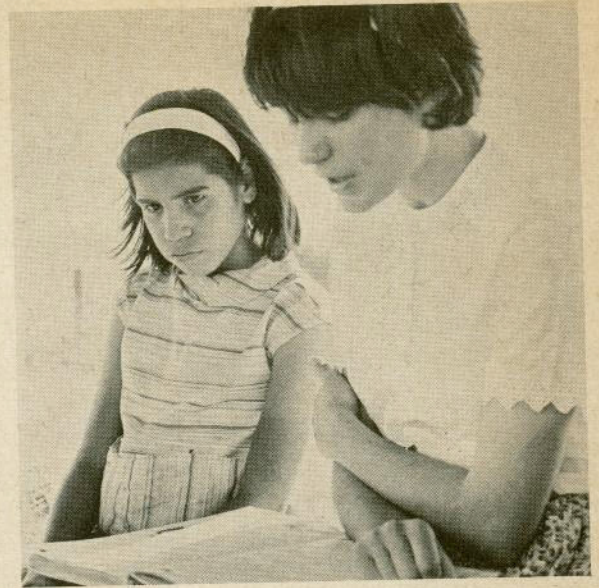
Students set up and manned a display at the Yamhill County Fair. It depicted, through photographs and the personal comments of the young person attending the display, life in the "typical" migratory labor camp. The exhibit won third prize in its category.

Some coeds established charm clinics for teenage migrant girls, showing them the benefits of poise, good grooming and "bodily cleanliness."

At the publicly owned Eola Village for migrants in Yamhill County, students established a weekly mimeographed newspaper, *The Village Voice*. The paper was avidly consumed, at least by those who could read; however, the subtle reference to another famous *Village Voice* in New York probably escaped most Eola Villagers.

Students manned a small library with donated books. They ran a "clothing store" where migrants could buy donated garments for mere pennies. When a whooping cough epidemic threatened one camp, they knocked on doors urging families to have their children immunized (the families did and the epidemic was averted). They helped arrange a local television documentary and newspaper articles that would depict the "real" (i.e., improved) conditions at the camps.

THESE ARE AMONG the many things students worked on during their summer in the field. To be sure, they did not think up and do these things entirely on their own. Many organizations—church and charitable groups, public health agencies and others—have been working with migrant families for a long time. In many instances students were merely placed into jobs created by these other agencies. Some of the jobs were routine and occasionally a student tended to grow restive over what he considered a minor job



LEFT. Kathy McClary conducts eyesight test for Frank Magallan while brother Henry tastes lollipop. ABOVE. In shade of big tree, story time. Kristin Fletcher reads; Elizabeth Magallan listens.

"like driving pregnant women to clinics."

Yet from an overall standpoint, the collegiate participants did consider it a worthwhile experience ("Inspiring," one said). It accomplished some specific improvements designed to benefit the migrant families, but more importantly it "educated" the students as well as the migrants.

"I think some of us entered this project thinking that it was a significant and worthwhile liberal *cause*," explained one student, David Laing, a graduate in English. "But then, eventually, we became interested in the migrant workers and their families as *people*."

Alice Tsunenaga, of Portland, expressed the same thought, not in words but in a deed. She purchased a guitar. Most of the migrants, she explained, are Spanish-speaking people of Mexican descent. They are very fond of singing and guitar playing.

With "education" came "enthusiasm." This is best shown in the fact

that of the original 15 students, 12 thought enough of their experience to want to do it again next year. At least two have made changes in their field of study at the University as a result of their summer experiences. These changes will more directly aim at careers in public service.

The program, then, shows promise if for no other reason than the enthusiasm it has caused, both in and out of the student group. As Robert G. Bull, migrant health representative of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare told the students at a mid-summer meeting:

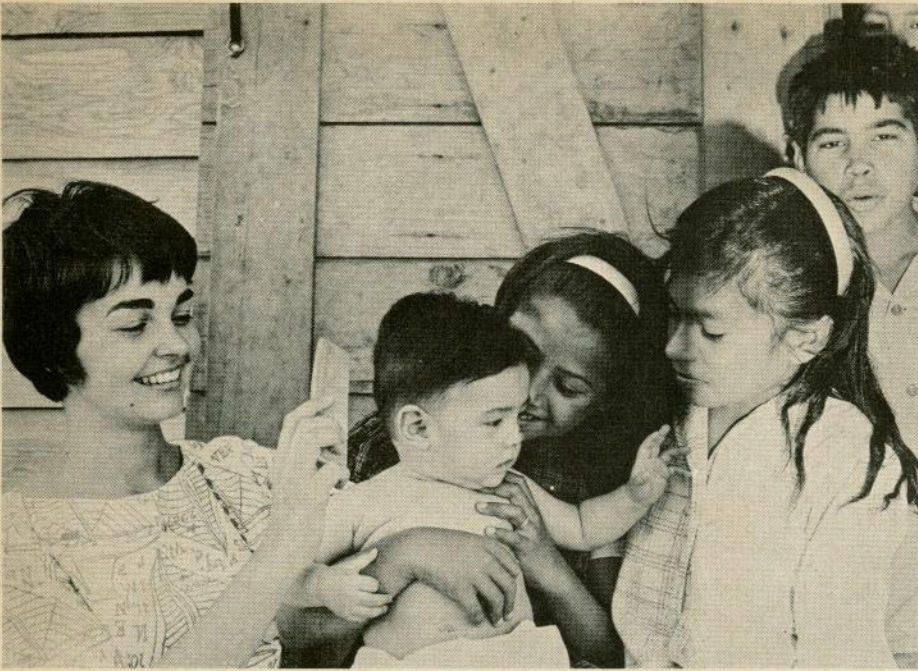
"This project has captured the imagination of the people in my office. It's a new approach to the problems of the migrant. A group such as yours can be helpful at this time and also in the future for setting up similar programs. You all seem eager and are honestly trying to accomplish something Many migrants have been kicked in the teeth by society for so long that they don't know how to help them-

selves . . . maybe this will show them."

The student project grew out of a conviction among student leaders on the campus that student government must concern itself with significant issues beyond the tinselled, papier mâché world of house dances and fraternity power manipulations. How much longer, the students kept asking themselves, could they pursue what some professors deprecatingly referred to as "sandbox politics"?

So the ASUO Senate, under leadership of then Student Body President Neil Goldschmidt '63, settled on migrant labor as an area of social need within the reach of student action. Student Mike Gannon, of Medford, was appointed to head a committee to get something started. Gannon, working with two other students, Sylvia Rogn Dahl, of Roseburg, and Prudy Schroeder, of Corvallis, worked out a project and applied to the U.S. Public Health Service for a grant.

By the time the grant was awarded in May, the students had enlisted the



ABOVE. A young gentleman gets some good pointers on personal grooming from Connie Shaw, of Langlois, Oregon. RIGHT. Vicki Singer, of Los Angeles, fits "new" shoes on youngster. Shoes are sold to the families for 20 or 25 cents.



aid of Miriam Tuck, associate professor of health education, a former New York City health nurse. Robert Lutz, of Springfield, Oregon, a former migrant worker himself, was later appointed field supervisor.

Sixty University students applied for the summer work, which paid \$55 a week. Fifteen were selected by an advisory committee. Lutz made a preliminary screening, basing an evaluation on their "exposure to a variety of living conditions . . . I wanted to see if they would be repulsed by filth or profanity, and how they would handle themselves in the field."

The students proved to be reasonably resourceful in the field, as shown by their handling of countless little emergencies such as that faced by Sherril Southward, of Pendleton. A month-old breast-fed baby had been left in her care one morning with no instructions on feeding. Sherril decided that canned milk was the obvious answer. She mixed a formula of three-fourths milk and one-fourth water. The health



LEFT. Merritt Fink and Fred Michaels take a sample from bean field water supply to test purity of water.

service doctor was aghast and Sherril chagrined when he later discovered what she'd done (she should have been far less generous with the milk, he said), but the baby did fine, just fine.

Ted Schneider, of Eugene, helped organize a fire department at Eola Village. "It instills a community spirit that most camps lack," he explained, "and, of course, it provides reasonable fire protection for the village."

Dave Staat, of Salem, took it upon himself to design and construct a model privy which he used to show farmers the minimum health standards for such facilities. Later he and Mike Gannon actually built a full-sized privy and

delivered it to a farmer's front lawn, with the assumption that the farmer would move it to wherever he wanted it. Unfortunately the season was almost over and the farmer had no real need for it, so he just left it there. More unfortunately, people started using it anyway, even though there was no pit dug beneath it.

Vicki Singer, of Los Angeles, and Karen Wyatt, of Warm Springs, Oregon, showed several mothers the importance of covering food to keep out flies and how to sterilize baby bottles to kill germs which can cause intestinal disorders in infants.

"One mother followed our instruc-

tions for a couple of days," Vicki recalls. "Then she ignored what we told her. When the baby started to get diarrhea she finally saw the importance of what we had been trying to tell her, and she went back to boiling the baby's bottles."

The rewards for some of the student workers may not be quite so obvious just yet. "In the long run," says Miss Tuck, "we will know if this project is successful if certain types of diseases are gradually eliminated, and the living standards of the migrants are improved."

"You can't change everything in one summer," adds Robert Lutz, the former migrant worker. "That's sometimes the hardest thing for young people to understand."

And yet the real, long-range needs of the migrants are all too clear to many of these youths. Frequently they find themselves reacting defensively to public apathy and occasional public hostility toward migrant workers. Sherril Southward and Mike Gannon have reached the conclusion, quite independently of one another, that education is the key. After all, the migrant children are far behind the average of their age groups in education, according to a recent Bureau of Labor report. The majority of children do not speak English. Living conditions and annual incomes are sub-standard. Yet the education that would elevate them from their transient plight would also eliminate, ultimately, migrant laborers.

For instance, Mike Gannon happened across a family with 10 children that he felt would measure up to the responsibilities of full-time year-round work in a permanent location. After considerable scouting, he found the father a job at a lumber mill at Reedsport, Oregon. Late last summer the family moved to Reedsport and apparently is thriving on its new-found status.

Yet the ultimate destination of this kind of "success story" is not so much to ease the plight of the migrant, but to eliminate him. Is this really for the benefit of society, or is there a permanent place in the economy for the migrant worker?

Perhaps the question is really aca-

demie, for right now the migrants fill a sorely needed role in the economy of Oregon, as well as other agricultural centers where the need for workers is *right now* during the harvest seasons. Merritt Fink, of Portland, says of Oregon's 25,000 migrants, "they are the best workers most farmers can find because they can work fast. One needs the other so that both can survive economically."

One farmer quoted by Henry Schainck of the *Eugene Register-Guard* says "one migrant family is worth about a busload of kids in our fields." Another says, "Migrant workers are the only way we can get crops picked here." And a third: "Kids can pick only about a third of what [migrants] can."

YET THERE IS SOMETIMES tension and friction between the two, with public health agencies squarely in the middle. Some farmers consider health and sanitation checkups a malevolent nuisance. They sometimes feel that whatever unsanitary conditions exist are largely the fault of the migrants themselves—"just the result of a lot of people living together," as one farmer put it. Another farmer devised elaborate schemes to avoid being confronted by health officers (pretending to be staggering drunk whenever a health inspector arrived was a favorite).

Other points of irritation came as a result of the presence of students on the special project. Some health departments seemed not entirely sure what the students were supposed to be doing, or even whether they were really necessary. Students often felt they were thwarted from doing a good job by red tape and protocol. Bob Lutz, who often found himself in the role of go-between, commented to the students one time, "Perhaps the health people don't yet feel that you are competent to handle certain assignments. You must remember that there is always the old friction between eager youth and the person who has worked in the field for a long time and feels he knows the situation."

One health official, Dr. Samuel Osgood of the State Board of Health, commented, "The students are them-

selves all rather fine selections, but they aren't doing exactly what I imagined they would: to help cause a permanent change in the health habits of the migrants. They seem concerned with developing rapport with the workers and 'living among them.' Of course, some local health departments differ on what can be done. Perhaps there is a need to learn from the psychologist how to make these permanent changes. Perhaps we could have done more with a better understanding of this aspect in the initial training session before the students went into the camps."

Of course the "pilot" project was designed to uncover problems of this type. All the participants, students and health department workers alike, have learned from the summer's experience and are now "re-writing" the project to fit this new knowledge. Profit will be gained from past mistakes. As Robert Bull told the students, "We in the Public Health Service expect from this work your raising of the problems inherent in this project. After this year we hope the local health departments will know how students can be utilized and that the University will know how to prepare students for this experience."

The latter comment opens a whole new potential. Should such a project be more closely coordinated with the University's academic program? Should a special institute be formed? If so, what happens to the earlier concept of "meaningful" activities for student government (i.e., do they become academic as soon as they become significant)? Should academic credit be given? One suggestion calls for the development of an "Antioch College" approach to public service education. The Antioch project puts students in the classroom part of the year and then actually working in business and industry the other part. Could an Oregon project, devoted to public service work, make a similar contribution?

All these are questions brought up by students and faculty this fall and, if nothing else, they confirm the earlier assertion that there is, indeed, a burning kind of enthusiasm here on the part of all concerned. Enthusiasm is always a good place to start.