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Migrant labor

NO WORK TODAY!

The Plight of America's Migrants

BY VARDEN FULLER

(PUBLIC AFFAIRS PAMPHLET NO. 190)



NO WORK TODAY is a concise analysis of the Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor which was composed of Dr. M. T. van Hecke, Chairman; Noble Clark, W. M. Leiserson, Robert E. Lucey, and P. H. Odegard. The facts and statistics of the now historic Report have moved out from the printed pages to become live human beings whose hopes and frustrations, ceaseless wanderings near and far, often with homeless and unschooled children, have stirred the conscience, but not the action of the American people.

The pamphlet concludes with four practical recommendations which need the prompt consideration of the makers of American public opinion. These four simple recommendations are in behalf of hundreds of thousands of human beings who work and live in a twilight zone of cruel necessity, much complacency, and continuing neglect. This neglect of them is damaging to the fair meaning of America and the equal freedom and dignity of Americans.

Frank P. Graham

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NO WORK TODAY!

BY VARDEN FULLER

This pamphlet is a summary of "Migratory Labor in American Agriculture," a Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1951. Varden Fuller was Executive Secretary of the Commission and is Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics at the College of Agriculture, University of California.



Y APRIL OR MAY, each year, millions of American families are discussing summer vacation plans.

Father says, "Shall we go to the mountains this year, or to the seashore, or some attractive resort?" and Mother replies, "Let's wait till the school term ends before we decide".

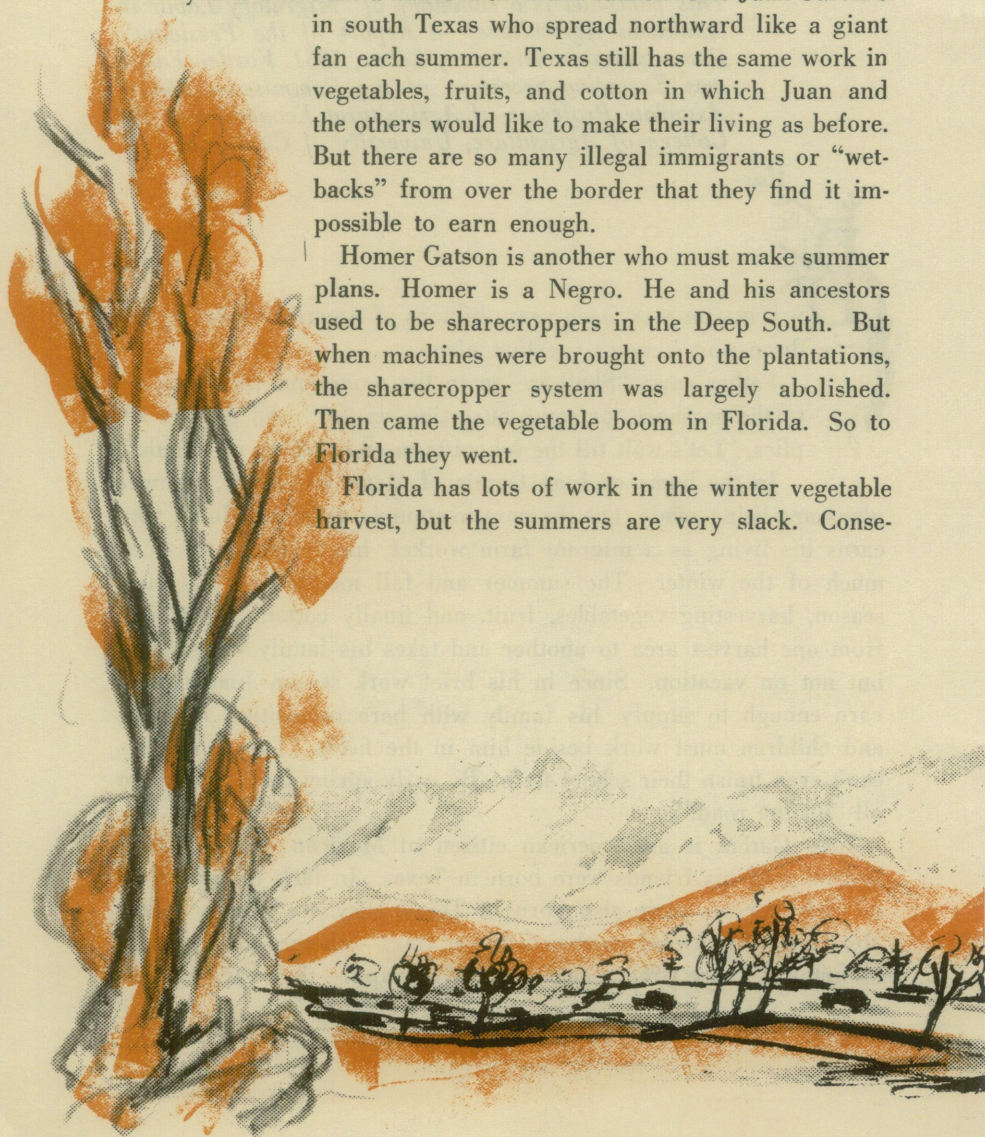
In the home of Juan Garcia of Mercedes, Texas, summer plans are being made, but the conversation is different. Juan, who earns his living as a migrant farm worker, has been out of work much of the winter. The summer and fall months are his busy season, harvesting vegetables, fruit, and finally cotton. He travels from one harvest area to another and takes his family with him—but not on vacation. Since in his brief work season Juan cannot earn enough to supply his family with bare necessities, his wife and children must work beside him in the fields. The youngsters can't even finish their school term. By early spring the family must all "hit the road."

Juan Garcia is an American citizen of Mexican descent. Juan and most of his friends were born in Texas. In fact, though many of their parents were also born in Texas, they are usually called Mexicans. Northward on their summer treks—whether to the Rocky Mountains, to the Great Lakes, or to Mississippi—they have a some-

what more distinctive name, for then they are usually called Texas-Mexicans or sometimes Texicans. A few of Juan Garcia's friends have worked sugar beets in Colorado or Michigan for years. Most of them, however, seldom if ever left Texas until the past six or seven years. There are a hundred thousand families like Juan Garcia's in south Texas who spread northward like a giant fan each summer. Texas still has the same work in vegetables, fruits, and cotton in which Juan and the others would like to make their living as before. But there are so many illegal immigrants or "wet-backs" from over the border that they find it impossible to earn enough.

Homer Gatson is another who must make summer plans. Homer is a Negro. He and his ancestors used to be sharecroppers in the Deep South. But when machines were brought onto the plantations, the sharecropper system was largely abolished. Then came the vegetable boom in Florida. So to Florida they went.

Florida has lots of work in the winter vegetable harvest, but the summers are very slack. Conse-

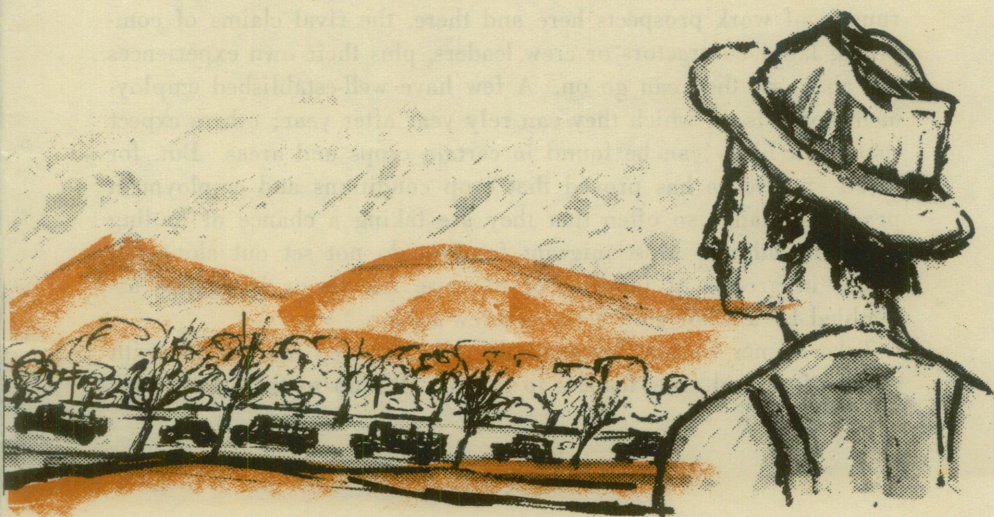


quently, Homer Gatson, like 15 or 20 thousand other Negro families, began to look northward into the Carolinas, Virginia, New Jersey, and New York for something to do in the summers. Some of them have been making this summer trip for twenty years, going as far north as Aroostook County, Maine.

Who Are the Migratory Workers?

Juan Garcia and Homer Gatson are, of course, not typical of all migratory families. There are other thousands of "Mexicans" and Negroes whose life is very similar although they live and work in other parts of the country. There are also thousands of Anglo migrants—including the remnants of the very large and very famous migration of "Okies" and "Arkies" into California and Arizona during the thirties. Most of the "Okies" who were on the move fifteen to twenty years ago are now in industry or have small businesses or farms. Many more have settled down in their own homes and make their living by doing temporary and seasonal farm work within their localities. But some still are migrants.

Only about one-half of the migratory workers of the United States are in citizen families; the other half, mostly aliens, are in the United States as single males. This nonfamily group includes



a few thousand Puerto Ricans who are citizens and who work chiefly in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and the Midwest. A few thousand Jamaican and Bahamian nationals are contracted and imported for seasonal employment along the Atlantic Coast and in the Midwest. By far the largest group of nonfamily alien migrants however, are the Mexican nationals, of whom currently some 200,000 are imported each year under temporary contracts, and from half a million to a million of whom are "wetbacks" who illegally cross the border.

For the Puerto Rican and the alien under contract, migrancy and seasonal employment appear to be comparatively simple and uncomplicated. Such workers do not have the special problems of those who travel with their families, and their contracts stipulate their employment and their living accommodations. In extreme contrast, the Mexican "wetback," being a refugee from the law, lives a furtive life of uncertainty and insecurity. And in sharp contrast to all these, the life of migrant citizen families is compounded out of the uncertainties of where to make a living and how the family will be housed and cared for.

The Search for Work

In April and May, these uncertainties hang heavy in the homes of Juan Garcia and Homer Gatson. The stories of fellow migrants, rumors of work prospects here and there, the rival claims of competing labor contractors or crew leaders, plus their own experiences are about all they can go on. A few have well-established employment contacts on which they can rely year after year; others expect that work likely can be found in certain crops and areas. But, for most, experience has proved that crop conditions and employment practices change so often that they are taking a chance of finding little or nothing. Most migrant families do not set out alone but rather in groups of families or of close friends or in groups assembled by a labor contractor or crew leader.

Take Homer Gatson, for example. His first step is to decide with which of several crew leaders to travel. (It's up to the crew leader

to locate and arrange the work.) He then has to decide whether his family should ride in the crew leader's truck, sharing expenses, or drive their own jalopy in the crew leader's party. Homer will not enter into any formal contract with his crew leader unless the leader pays for his meals and shelter, in which case he will have to pay the rates charged by the crew leader.

The usual Florida crew-leader arrangement is this: the crew leader makes a deal with a farmer to grade and sack his potatoes or to haul produce out of the field, provided the crew leader furnishes a crew of field hands. It is principally through the preferential employment rights thus obtained that the crew leader is compensated for his efforts in assembling a crew.

The crew-leader system has obvious advantages in reducing the uncertainty of finding work and living accommodations and in supplying transportation. Yet, it is also true that a crew member has the chance to work only when and where the crew leader is able to make a deal that is advantageous to him. Regardless of its merits, the crew-leader system is deeply entrenched among the Florida Negro migrants. The State Employment Services of the various Atlantic Coast states depend on the crew leader for recruiting and moving migratory workers; farmers prefer to deal with crew leaders rather than with individual workers.

For Juan Garcia, making the choice of where and how to go is much more complicated. To begin with, he has a far wider choice of crop and localities. In going north, he may bear westward to Colorado, Wyoming, or Montana, or he may go directly north into Minnesota, Wisconsin, or Michigan, or eastward into the cotton plantations of Arkansas and Mississippi. If he can, he will try to lay out a route on which he will find work in the early fruits, then into sugar-beet blocking and hoeing, then summer vegetables and fruits, and finally into the sugar-beet and cotton harvest. Juan Garcia also has a choice to make of how he will go. In the principal cities of south Texas, he may be solicited by numerous recruiting agents, some of whom may represent sugar companies, canning companies, or associations of farmers, and some of whom may be

labor contractors or recruiting agents in business for their own profit. By some of these soliciting agents, particularly those representing sugar or canning interests, Juan Garcia may be offered an advance of transportation money and assurance of living accommodations—possibly also a sort of employment contract. By entering into such an arrangement as this, the uncertainties of the situation are greatly reduced.

Also, like other migratory workers of Texas, and of the Southwest and the Pacific Coast, Juan Garcia may be confronted with the choice and sometimes with the necessity of joining the crew of a labor contractor. Labor contractors perform the same functions as the crew leader of the Atlantic Coast and usually many others in addition. Labor contractors usually have more formal arrangements with farm employers and greater control over the work to be done. They also more often provide transportation and maintain camps. It is commonly believed that both crew leaders and labor contractors make their incomes by charging fees of the worker for finding him employment.

Actually, the crew leader seldom profits directly from the worker but rather from the preferential employment that he establishes for himself. The labor contractor, in contrast, usually profits directly from the worker in one way or another. His profit may be made on the transportation, lodging, or other services supplied to the worker. Or his profit may be derived from the difference between the wages he pays to the workers in his crew and the amount received from the farmer for contracting the harvest of a particular crop. Many labor contractors profit in both ways.

Pattern of Uncertainty

People who are concerned with migratory labor—government officials, employers, and interested observers—are inclined to simplify migratory movements and to perceive them as systematic by classifying them into “patterns” or “streams.” By identifying these patterns or streams and drawing them on a map, the directions and sizes of the various movements are portrayed. But the notion of

migratory patterns, as currently used, contributes about as much to misunderstanding as it does to clarification.

True, the seasonal movement of people from one area to another follows fairly well-defined routes. But this does not mean that the same individual families move regularly along these routes, that such families have known destinations, that they have assurance of employment on arrival, and that they "follow the sun" systematically from one harvest to the next. If one pays attention to the experiences of individual families, the orderliness, the stability, and the regularity and assurance of employment that are implied by the concept of migratory patterns are all cast into doubt. After surveying work and migration histories of individuals and families, the picture that emerges is one of trial and error, of disappointment or rebuke here or there, of a great deal of frantic movement within the season and from one season to the next, most of it based on rumor or on the chance that things will prove to be better somewhere else. A few have fairly certain work connections, but they are mainly individuals and small groups who work in the minor crops and in the smaller areas which lie outside the paths of the major movements. Within the major migratory labor areas, the aggregate movement may seem to resemble a pattern, but it is a mistake to assume that the lives of the majority are patterned on anything except harsh uncertainty.

Earnings, Weather, and Luck

This uncertainty is a double one: (1) There is the hazard of whether there will be a crop on which to work. (2) There is always doubt whether the migrant will get the work he expects even if there is a good crop. In consequence, a hopeful trek of hundreds of miles may end with the crushing discovery that the crop is late or has failed or that other migrants have arrived earlier and have filled up the available housing and that there is no work to be had. The whole system of migratory labor is so chaotic and unsystematic that a comfortable balance of labor supply and demand is rare and unusual. Either surpluses or shortages are more normal.

These hazards and uncertainties help to explain why migratory workers earn so much less than many people think they ought to. Quite frequently, one encounters the belief that migrants in a certain pattern should get at least 200 days of employment a year. This is arrived at by adding up the estimated days of crop activity that lie along the route. Unfortunately, this estimate does not allow for the many disappointments that befall the migrant worker. Actually, according to the surveys that have been made, the male adult migratory worker who gets more than 100 days of farm employment during the year is lucky. And many of these are short days that start late or end early.

Migrants do not work at individual jobs like tending a machine, or occupying a station on an assembly line, or driving a truck. A hundredweight of cotton or a hamper of beans is the same whether picked by a child or by an adult and earns the same wage. Since farm employers and labor contractors seldom exclude women and frequently allow children as well, and since the family usually needs the earnings, the entire family often works as a unit. Moreover, except in the rare instances of child-care facilities being provided, it is easier and safer for children to work along with parents than to be left behind in camp or in a locked automobile. Children as young as seven and eight years of age are often found at work in the fields, and child-labor laws, even where they do exist, have proved difficult to enforce.

When crop conditions are favorable and the work force of the locality is not diluted with excessive labor, the family may make impressive earnings. Such fortunate experiences are the exception rather than the rule. When migrants' earnings are systematically investigated and the disappointing experiences as well as the favorable are brought into the picture, the record is not one to evoke envy—not, at least, by prevailing American standards of income. The most recent national survey of migratory labor earnings, made by the U. S. Department of Agriculture for the year 1949, revealed that average earnings of adult male workers were approximately \$600 for the year; only one out of four earned \$1,000 or more.

Even with such additional earnings as wives and children are able to contribute, the typical family earned no more than \$1,000. These are gross earnings and do not allow for the transportation expense incurred in moving about in search of work.

Wage rates to farm labor are higher in the North than in the South and also higher in the West than in the East. Accordingly earnings in Colorado ought to be comparatively favorable. Yet, the National Child Labor Committee found, in a Colorado study, that 1949 migrant earnings from all sources averaged \$1,424 a family. "About 80 out of each 100 families had, somehow, to support themselves, travel from job location to job location on an annual cash income of less than \$2,000," reports the Committee.

Since details of the national scene are impossible in a publication of this size, perhaps some thumbnail sketches of a season's events within a locality may help to bring the many forces into perspective. One way of deriving such a thumbnail sketch is from the weekly situation reports of the state employment offices. From one week to another, the reports for a particular state give a brief account of labor conditions and the progress of the crops. The following 1950 season eleven-week summary for Mississippi is instructive to the reader who carefully notes the details. These reports are edited only slightly to eliminate the less important parts and to clarify some of the statements:

August 14: Mississippi estimated (cotton) crop production is 1,420,000 bales. Off-farm labor will be needed in most areas by August 21 and out-of-area workers by September 1. Orders for 8,000 out-of-area domestic workers now being processed and certifications have been made for 2,200 Mexican nationals.

August 21: Weather conditions generally favorable. A few bales of cotton have been ginned. Total out-of-area demand for workers now exceeds 11,000.

September 5: Rains delayed opening and picking of cotton last week; however, prospects for good crop are favorable if rains cease. Out-of-area crews are moving in and some planters are scheduled for contracting of Mexican nationals this week. Total out-of-area demand is now 14,000.

September 11: Rain and cool weather have delayed the opening and harvesting of cotton crop. Crop now 20 per cent open, 5 per cent harvested. Out-of-area workers moving in and a heavy influx expected this week from

within state, Alabama, Texas, and Great Lakes area. 419 Mexican nationals contracted through 9/8/50. Current out-of-area demand for 14,000 workers. Known domestic sources of supply approximate 12,000. Current wage from \$2 to \$2.50 cwt.

September 18: Adverse weather conditions continued throughout cotton area last week. Some areas were able to get few days dry enough for picking and defoliating. Approximately 4500 out of area workers moved into delta area, including 1100 Mexican nationals. Price per cwt. has gone to \$3.00 in remote areas. Average price \$2.50. Anticipated movement of crews from Great Lakes and Alabama has not materialized yet and there is current demand for 13,000 out of area workers.

September 25: Favorable weather during past week allowed more cotton picked and more defoliating done than any time since season began. Demand for workers also greater as three weeks' bad weather delayed harvest, and we are in our peak demand period. There is still demand on order for 11,000 out of areas workers.

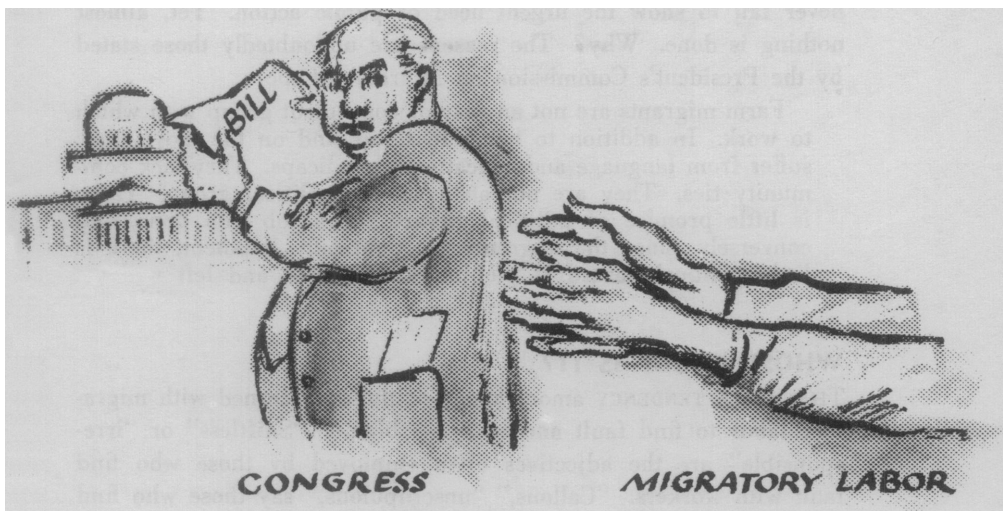
October 2: Unfavorable weather prevailed over most of delta area during past week greatly retarding picking. Where ground and weather conditions permitted few mechanical pickers of California were in operation. Out of area workers have not yet been acquired in the numbers anticipated and heavy demand continues to exist. Prices for picking \$3.00 to \$3.50 in most areas and 50 cents for crew leader for weighing and hauling. Approximately 80 per cent of cotton in whole delta area is open and estimated 30 per cent of crop harvested.

October 16: Favorable weather during past two weeks aided materially in harvest of cotton. Delta cotton now approximately 95 per cent open, 60 per cent harvested. Cleveland and Indianola now areas of greatest demand; supply sources are requested to contact these offices as crews become available. Wage scale remains from \$2.50 to \$3.50 cwt. with average wage being \$3.00 to picker and 50 cents to crew leader for weighing and hauling.

October 30: Cotton crop in Yazoo-Mississippi Delta approximately 82 per cent harvested. Our status has now shifted from a labor demand to a labor supply area.

Plight Largely Ignored

Although Juan Garcia and Homer Gatson are among the nation's least-privileged citizens, the great wave of national social progress has brought them little or nothing. For others have come farm price supports, minimum wages, protection of the right to organize, government housing, and credit for homes, farms, and industrial plants, unemployment insurance, old age and survivors' insurance, and the like. Migratory birds in flight are provided with rest havens



at taxpayers' expense; cattle in transit are by law guaranteed a respite for feed and rest. But, to Homer Gatson and Juan Garcia, such protection is scarcely real, for they are the great exception. "All . . . except farm laborers . . .," say the federal statutes. "Nonresidents shall be ineligible . . .," say the state and county laws. Such a world of exceptions can scarcely be other than drab and dingy. Its very realities—uncertainty, insecurity, poverty, and filth—are the qualities most of us like to think are unreal.

But now and then something happens in the dim world of the migratory laborer: a truckload of workers smashes up and many are killed; an ex-chicken coop catches fire and the migrants living in it are burned to death; babies of migrant families are reported to have died from malnutrition and neglect. With such reports the public conscience stirs uneasily and, if several such incidents occur within a brief period, the public conscience is momentarily aroused. Not least prominent among those newly stirred to interest in migratory affairs are the governmental commissions who are assigned to investigate and to report on "the situation." These investigations

never fail to show the urgent need of public action. Yet, almost nothing is done. Why? The reasons are undoubtedly those stated by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor:

Farm migrants are not an easy or convenient group with which to work. In addition to being footloose and on the move, they suffer from language and educational handicaps. They lack community ties. They are not an articulate political group. There is little promise of political reward for a job well done, and conversely, since the migrants are politically impotent, there is little political hazard if the job is neglected and left undone.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

THERE IS A TENDENCY among many of those concerned with migratory labor to find fault and to assess blame. "Shiftless" or "irresponsible" are the adjectives often employed by those who find fault with workers. "Callous," "unscrupulous," say those who find fault with farm employers or labor contractors. On occasions, the use of such adjectives, whether against workers or employers, may seem to be appropriately descriptive. Yet, little is gained by charging shiftlessness if the migrant family becomes destitute immediately after the harvest season or by charging irresponsibility if the migrant leaves a locality before the crop is completely in.

Similarly, little is gained by charging the farm employer with callousness if, in attempting to assure himself of a labor supply for a vital harvest, he resorts to the use of a labor contractor or if his labor recruiting activities result in a labor supply larger than is actually required. The important and significant thing is that both worker and employer are operating within an economic environment having particular characteristics, and the behavior of both parties is inevitably influenced by these characteristics. Hence, it is quite useless to expect a person who lives in a world of irresponsibility to behave responsibly; it is equally useless to expect much to result from the laying of blame.

Of the hundreds of witnesses representing many and diverse points of view who testified to the President's Commission on Migra-

tory Labor, virtually none was satisfied with the present migratory labor system of the United States. In the view of the migratory worker, it is a hazardous and unsatisfactory way to make a living. In the view of the farm employer, citizen migratory workers are an uncertain and irresponsible labor supply. From the viewpoint of local health officials, influxes of migrants aggravate health problems and overtax community health facilities. Local school officials find themselves literally swamped for a month or so at the beginning or at the end of the year, sometimes at both. Social workers abhor the absence of facilities for the proper care of children and the make-shift housing which is found along the migratory routes and in the work locations.

How It Came About

Why, then, if the migratory labor system is so bad, did we get into it and why do we keep it?

Some people tell us we have migrants because there is a class of people who like to be migrants, who like to move around to escape their old environment, to find new adventures, to follow the sun. Others tell us the reason we have migrants is that the national economy requires migratory workers—there are large acreages of fruits, vegetables, and the like to be harvested, and labor not locally available to do it.

Actually, neither of these explanations is adequate. Neither Juan Garcia nor Homer Gatson took their children out of school and started a migratory trek because they had itchy feet or because some distant place had crops to be worked. Both left home and commenced a seasonal migration for a reason that is astonishingly simple—they had to. For Homer Gatson, the slack Florida summers provide no work; for Juan Garcia, even though south Texas has lots of work, there is no longer the chance to make a living in competition with the “wetbacks.”

Whether rich or poor, Americans are enthusiastic travelers, but to believe that enthusiasm for travel motivates people to become laborers is to be mostly wrong. Only five out of a hundred migra-

tory families studied in Colorado by the National Child Labor Committee said, "We like it."

If migratory people dislike the life they lead, why don't they settle down? The answer to this is: They do—when they have the chance. When jobs were plentiful during the past decade, most of the people who were the migratory laborers of 1930 to 1940 settled down. California used to be the biggest migratory labor state in the Union, but in the past several years, many of its migrants have been able to find enough work within localities so they could settle down. Now, California, still with a vast seasonal labor requirement, has fewer migrants than formerly, and their movement is now primarily within the state.

Our migratory population changes from year to year in its composition and size. The migratory labor system is a kind of residual pocket in the nation's structure of occupations. For more than forty years, the farm population has had the highest rate of natural increase of any major sector in the nation. At the same time, farm people in very large numbers have had to seek opportunity in urban and industrial occupations. In this process of rural-urban migration, part of the population cast loose does not succeed in making a clean

break out of agriculture. A group is left unabsorbed by commerce and industry. In depression and recession, this group backs up like an obstructed irrigation stream. The only real difference between those who successfully make the break and those who are left behind is occupational preparation and "luck." And there is more "luck" when times are good.

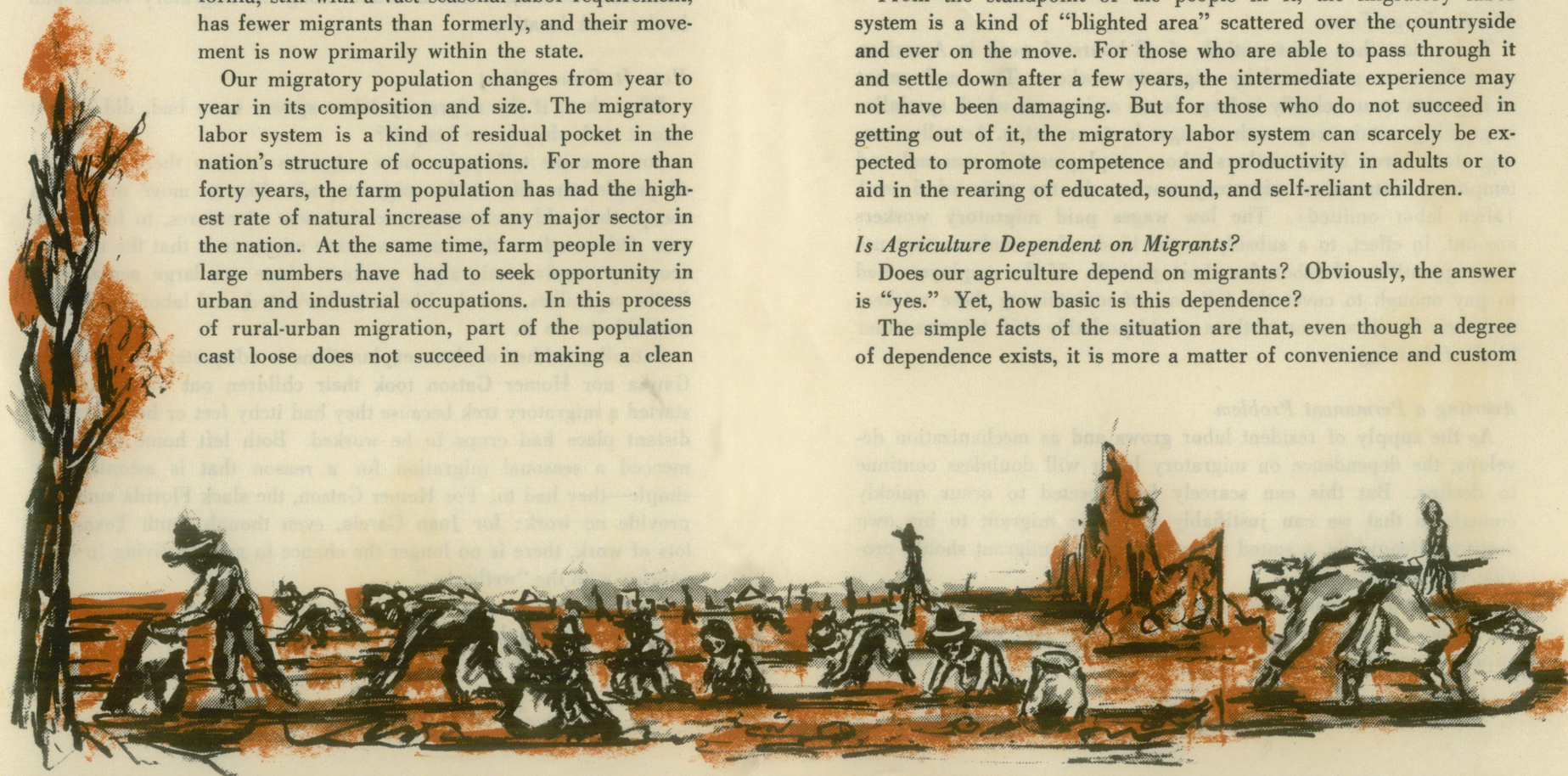
Hoeing sugar beets, picking cotton, picking cherries, and the like, are about the only kinds of work available to this group. This sort of employment is "open" because there are no designated jobs, no seniority, no employment rights, and no experience needed.

From the standpoint of the people in it, the migratory labor system is a kind of "blighted area" scattered over the countryside and ever on the move. For those who are able to pass through it and settle down after a few years, the intermediate experience may not have been damaging. But for those who do not succeed in getting out of it, the migratory labor system can scarcely be expected to promote competence and productivity in adults or to aid in the rearing of educated, sound, and self-reliant children.

Is Agriculture Dependent on Migrants?

Does our agriculture depend on migrants? Obviously, the answer is "yes." Yet, how basic is this dependence?

The simple facts of the situation are that, even though a degree of dependence exists, it is more a matter of convenience and custom



rather than a basic condition imposed by nature. Most of the migratory labor "requirements" that exist today had their beginnings in the 1930's. Finding that labor could be had to meet short seasonal peaks, farmers went ahead with the plantings of large acreages of crops having intensive labor requirements. With the plentiful migratory labor of that decade, many new areas were developed which, by reason of their isolation from population centers, it would have been impractical to farm without migratory labor readily at hand.

As a result of the subsequent growth of population in most such areas, the dependence on outside labor has become much less.

Chiefly Large Farms

Today, less than one-twentieth of all hours of work in American agriculture are performed by migratory workers. The employment of migrants occurs chiefly in large farms or in areas which specialize in growing certain crops such as sugar beets or cotton. Actually, non-migratory hired farm workers whose employment is seasonal and temporary outnumber migratory workers in the ratio of 5 to 1 (alien labor omitted). The low wages paid migratory workers amount, in effect, to a subsidy to the kinds of agriculture that use large quantities of labor for short periods. If the employers had to pay enough to cover the full cost of maintaining these workers and their families, some of them would probably shift to some other kind of farming.

Averting a Permanent Problem

As the supply of resident labor grows and as mechanization develops, the dependence on migratory labor will doubtless continue to decline. But this can scarcely be expected to occur quickly enough so that we can justifiably leave the migrant to his own destiny. Meanwhile, a sound policy toward the migrant should provide two things:

(1) assurance that those drawn into the migratory streams do not become permanently absorbed therein, that they have maximum opportunities to settle down and enter more attractive occupations

(2) assurance that we do not develop a permanent cancer in the national occupational structure that feeds on the economically unfortunate from home and abroad.

We have seen that most of the earlier groups once in migratory labor have succeeded in getting out. But the prosperous decade that most recently enabled the majority of the "Okies" to do so by-passed Homer Gatson and Juan Garcia. Moreover, current prospects hold little assurance that Negroes or Mexican-Americans will be able to move quickly or easily out of migratory labor. For the Negro, the general movement out of southern agriculture into the North and into industrial occupations will most probably leave a peripheral margin of migratory laborers.

For Mexican-Americans who have been migratory laborers longer than any other single group, the future is far from promising. Mexican-Americans are not being absorbed into the cities and into industrial occupations fast enough to relieve the pressure of the growth in their own numbers, and this pressure is greatly aggravated by the "wetbacks."

During World War II, the United States as an emergency measure contracted aliens from Mexico and the Caribbean countries for temporary employment. This emergency is evidently becoming permanent, for our government has continued to permit alien labor contracting by farm employers although it was stopped after the war for other types of employment.

We have seen that our system of migratory labor is largely accidental in origin. It is accidental in the sense that the circumstances that created it were not designed and made effective by any particular group. Yet neglectful and passive policies of government toward an unfortunate and politically impotent segment of the nation have had the effect of building these accidents into a permanent system. This system now is well on the way to becoming a completely alien system, and is making a mockery of the spirit and intent of our immigration laws.

To blame the government is, of course, nothing more than to blame ourselves. In writing our laws and in the administration of

them, we have not only neglected but have discriminated against the migrant and against farm labor in general.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

REMEDIAL ACTIONS may be undertaken in several directions. They would include:

(1) Programs and activities to alleviate the most obvious and urgent needs.

(2) Programs and activities to promote self-reliance and to increase skills in order that migratory laborers may be able to find better jobs.

(3) Adopt and vigorously adhere to a public policy that will "raise the standards and conditions of work in migratory farm employment and thereby eliminate the dependence of farm employers on poverty at home and misfortune abroad as the foundation of the recruitment of their labor supply."

In the undertaking of these various steps, the best results will be attained by a continuous and coordinated effort on the part of farm organizations, private welfare associations, labor unions, and the various agencies of government. In the past, private, local, and state agencies have tried spasmodically to deal with migrancy problems. Their achievements have been small. In large part, the meager results are attributable to lack of legal authority and to slender resources, but also to lack of coordination among the states and within the agencies of the federal government.

An Agency for Migrants?

Many people have suggested there ought to be an agency created especially for migrants. The President's Commission did not, however, see the creation of such an agency as the desirable solution. The reasoning and conclusion of the commission on this matter were:

Sound public administration in a democracy requires that agencies designed to serve the particular needs of special occupational or income groups in the population be kept at a mini-

mum. Agencies to serve all segments of the population are essential to sound and democratic government. But with such a group as the farm migrants, though their needs are particular and urgent, they are not in good position to make them known and thereby to share in the general service programs of government agencies at all levels.

We do not believe that the answer to the neglected needs of migratory farm workers is to create a new bureau or agency to serve their particular requirements. The Commission is of the opinion that in the long run the needs of migrants can best be met by broadening and extending to them the basic services which are designed to serve the population in general. We are therefore recommending that program responsibilities should be kept in the regular agencies. Something must be done, however, to achieve a more closely integrated approach to the manifold problems of migratory farm workers by these various agencies and to provide a voice for the migrant where none now exists. Consequently, the Commission recommends that a coordinating body be established at the Federal level of Government and also in those States in which migratory labor is a problem of major proportions.

A Federal Committee on Migratory Farm Labor composed of three public members and five federal agency representatives was recommended. This committee was to have no administrative responsibilities but was to coordinate and stimulate activities, contribute to the understanding of the migrancy problem, and recommend changes in legislation and administration.

Housing

Housing, of all the particular problems of migratory labor, is the one that invariably evokes the greatest sympathy. Hence, it is not unnatural that the immediate response of observers should be that "farmers should build better housing" or "there should be government housing for these people." But although these would appear to be practical suggestions, will they stand the test of rigid examination? Is it appropriate that farm employers be required to build quality housing for short-term employees? There are sound arguments in the negative: (1) such housing would be a financial

burden on the farmer in view of the short period of occupancy; (2) employer housing tends to restrict the freedom of the occupant to seek work for others within the locality and to bargain individually or collectively for terms and conditions of employment. In society at large, the tendency has been to do away with "the company town." Should the migratory laborer be the exception?

Should government housing be the alternative? Again, there is the matter of the very high cost per day of occupancy when housing is supplied for short-period use. Additionally, there is the fact that good housing encourages settling down and to offer such encouragement in areas of insufficient employment opportunity for self-support is undesirable for both the migrant and the community. Yet, the migratory labor housing built by the Farm Security Administration in the latter 1930's, though it housed comparatively few people, not only led to significant housing improvements but was also a morale booster that salvaged many human derelicts.

Increasingly, farm employers are realizing that good housing is an important factor in attracting and holding capable workers. Hence, except in areas such as the Rio Grande Valley where "wet-back" labor can be obtained whether there is housing or not, on-farm and community housing for migrants is improving. In some localities groups of farmers cooperate in maintaining camps for migrants. This provides an opportunity for better community relationships as well as for developing health and welfare programs and for making fuller use of migrant labor.

Commission's Recommendations

It is only realistic to anticipate that on-job housing for the bulk of the migrants will continue for some time to lie somewhere between what the employer has to offer to attract labor and camp facilities that meet minimum standards of decency. Government housing activity, pursuant to the policy declarations of the Housing Acts of 1937 and 1949, can however be directed toward the needs of the migrant in his home location. The recommendations of the Commission on Housing included the following:

That the Department of Agriculture be empowered to extend grants-in-aid to States for labor camps in areas of large and sustained seasonal labor demand provided the States agree to construct and operate such camps under standards promulgated by the Federal Committee on Migratory Farm Labor. Since such projects are to be constructed and operated for the principal purpose of housing agricultural workers and their families, preference of occupancy should be given those engaged in seasonal agricultural work. Costs should be defrayed by charges to occupants.

That when housing is deficient in areas where there is large seasonal employment of migratory farm workers, but where the seasonal labor need is of short duration, the Department of Agriculture establish transit camp sites without individual housing. These camp sites should be equipped with water, sanitary facilities including showers, laundry, and cooking arrangements. They should be adequately supervised.

That the Department of Agriculture be authorized, and supplied with the necessary funds, to extend carefully supervised credit in modest amounts to assist migratory farm workers to acquire or to construct homes in areas where agriculture is in need of a considerable number of seasonal workers during the crop season.

That states be encouraged to enact State housing codes establishing minimum health and sanitation standards for housing in unincorporated areas.

That the Public Housing Administration of the Housing and Home Finance Agency develop a rural nonfarm housing program to include housing needs of migrants in their home-base situation.

Health and Welfare

The Commission also made several recommendations dealing with health, welfare, child labor, and education:

That because present unemployment compensation legislation is not adapted to meeting the unemployment problems of most migratory farm workers, the Federal Social Security Act be amended to provide matching grants to States for general assistance on the condition that no needy person be denied assistance because of lack of legal residence status.

That the Public Health Service Act be amended to provide, under the supervision of the Surgeon General, matching grants

to States, to conduct health programs among migratory farm laborers to deal particularly with such diseases as tuberculosis, venereal diseases, diarrhea, enteritis, and dysentery, and to conduct health clinics for migratory farm workers.

That the 1949 child-labor amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act be retained and vigorously enforced.

That the Fair Labor Standards Act be further amended to restrict the employment of children under 14 years of age on farms outside of school hours.

That State child-labor laws be brought to a level at least equal to the present Fair Labor Standards Act and made fully applicable to agriculture.

That the child-labor provisions of the Sugar Act be vigorously enforced.

That the Federal Committee on Migratory Farm Labor, through the cooperation of public and private agencies, including the United States Office of Education, State educational agencies, the National Education Association, universities, and the American Council on Education, develop a plan which will provide an adequate program of education for migratory workers and their children. This may include Federal grants-in-aid to the States.

That the Agricultural Extension Services, in fuller discharge of their statutory obligations to the entire farm population, provide educational assistance to agricultural laborers, especially migratory workers, to enable these people to increase their skills and efficiency in agriculture and to improve their personal welfare. The Agricultural Extension Services should expand their home demonstration work to supply the families of farm workers, particularly migratory farm workers, instruction in nutrition, home-making, infant care, sanitation, and similar subjects.

That the Federal Government, in accordance with the long-standing policy that agricultural extension work is a joint responsibility of the Federal Government and the several States, share in the cost of the proposed educational program for farm workers and their families.

Higher Wages

Unquestionably, inadequate incomes are the basic problem, underlying all others. Low and unreliable incomes are compounded out of poor wage rates and meager employment. Since low wages and unemployment are both peculiarly acute for migrants and other

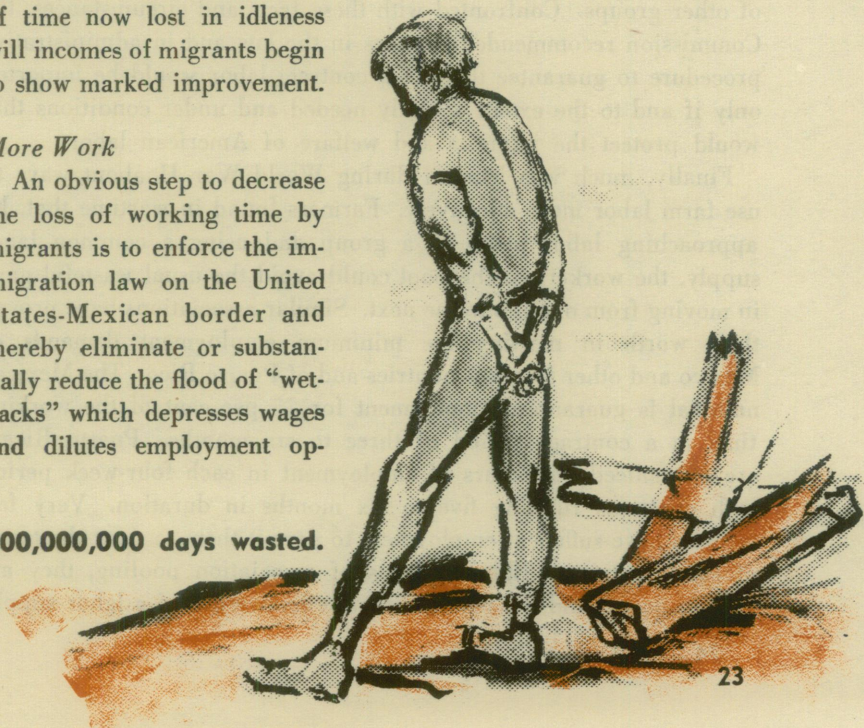
farm laborers, it is ironic that, in devising its security system, the nation should have excluded them from the minimum wage law, from unemployment insurance, and from social security. Equally inexplicable is the exclusion of farm laborers, who particularly need it, from the protection of the rights or organize and to bargain collectively. Since these protections were withheld from portions of the population whose need is most urgent, and since coverage under these programs can be expected to increase the welfare and self-reliance of farm labor, including migrants, the Commission recommended that the exclusions of farm labor be removed.

The protections of minimum wages, of old-age and survivor's insurance, of unemployment insurance, and of the right to organize and bargain collectively should all help to solve the basic income problem. Yet, we cannot expect these measures to bring migratory labor incomes to anything like acceptable standards. Only by salvaging some of the vast amount of time now lost in idleness will incomes of migrants begin to show marked improvement.

More Work

An obvious step to decrease the loss of working time by migrants is to enforce the immigration law on the United States-Mexican border and thereby eliminate or substantially reduce the flood of "wet-backs" which depresses wages and dilutes employment op-

200,000,000 days wasted.



portunities of American workers—particularly in the Southwest. To achieve this end, the Commission made a number of recommendations. Primarily these were concerned with eliminating loopholes in the immigration laws.

Another step in salvaging some of the great loss of migratory labor time is to make certain that the contracted aliens brought in for temporary employment do not actually compete with and displace domestic labor. Contracted aliens are not supposed to “adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers similarly employed.” Nevertheless, the Commission found the measures taken by federal agencies in pursuance of this guarantee to be unimpressive and imperfect, with a great deal of working at cross-purposes, much duplication in some parts of the alien program, and general neglect of others. It was found also that the already meager job opportunities for American farm laborers were shrinking and that their already low wages were falling further behind those of other groups. Confronted with these facts and circumstances, the Commission recommended changes in the law and in administrative procedure to guarantee that alien contract labor would be imported only if and to the extent actually needed and under conditions that would protect the interests and welfare of American labor.

Finally, much was learned during World War II about ways to use farm labor more effectively. Farmers found in wartime that, by approaching labor needs as a group and using a common labor supply, the workers in the pool could avoid the usual wasteful gaps in moving from one job to the next. Similar associations have proved their worth in meeting the minimum employment demands of Mexico and other foreign countries and of Puerto Rico. The Mexican national is guaranteed employment for 75 per cent of the working time in a contract period of three to six months. Puerto Ricans are guaranteed 160 hours of employment in each four-week period with contracts running five to six months in duration. Very few farmers have sufficient employment to permit them to meet the terms of such contracts. But by means of association pooling, they are able to do so, and the result is more effective use of a labor supply.

Notwithstanding its demonstrated success with foreign contract labor and Puerto Ricans, employers have been slow to extend similar contract-pooling arrangements to native Americans. When asked why, farm employer spokesmen expressed doubt that American farm workers would be reliable in keeping their side of the contractual obligation and also made the probably more significant point "you don't have to do it if you engage the local laborers."

Nevertheless, any constructive measures that would help to salvage any part of the 200,000,000 days that are presently wasted in the migratory labor system are worth consideration. These days are immensely valuable to the economy. They are even more valuable to the morale and self-respect of the people who are denied the privilege of putting them to use. Accordingly, the Commission recommended that the pooling-contract arrangement be adopted and extensively used for domestic labor.

PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

JUST AS THE Commission's Report was completed and submitted to the President, the Senate and House Agricultural Committees were preparing bills to authorize the Secretary of Labor to recruit Mexican agricultural workers and transport them to and from the United States. For several years, Mexican labor had been recruited by farm employers and admitted under the terms of intergovernmental agreements between the United States and Mexico. According to the House report (No. 326, April 16, 1951), "a number of problems have arisen in connection with the operation of the present program which have caused dissatisfaction among the farmers employing such workers as well as on the part of the Mexican Government." Actually, the congressional activity resulted from the insistence of Mexico that the recruiting of Mexican workers be done not by private employers but by an official agency of the United States and that the United States guarantee the performance of the work contracts. Lacking the authority to do either of these, the Government presented the matter to Congress.

The Senate bill (S. 984) was debated within days of the submission of the Commission's Report, and in the course of the debate several amendments in line with the Commission's recommendations were adopted. These amendments of the Senate bill would have established minimum conditions under which Mexican labor could be imported and also would have prohibited the employment of "wetback" labor. However, parallel amendments were not made in the House, and the Senate amendments were lost in conference. Swept clean of any trace of the Commission's recommendations, S. 984 was approved by the President on July 12, 1951.

However, in approving the Mexican labor bill, President Truman explained his action:

If promptly followed by other needed measures, this Act can be a first step toward a comprehensive program to bring badly needed improvements in the living and working conditions of migratory farm workers, both foreign and domestic. At the same time, this Act can help to assure an adequate supply of labor to meet the needs of American agriculture. On the other hand, if enactment of this legislation becomes an excuse for delay on these other measures, it will hamper our efforts to meet more basic problems—including the pressing problem of illegal immigration.

For that reason, I could not have given my approval to this Act had I not been assured by Congressional leaders that supplementary legislation and appropriations would receive prompt attention at this session.

The President noted that this legislation did not "face up to [the] basic issue" posed by his Migratory Labor Commission, i.e., should it be national policy to raise employment standards in agriculture to prevailing American standards so that Americans "without being forced by dire necessity, will be willing to stay in agriculture and become a dependable labor supply"? In this connection, the President stated further:

If we are to begin to meet the basic problem, we must do two things right away. First, we must put a stop to the employment of illegal immigrants. Second, we must improve the use of our domestic labor force. These steps will require more sanctions than our laws now provide and more administrative machinery and services than are now available.

The President then asked for the legislation on which assurance of prompt attention by congressional leaders had been given:

1. To provide punishment for the offense of harboring and concealing aliens who have entered this country illegally.

2. To clearly establish the authority of personnel of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to inspect places of employment, without a warrant, where they have reason to believe that illegal immigrants are working or quartered.

3. A supplemental appropriation to the Immigration and Naturalization Service to step up enforcement of the immigration laws in the Southwest.

4. Additional appropriations for the Farm Placement Service of the Labor Department to expand its activities relating to more effective use of domestic labor.

This program was not achieved. There have been no additional appropriations other than to pay the costs of recruiting, importing, and exporting Mexican nationals under Public Law 78. The Walters-Kilgore Bill, which would have strengthened immigration law against the "wetback" flood, finally passed in the second session of the 82nd Congress but was stripped of significant equipment for doing the job it was set up to accomplish.

An additional congressional action of much significance, but so far without legislative accomplishment, was the hearings by the Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in February and March, 1952. These hearings were directed to the finding and recommendations of the President's Commission with particular attention to restrictions on importation of foreign contract labor, to the regulation of labor contractors, and to more adequate living accommodations for migratory labor families. The hearings of the Subcommittee, an informative and valuable document in two parts and comprising almost 1,100 pages, have been printed. A bill to establish the Federal Committee on Migratory Labor, with accompanying report (No. 1686), was prepared and reported out unani-

mously by the Committee in June, 1952. This bill did not come before the Senate.

The significance of recent activities, particularly of the President's Commission and of the Senate Subcommittee, reaches far beyond legislative accomplishments. Administrators of federal agencies concerned with various aspects of migratory labor have become more alert to their opportunities under present laws and more aware of public interest in the responsibilities to which they are already obligated. Scores of civic and religious organizations, long virtually alone in their concern for migratory labor, have taken courage from the recent show of government interest. In 1952 a Labor Advisory Committee to the Farm Placement Service, with representatives from organized labor, was organized and has made recommendations for improving administration under existing laws. Likewise, the state bureaus and commissions on migrant labor have accelerated their attack on migratory problems, notwithstanding the fact that most of them are interstate in character.

WHAT TO READ

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141. ENJOY YOUR CHILD—AGES 1, 2, AND 3
139. LIVE LONG AND LIKE IT
138. GOOD NEWS ABOUT DIABETES
137. KNOW YOUR HEART
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