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On the Season

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ON THE SEASON

Special Studies

H491

Presented to
Dr. Weldon Vogt

137

by

Marty McDonald

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In a recent report to a subcommittee of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare of the United States Senate, Father John A. Wagner made an apt comparison of Texas migrant workers and "tumble weeds that roll helter-skelter, . . . in search of that constantly eluding hope that they will have a chance to make enough to keep their families alive."¹ Much of the migrant farm labor in the United States make their winter quarters in sunny Florida. By May they are moving out to follow crops and get "on the season." They travel to South Carolina, and on up to New York, maybe as far as Maine before returning to Florida in October. However, thousands of migrants, the vast majority of them, stay in southern Texas and the largest stream of workers flow out of the Rio Grande Valley into the western, northwestern and central sections of our nation in the early spring.

These domestic laborers are used to pick cotton or fruit, bunch carrots, pull corn, top onions and various other harvesting tasks. Willard Wirtz, former Secretary of Labor, pointed out the importance of these workers. In 1965 the use of foreign farm labor dropped 83%, from 634,000 man months in 1964 to 110,000 man months during 1965. Some 100,000 Americans who were not otherwise

¹ "Plight of Migrant America," America, CXV (July 9, 1966), p. 34.

employed got at least part time jobs in the fields. The market price for fruits and vegetables dropped 3% though all foods rose 3.5%.²

Because I was personally involved with some of these migrants for three months this past summer I have been very interested in all phases of their lives. In this paper I hope to explore some of the psychological effects this type of life brings to a person.

Louisa Shotwell in her book The Harvesters defined migrants as a minority group, either racial or ethnic. The migrant may be a Negro, a Spanish speaking American, or an Anglo who got on the season during dust bowl days. He is usually separated from the community life in the area where he works because he is not a permanent resident. Other travelers on the road are able to lodge in hotels but migrants have grassy parks, road sides and labor camps. Some of these people enjoy being out doors, traveling around, seeing new places and working independently at piecement jobs. Some have grown up on this way of life, trapped by the vicious circle of no education, no good job, no money. Others got into it when their small farm was taken over by a bigger farmer. All sorts of people ride the season - frail and solid, perceptive and dull, industrious and indolent, sensitive

² _____, "Stooping to Conquer," Newsweek, LXVII (February 7, 1966), p. 61.

and stoic, honest and crooked, clean and dirty. Yet for all this variety of characteristics and background there is a common value system. They have developed a spirit of resignation, a sense of being trapped, lack of bitterness, strong family loyalty, buoyant wit, spendthrift tendencies (when there is money), a longing to be somebody or to be human, a longing for a better life for their children, sympathy for their neighbors, with lots of stamina and courage.

Red, a father of five, explained to Dale Wright while harvesting tomatoes in Florida that he had known no other life. His parents had both been migrants since childhood. He and his family lived in a tin and tar paper shanty not far from the field. Red could not recall how far he had gone in school though he felt if he had remained he might have become a bossman. He planned to bring his children out to the field when they were old enough. There were five children now, but the twin daughters had died in infancy. Red could see little educational opportunities ahead for any of the kids.

Louis, a child of twelve, Truman Moore described as ageless. "His face was wrinkled, marked with a tiny network of fragile lines at the corners of his eyes and deeper lines across his forehead... From behind

he looked like a dwarf - a tiny old man whose bones had dried up and warped with age."³

The average seasonal worker earns one thousand dollars a year. So naturally the question comes why do these people begin this type of work in the first place. There are various reasons. As a child there was probably little education and no knowledge of another way of life. Some have used it as an escape from the more demanding pressing business world. One man said he simply could not stand his wife. The typical family starts following crops because they are broke otherwise and the promise of a sure job with money sounds good. They start out for a job but find work before they reach their destination, which is fine until the crop runs out. Then they are forced to travel to the next crop and the next and before long they are on the season. Some young people have been lured also by the thoughts of money. After graduation from high school there is not an abundance of jobs available and the thrill of travel seems adventuresome. Yet for every one who jumps in it is a struggle to get out.

Though the conditions under which these farm laborers exist have been hinted at, nothing but the facts can bring out the true environment. In a migrant center near Holcomb, Kansas, seventeen Mexican American

³ Truman Moore, The Slaves We Rent. (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 53.

families lived while working in sugar beets. They were living in three room houses with electricity but not any plumbing. The rooms were used for living, sleeping, and eating; they were full of beds, bedding, clothes, and boxes of kitchen supplies. In eighteen states there are housing regulations for migrant labor but these are usually jokes. The code from the Federal Interagency Commission stated in 1947 the shelter must be structurally sound, and protection from the elements, with no less than two rooms for the husband, wife, and one or more children over ten years. It required a separate room for the kitchen, wire fly screens, sanitization of mattresses, one shower head for every eight people, one washbasin for every twelve people, metal garbage cans, adequate water supply and restrooms over fifty feet but less than two hundred feet from sleeping quarters.⁴ Yet to say that these conditions prevail is a farce. If personal experience will be tolerated at this point, I have lived in a one room cabin with three other young women exactly like the rooms in which families of six or eight lived. The kitchen consisted of a three burner stove in the room. There was no plumbing in these rooms. The showers were more likely in a ratio of one to sixteen and the restrooms were deplorable.

⁴Louisa R. Shotwell, The Harvesters: The Story of the Migrant People (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 112.

In such surroundings as these many a child's disease goes untreated such as pin worm, diarrhea, asthma or tonsillitis. Their diets consist of corn meal and rice, due to malnutrition the health of most people is not good. Arthritis, coughs, and chest pains are prevalent illnesses.

The working conditions are not any more appealing than the living conditions. Most laborers go into the fields in the early morning hours, 4:00 or 5:00 a.m., and leave in the early afternoon, thus avoiding as much stifling heat as possible. For those working in a crew the crew boss distributes the weekly pay check by withholding some for himself. It has been estimated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture the average hourly wage of the forty eight million farm workers is between ninety five cents and a dollar.⁵ However, no accurate measure can be taken to support this statistic. The consensus of government, religious and social service agencies is that between four and five hundred thousand workers make forty to sixty cents an hour.⁶ It makes a difference if the worker is white, nonwhite, Latin American or West Indian; if he is under eighteen or over forty five; and much depends on his sex and marital status. Many of the farm laborers are children. An

⁵Dale Wright, They Harvest Despair (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 142.

⁶Ibid., p. 143.

estimated three fourths of the olives harvested in California were by children.⁷ For the Puerto Rican worker things look better. The Labor Department has given them some protection in work hours, compensation, and health insurance. Many of the contracts they secure are more to their advantage as well. The people working in sugar beets are given some protection too, at least this is the only crop which requires a minimum wage and restricts children under fourteen from working.⁸

As one can well imagine the effects of this life are devastating to an individual. One worker in a day care center for migrant children told how easy it was to see the frustration, bitterness and disorganization in these children. He reported they began their new projects with enthusiasm but once a problem was encountered, they were quick to abandon the idea and seek another project to pursue. The children usually lacked experience in building anything or solving problems and had little or no self confidence. The parents of the children are eager for them to have what they could not or did not have. When questioned about their desires for the children, typical replies were "an education, health,

⁷ Moore, op. cit., p. 54.

⁸ American, CNY (September 10, 1966), p. 253.

something good, a good normal life," and one even stated "all eight of them dressed at one time."⁹ In a study by T. P. Omari it was found that migrants need the confidence of their neighbors and friends to join in activities of the community. The study made in the Tucson, Arizona, area surveyed one hundred families with school age children and who had moved four times or less. It studied the problems of adjustment according to the sexes, number of moves made, family size, age, and size of previous hometowns. The trends revealed (1) that parents have more difficulty adjusting than their children, (2) there was no significant difference between boys and girls, (3) better adjustments occurred with the increase in moves, (4) more problems resulted in moving from a small to large community than from a large to a small community, (5) as the child grew older it became harder to adjust, and finally, (6) the families with two, three, or four children adjusted better than those with one child or more than six children.¹⁰

The farm worker however, is beginning now to rise up and demand a more "equal" rating with other laborers. They went on strike in September of 1965 in the California fields. Led by Cesar Chavez they formed a

⁹ Leone Kell and Beth Alsup, "One Cup of Sugar: Home Economics and Migrant Families," Journal of Home Economics, LV (October, 1963), p. 642.

¹⁰ Ramona Smith and Victor Christopherson, "Migration and Family Adjustment," Journal of Home Economics, LVIII (October, 1966), p. 671.

National Farm Workers Association. Workers began a march of three hundred eighty miles from Rio Grande City to Austin, Texas, seeking a minimum wage of \$1.25. Although Governor Conally did not call a special session of the legislature as they hoped, Hank Brown, head of the state AFL-CIO, had this to say, "There has never been such unity among the Mexican American people of this state."¹¹ Not only are migrants protesting their low wages but also the hiring of Mexican braceros. In May 1966, California workers struck, and threatened to do so again if more Mexicans were hired.

Things are indeed looking better for the migrants. Summer schools are being established in various states to help the children catch up on work missed during moves. Various agencies have been helpful in setting up day care centers, night classes for teenagers and adults, mothers' clubs and vocational training counseling. Various religious organizations have begun services and health centers staffed by their volunteer nurses and doctors. The staff of such health centers act as liasons for the workers to other health, welfare, and social agencies, schools, and the community in general, thus breaking down some barriers of indifference which

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LXVIII (September 12, 1966), p. 54.

exist. Government assistance under the Migrant Health Act passed in 1962 has given three million dollars for health projects in heavily populated migrant areas.¹² Some money has been allocated under section III B or the migrant title of the Economic Opportunity Act. Yet even this is less than under any other title.

The plight of the migrants is indeed depressing but after working along side them for even a short time one can not help but feel deeply involved in their lives. From the help offered by government and private agencies faint gleams of hope are slowly penetrating the blackness of their lives. The late Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell said, "The shameful migrant problem will finally be solved when there are enough Americans with wisdom, compassion and good sense to save their final censure for those who stand by and seem unable to find within their economy a place for conscience."¹³ Perhaps something can be done to alleviate the many distorted and abnormal effects produced by such a desperate existence. Truman H. Moore expressed the sentiment felt by the migrant in a statement from The Slaves We Rent.

¹² Wright, op. cit., p. 137.

¹³ _____, "Flight of Migrant America," op. cit., p. 34.

"They come from wherever men are desperate for work. They come by whatever means they can find. These are the migrants ... crossing and recrossing America, scouring the countryside in a land where the season never ends,"¹⁴

¹⁴Moore, op. cit., p. 55.

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