

Migrant Labor  
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# ADrift ON THE LAND

BY PAUL S. TAYLOR



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*B. Benton*

# ADrift ON THE LAND

By PAUL S. TAYLOR

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IN THE early 1930's a flow of country people westward from the Great Plains to California and the Pacific Coast began on a large scale. By 1935 it had become a human river. This migration of native Americans has captured the imagination of the country. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, telling of the trek of the Joad family from Oklahoma to the Pacific Coast and up and down the valleys of California following the crops, has been the most discussed book in years in every section of the country. Like another great American novel, this modern *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has stirred emotions deeply—and divided them. It is received by some as a clarion call to a crusade. By others it is shunned as obscene or “unfair,” to be banned or burned. Almost simultaneously appeared Carey McWilliams' *Factories of the Field*, which holds that concentration of control of the industrial agriculture of California rests on ownership of land in great holdings, some of them dating back to huge Spanish grants. Both books have been warmly praised throughout the country, and both have been attacked.

Professor Taylor has long specialized in agricultural labor problems. He is a consulting economist of the Social Security Board, a member of the California State Board of Agriculture, and the advisory committee of the California State Employment Commission, and formerly regional labor advisor of the United States Resettlement Administration.

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*"The . . . terror of drought"*

## The Great Migration

The Joads had no choice but to leave their home in search of a living. John Steinbeck has dramatized the combined effects of years of depression, drought, and mechanization which finally snapped the bonds that held many on their farms. Gradually more and more farmers, farm laborers, and small townfolk were stricken. The old outlets for the young to northern factories had been closed since 1929, and the back country was filling up with casualties from industry. In 1934 and 1936 came the brown terror of drought. There was a severe drought again in 1939. The movement of distressed people out of the Great Plains became the tide which Steinbeck describes:

[Highway] 66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. . . . The people streamed out on 66, sometimes a single car, sometimes a little caravan. All day they rolled slowly along the road, and at night they stopped near water. In the day ancient leaky radiators sent up columns of steam, loose connecting rods hammered and pounded. And the men driving the trucks and the overloaded cars listened apprehensively. How far between towns? It is a terror between towns. If something breaks—well, if something breaks we camp right here while Jim walks to town and gets a part and walks back and—how much food we got?

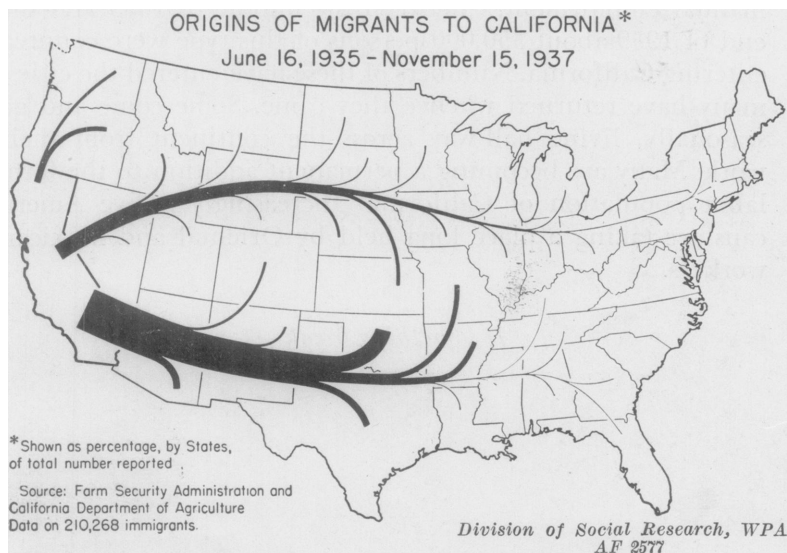


These people come from all over the Great Plains, from Texas to North Dakota. They are bound for all the states from Arizona to Washington. The only figures we have on the flow of people are those gathered at the California border, where movement is greatest. This count by the California Department of Agriculture reports people of all ages who enter that state in motor vehicles in parties which appear "in need of manual employment." Between the middle of 1935 and the end of 1939 about 350,000 persons of this type were counted entering California. Numbers of these have entered the cities; many have returned whence they came. Some come and go seasonally, living half-way across the continent from their work. Many are becoming a permanent addition to the farm labor population of California. Increasingly native Americans are taking a place long held by Oriental and Mexican workers.

*"If something breaks—"*



As may be seen from the map below, they come from every state in the Union, but mainly from the Southwest and the Great Plains. Nearly half of those who have migrated to California come from the four states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. More than a quarter of those arriving in Oregon and Washington come from the West North Central states, mostly those of the Great Plains.



## MILLIONS ON THE MOVE

THIS westward movement is only part of America's annual migration of farm workers. Every year from one to two million men, women, and children move about the country seeking farm jobs. Most of these follow the crops and harvests from one section to another, finally returning to their homes. They are to be distinguished from Steinbeck's migrants, the hundreds of thousands who have been forced from their homes in desperate search of a bare living.

The migration of farm labor is not new in the United States. For years the peak requirements of crops with heavy labor demand have drawn field hands from beyond the immediate vicinity. Usually they move on or return to their homes after the harvest. Fruit, vegetable, and berry crops in particular have encouraged heavy migration. Curiously, it

was a field crop—wheat—which caused the greatest trek of farm labor.

### **Wheat Belt Migration**

From the early 1900's to the middle of the postwar decade, the wheat fields of the Middle West and the Great Plains were scenes of great movement. Only a small amount of labor was needed to sow the crop with the aid of machinery, but a great deal was needed to shock and thresh the grain at harvest time. To do this work as many as 250,000 men were on the move each year from field to field, following the ripening crop.

The usual migration in the wheat country from 1890 until the 1920's was a definite pattern—"the woods" (Minnesota or Wisconsin) in the winter, "the harvest" in the summer, with a "spring layover" in Chicago, the Twin Cities, or Duluth. A large proportion were young single men. Those with families often had their homes in or very near one of those four cities. But in those days, when a farm laborer married, he very often "took up land," or settled down as a "renter." They were not migrants in the Joad sense—the family did not go along, and they were following a definite pattern, knowing when they were going and where and why. On lots of the big grain farms, some of the harvest hands turned up season after season, were known, expected, and had a place in the scheme of things. The harvest began about June 1 in Texas, and moved steadily northward, reaching North Dakota by the middle of August, and passing on into Canada. Some of the field hands moved all the way from Oklahoma and Texas to the Dakotas and Canada and back again. But most of them followed more restricted routes.

The harvest hands were men. They traveled by train. In the years before the first World War, one could see the freights in July moving slowly through Sioux City into the Dakotas, the roofs and doorways of boxcars literally black with men on their way to the wheat fields. In the second decade of the 20th century, American radicalism, organized by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), spread rapidly. It became unsafe to ride the freights in some places unless one carried a "red card." Farmers learned the meaning of strikes for better wages and living conditions. They responded sometimes by

giving way, and sometimes by organizing mobs to drive the agitators and workers from towns at the point of guns.

The death knell of the Wheat Belt migration was sounded by the combine harvester, enabling one man to do the work of five or six, cutting and threshing the grain in a single operation. Hand shocking was rendered unnecessary and wheat production was mechanized from planting to harvest.

As the use of the combine spread, this type of migration declined, and with it labor radicalism and the social problems caused by this great male migration.

### **Western Cotton Migration**

Advancing mechanization has also struck cotton. It has thoroughly changed the methods of planting and ginning, but has not yet eliminated two sharp peak employment seasons—chopping (thinning) in the early summer and picking in the fall. The cotton-producing sections of the country meet these seasonal requirements in two ways. In the Old South and as far west as the Brazos bottoms of Texas, the old system of placing a large tenant or sharecropper family upon each fifteen to twenty acres makes certain that large numbers of hands, young and old, will be available when needed. Thus the old Cotton Belt has been crowded with under-employed labor, enough to supply all normal needs locally. From central and south Texas westward, however, and including Arizona and California, a new variety of the old plantation system has developed, using day labor. This has occurred mainly since 1910. Cotton farms are large, with only enough home labor to plant the crop. Here the sharecropping system, which binds the laborers to the soil throughout the year, is practically unknown. Wage labor chops and picks cotton at piece rates. Cotton harvesters for Arizona and California are drawn seasonally from as far east as Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. Until 1929, when immigration barriers were raised, they used to come also from the central plateau of Mexico. In Texas and Oklahoma there are probably more than 50,000 roving cotton pickers—whites, Negroes, and Mexicans. They follow the opening bolls from Corpus Christi on the Gulf, north and westward to the Texas Panhandle and Oklahoma, six hundred to nine hundred miles away.

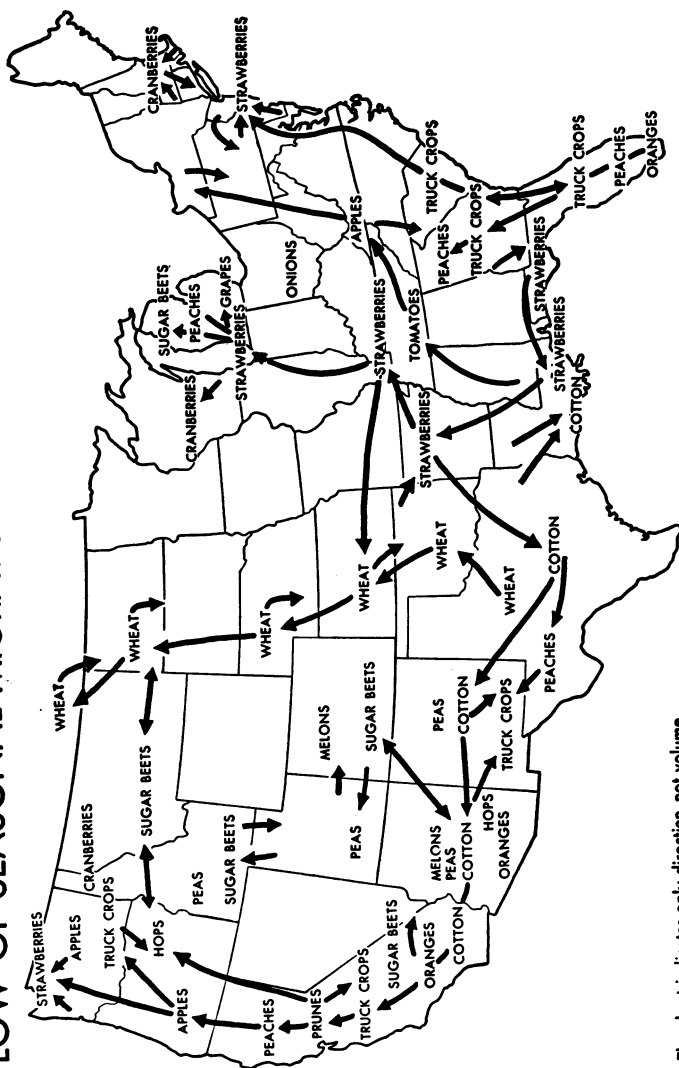


This dependence of western cotton areas upon roving field labor sharply distinguishes its social problems from those of the plantation and tenant system of the Old South. The western system, when applied to other crops offering employment to migrants, represents a more efficient use of labor than does the sharecropping system. And it is well to point out that if the Rust brothers', or any other, mechanical cotton picker should prove successful and generally adapted to all types of cotton, its effects in the cotton area from central and south Texas to the Pacific coast will differ from those in the older cotton areas. In both areas the use of machines in the cotton harvest will do away with the need for outside labor. In the Old South, the putting of cotton production on a machine basis will displace millions of workers. In the Southwest and California, use of machinery will end the need for roving labor in cotton, as the combine harvester is ending it in wheat. The cost of rapid mechanization of cotton production is likely to fall heavily on labor in both areas, but it will cause less disturbance in southwestern and Pacific Coast cotton areas than in the Old South.

### **Berry Crop Migration**

In many parts of the United States berry crops, which require large numbers of skilled hand pickers, have long been a cause of seasonal migration. Usually the distance covered by the migrants is not great. Thus, Italian berry pickers come from Philadelphia and Camden to harvest the crop of southern New Jersey, as they have done for fifty years; and now they are joined by Negroes from Delaware. Poles and Indians have for many years supplied the outside labor for the cranberry bogs of Wisconsin. The owners of cranberry bogs in New England also still rely upon outside labor. Berry pickers of the Pacific Northwest generally move short distances. In years of good crops a thin stream of families works its way northward with the berry crops from the Gulf to Lake Michigan. A few follow the whole way, from the strawberry harvest of northern Florida in the spring to Tangipahoa Parish in Louisiana, next to Judsonia in central Arkansas, thence to Paducah, Kentucky; Vermilion or Farina, Illinois; and Benton Harbor, Michigan. Following this they pick grapes and peaches in Michigan.

# FLOW OF SEASONAL MIGRATORY FARM LABOR IN THE U.S.



The chart indicates only direction, not volume.  
 The number of migratory farm workers in the different areas varies considerably from year to year.

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The routes of migrants are curiously varied and irregular. For example, the migrant strawberry pickers of Arkansas are drawn from four principal groups:

1. Families from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, who return to their homes at the conclusion of the Arkansas harvest.
2. Families from north- and south-central states east of the Mississippi, who follow the strawberry harvest from Florida or Louisiana into Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and end their season picking the peach crop in the Michigan Peninsula and the islands of Lake Erie.
3. Pickers from various central states who follow the berry harvest in Arkansas and Missouri, then swing westward to follow the wheat harvest through Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas into Canada.
4. Pickers from north central states who follow the berry harvest in Arkansas and Missouri, then turn southwestward as far as the Lower Rio Grande Valley of southern Texas for cotton picking, and return north for the winter.

### **Sugar Beet Migration**

Outside labor has been important in the sugar beet field since the early 1900's when, under stimulus of the tariff, acreage began to expand rapidly. Unlike most migratory laborers, beet workers move only twice a year. They move in the spring to the farms where the crop is to be bunched, thinned, hoed, and topped on contract, and they move again to winter quarters or to seasonal work elsewhere when the harvest is over in the fall.

Sugar beet production is an industrial form of agriculture in which the sugar factories are influential throughout the process, from finance to seed and labor. Its labor history illustrates dramatically the problems common to the migratory labor in other crops and areas. The sugar factories seek field labor at distant points. In recent years, for example, agents have recruited laborers for Montana in California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Until 1929 the labor market extended even into central Mexico, and growers of beets, like the big cotton growers of Arizona and agricultural employers of California, used all the influence they could muster to obtain congressional approval to bring workers from

Mexico each season. Many races have been mingled in the beet fields. To the mountain states, German-Russians, Mexicans, Spanish-Americans from New Mexico, and even Japanese were brought. For the Middle West—Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan—Belgians, Poles, and Mexicans were recruited. In 1930 Filipinos were recruited in Seattle for shipment to Minnesota.

The amount of outside labor needed depends upon the acreage planted and upon the size of the local labor supply. Since there are always some extra workers to be found at home, outside workers are needed primarily to meet exceptional circumstances. An increase of, say, 10 per cent in acreage, may increase the number of migrants by one-half; or a decline of 10 per cent may produce a disproportionate effect in the opposite direction. The annual importations of laborers by the Great Western Sugar Company between 1915 and 1936 fluctuated irregularly between 150 and 14,500.

### **Migration on the Pacific Coast**

Since 1870, when the transcontinental railroad opened eastern markets for California fruits and vegetables, roving field hands have followed the western harvests. Today the greatest seasonal migrations of farm labor in the United States take place on the Pacific Coast. The main whirlpool of migratory labor is in California, but the ease with which the workers get around these days makes all the western areas parts of a common labor market. Seeking to dovetail brief seasons of employment, they move from the Imperial Valley on the Mexican border to the Hood River and Willamette Valleys of Oregon, and the Yakima Valley of Washington. Some go also to the lettuce, melon, or cotton harvests of the Salt River Valley of Arizona, to the cotton fields near Las Cruces and Roswell in New Mexico, to the melon harvests of Colorado, to the pea fields of Idaho, southern Utah, northern Arizona, and New Mexico, and to the beet fields of Montana. In order to get workers, the hop yards of the Rogue River Valley of Oregon advertise annually in newspapers as far away as southern California. Cotton growers of Arizona invite pickers to come west from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas, many of whom stream through to California.

Many refugees from the Great Plains became seasonal farm laborers in the rich valleys like Yakima in Washington and the Klamath Basin in southeastern Oregon.

The early migrants in the West were mostly single white men. The Chinese, Japanese, and Hindus, too, moved in gangs of males, as do the Filipinos today. But with the coming of the Mexicans into California and Arizona during the last war, most western migratory labor became family labor. Recently the number of white families has been vastly increased by the refugees from the Great Plains.

The great desire of the American migrants seeking refuge on the Pacific Coast is for land to farm—land with plenty of water. For farming is all that many of them have ever done. But this great dream which ever has led land seekers westward fades in the face of reality. *An American Exodus* tells why disillusionment comes:

In California the old West is gone. Land is limited and dear. It was capitalized in the days of Chinese immigration on the expectation of continued ample supplies of cheap labor. It must be watered, and the cost of irrigation is high. Its price is in the hundreds of dollars per acre, beyond the reach of propertyless refugees. . . . And the mysteries and hazards of fluctuating markets for highly commercialized crops confound the uninitiated.

The opportunity which the new emigrants find is more in the tradition of industry than of the pioneers on the prairies. In California the family-farm ideal, embodied in the Homestead Act and established over a large part of the country, was never predominant. Its land pattern stems rather from large Spanish and Mexican grants, and from availability in the 70's and 80's of Chinese laborers ready to work cheaply and in gangs for entrepreneurs who brought water to land in large tracts. Thus agriculture in California became industrialized, and opportunity turns out to be not land, but jobs on the land.

Thus the hope of getting a farm shrinks to the hope of getting a steady job with perhaps eventual ownership of a plot of ground for house and garden, a cow, and chickens. Some are achieving this after a fashion. Many more are not.

## CONFLICT IN THE FIELDS

CALIFORNIA AND ARIZONA agriculture have been torn by frequent strikes and disputes for the last seven years. Increasingly, Americans who have sought refuge by migration to the West are becoming involved in this strife. Because of its critical nature, and the violations of civil liberties which have accompanied it, the Committee on Civil Liberties of the United States Senate, under the chairmanship of Senator Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin, has recently made a public investigation of California and Arizona agriculture. Testimony before this Committee concerning the way in which agriculture is carried on in these states reveals what is involved in the dependence of agriculture on migratory labor.

The conflict between employer and employee in the agricultural and agricultural-processing industries of California, and in those of neighboring states where similar conditions prevail, has been heralded widely as a struggle between "embattled farmers" and "farm laborers." To describe the issue in these terms, however, is to mislead all who understand the words "farmer" and "farm laborer" as they are commonly used in other parts of the United States.

The Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Dr. Joseph Schafer, recently stated the traditional and well-understood meaning of "American farmer."

The farmer is one who operates a "family-sized farm" for a "living" rather than for "an actual or potential modern fortune"; a farm on which the owner and his son or sons can perform the actual work of tillage, the female members of the household smoothing the way by providing home comforts, assisting about chores, or in field or meadow as pressure of work may dictate. Hired men are rather the exception than the rule in this typical agriculture. So far as they are employed, it is usually with the instinctive purpose of raising the labor force to the normal family plane rather than in the hope of abnormally expanding the business beyond the family-farm size.

The great strikes which periodically wrack the agricultural industry of California and Arizona are not strikes between this kind of "American farmer" and his "hired man." They are rather struggles between individuals or corporations, who



are more properly called "agricultural employers," and the workers they employ for particular specialized operations—such as picking, hoeing, or pruning—during peak seasons at wages by the hour or by the piece. There has been more strife in the agricultural industry of California than elsewhere because there the number of farm operators who really are "agricultural employers" is so large, and because they, with their large number of employees, form an industrialized pattern.

Among the factors which distinguish these agricultural labor conflicts from ordinary farm labor disputes, we may point out five: (1) industrialized agriculture; (2) desire of employers for complete control of wages as distinct from other costs; (3) perishability of crops; (4) lack of status of mobile workers in agriculture; (5) the interstate migration of native American farmers who have been driven from the land.

### Industrialized Agriculture

First is the industrialized pattern of agriculture, especially in the fruit, vegetable, cotton, and specialty crops. It is here that difficulties mostly arise. Large employing units, heavily dependent on gangs of seasonal laborers to harvest their highly commercialized crops, predominate.

Frequently it is pointed out that there are more small farmers in California than large agricultural employers. From this obvious fact some writers have sought to give the impression that big farms do not dominate California agricultural production. Articles making this point, supported by "statistics," have influenced thought within the industry itself, and even reached out to the public. An example is an article in *Forum* magazine and *Readers Digest* for November, 1939. The author of the article, Frank J. Taylor, writes:

The State has 6,732,390 acres devoted to crops, and the 1935 census shows that 1,738,906 are in farms less than 100 acres in extent, 3,068,742 are in farms of 100 to 1,000 acres, and 1,924,742 are in farms of over 1,000.

A check of these data in the census of 1935 shows that less than 7 per cent of all the farms of the state, with acreage of 500 or over, hold 42 per cent of all the crop land. Upon critical examination, the figures reveal just the opposite of what the author intended to prove.

It is true, of course, that small farmers outnumber the large agricultural employers of California. That fact needs no proof. But the small farmers are not found at the center of the labor conflicts in which migratory laborers are involved.

More misleading, in relation to the problems under consideration here, than this emphasis upon the large number of small farmers, is the serious error which arises from the use of *acreage* as basis for comparing size. In parts of the country where land is of uniform quality, it is satisfactory enough to take acreage as a basis for comparison. But the variations of intensity of land use are great in California, especially since some lands are irrigated and others are not. According to the census of 1930, the average size of Valencia orange ranches in Orange County, California, was only forty-one acres, but the average value of the ranches was nearly \$59,000. Better indices of size for comparative purposes are gross income—which the census itself uses in definition of “large-scale farms”—or value of products, or cash expenditures for hired labor.

The citrus industry affords a clear illustration of the manner in which the traditional functions of “farmers” are lost by those still classified as “farm operators” in the census. Of course the packing of fruit is usually performed in large packing plants cooperatively or privately owned, and not located on the farm. And the work in the grove of pruning, fumigating, spraying, and picking, is commonly done by gangs of laborers under contract, or employed and directed by the manager of a citrus association. An affidavit by J. Eliot Coit describes the almost complete loss of their functions as “farmers” of those who grow fruit in southern California:

The term “farm” in the old or commonly accepted sense in the East, South, and Middle West is long since obsolete in respect to the highly specialized agricultural occupation of growing such products as citrus fruits, walnuts, avocados, and a large number of other specialty crops grown on the Pacific Coast.

In some instances this removal of the farmer from farming has become so complete that Mr. Coit declares:

In fact, there are some farmers who do no manual work on their farms.

Those within California’s agricultural industry who know

its structure best, even though they resent any charges that it is lacking in social responsibility, do not hesitate to acknowledge its industrial character. A recent issue of *The Western Grower and Shipper*, for example, states:

It is true, of course, that a large sector of California agriculture is industrialized. . . . The incidents of husbandry—the family-sized farm with all of its pastoral glamor, is a lovely idyll—elsewhere than most sections of California. California is not unfriendly to husbandry and farming as a mode of life, but costly experience has shown that a large percentage of its acres, no matter how attractive to the inexperienced eye, are not suited to such purposes. The history of attempted development of many sections now successful under industrialized agriculture to small farming is a history of blasted hopes and broken hearts. And nature, not man, has been responsible.

#### LARGE-SCALE FARMS IN CALIFORNIA

More than one-third of all large-scale farms in the United States, according to the census of 1930, were located in California. "Large-scale" means "annual gross income of approximately \$30,000 or more." Although California produced less than 2 per cent of the nation's cotton crop in 1929, no less than 133, or 30 per cent, of the nation's large-scale cotton farms were located in that state. Arizona and California together had 47 per cent of the large-scale cotton farms. When the figures of the 1940 census become available, however, we may expect to see a larger number and probably a larger proportion of large-scale cotton farms in the old Cotton Belt than in 1930, because of the strong shift during recent years from operation with croppers and tenants to operation with day labor on the plantations, supplemented by seasonal workers brought in for peak needs. In 1930 there were also located in California 212, or 30 per cent, of the large-scale crop specialty farms, 40 per cent of the large-scale dairy farms, 44 per cent of the large-scale general farms, 53 per cent of the large-scale poultry farms, 60 per cent of the large-scale truck farms, and 60 per cent of the large-scale fruit farms of the United States.

The dominating position of these great enterprises with gross incomes of approximately \$30,000 or more, in respect to both production and employment of labor, is indicated by the fact that although they numbered fewer than 3,000 farms,

or barely 2 per cent of all farms in California, they produced 29 per cent of all California agricultural products by value. And they expended 35 per cent of the cash paid to wage workers by all farms in the state.

Many of the agricultural employers of California and Arizona are not individuals, but corporations. Sometimes they are grower-shippers, with cable addresses, direct wire services, modern offices in hourly touch with sensitive markets, and even with regional managers and distant headquarters.

The use of managers to operate farms is one sign of absentee control. The influence of commercial corporations on labor policies is frequently exerted through managers. In the entire United States only .9 of 1 per cent of all farms were operated by managers, according to the census of 1930, but in California the proportion was 5.7 per cent, or more than six times as great. Even these figures do not tell everything. In California and in Arizona these farms operated by managers spent one-quarter of all the cash used to employ wage workers on farms in each state.

Managed farms in the United States spent for wage labor \$2,985 on the average. In Iowa they spent \$1,377 and in Mississippi \$1,764. But in California, manager-operated farms spent \$4,126 or nearly three times the average spent by all farms hiring labor in the state, and more than eleven times the national average. These figures record the size of the wage bill, not the amount received by each worker.

We can now see the reasons for distinguishing sharply between the typical American farmer with his hired man and the employer-grower in California and Arizona. Peaceful relations usually prevail under the old system, but pressing labor problems and infringements on the liberties of citizens have shattered the peace in California and Arizona. For in those states the uprisings on the farms are not bands of "hired men" striking against "farmers"—as those terms are known, say in the Middle West. They are at bottom the efforts of gangs of wage workers—largely seasonal migrants—striking against employer-growers who produce on the factory pattern and hire and fire their unorganized workers in the manner of old-fashioned industrialists. The big employer-growers themselves are organized in associations which control labor

policies. So long as this pattern on the land continues, and the attitudes which have grown out of it become stronger, we may expect the same friction which may be found in similar types of industry.

Under a system which utilizes foremen, gang labor, piece rates, recruiting by labor contractors, the traditional personal relation between farmer and hired man hardly exists. Work is irregular and layoffs long. Milling about from crop to crop is necessary in order to obtain work. The average annual earnings are low despite wage rates which appear high when stated on an hourly basis, and the opportunity to ascend the agricultural ladder from laborer to tenant has become practically closed.

### **Control of Wages**

The second factor underlying agricultural labor strife in California and Arizona is the attitude of large agricultural employers toward labor costs as compared with their attitude toward their other costs of production and marketing. Transportation of produce to markets from 1,500 to 3,000 miles distant is a large factor in total cost. Interest, rent, power and water, fertilizer, machinery, and other costs, likewise are important. Agricultural employers have come more or less to accept these costs as relatively fixed and rigid.

The view that these costs are "uncontrollable elements" may develop sometimes because the employers are allied with or controlled by the processors, handlers, or bankers who fix these costs. Whether for this reason or not, it appears to be easier for large agricultural employers to organize to control wages than to organize to revise other costs to meet changing economic conditions.

Unquestionably, there is reason for the large employing group in agriculture to believe that they depend on a cheap labor supply in order to be able to operate profitably. This dependence upon labor increases with the size of operations.

The large agricultural employer who accepts the necessity of a complete control of wages because he believes that none of the other important costs can be adjusted, looks on any "interference," whether from "agitators," labor unions, or governmental agencies, with hostility. The civil liberties of

the individuals who appear to challenge this control over wages are in peril, whether they be laborers themselves, or outsiders.

### **Perishability of Crops**

Agricultural employers are especially fearful of labor organizations with any substantial power to call strikes in their industry because of the perishability of crops. Speaking before the 1937 convention of the California Fruit Growers and Farmers, a prominent spokesman for the employers vividly expressed this terror:

The problems of farm labor are so different from those of industry that, while we farmers have no quarrel with the aims of the legitimate industrial labor unions, we would regard the unionization of farm labor, under existing conditions, as absolutely ruinous to us as well as to the laborers themselves.

Owing to the perishable nature of his crop, a farmer cannot afford to have his harvesting delayed while negotiating with strikers.

A week's delay, or in some cases two days' delay, will destroy his whole year's income and the much larger amount he has spent in producing the crop.

The labor agitators always plan to call their strikes at the most critical stages of the harvesting.

Unquestionably, agricultural employers face difficult and peculiar problems. Whether because of these difficulties and peculiarities the agricultural industry must be regarded as in a class by itself remains, however, to be proved. Employers in some other industries, whose products or services are highly "perishable," such as newspaper publishers and railways, have sought, through elaborate and long-continued collective bargaining, mediation, and arbitration, to avoid the devastating paralysis of strikes. But many agricultural employers in California seem convinced that these procedures are ill-adapted to their industry, and that leaders of unions will be able so to mislead their agricultural laborers as to ruin the agricultural industry. This same fear that crops may perish no doubt leads the agricultural employer to be hostile towards labor unions and striking workers in canneries, packing, and transportation.





*"The life of the migrant is hard"*

### **Lack of Status of Migratory Workers**

A fourth factor making for strife in the agricultural industry is the conditions under which the migrants live and work. They often travel great distances to get work. They face low earnings, unemployment, instability and insecurity, bad housing, interrupted schooling for their children, prejudice and hostility from established residents.

Laborers who work for the agricultural employers of California in the industries most exposed to conflict must move around a great deal. They have a daily working radius of fifteen—even twenty-five miles. Many of them live a good part of the year "on wheels." The automobiles of the laborers are not luxuries. To even the poorest they are necessities of life. And the cost of their operation and upkeep cuts a large figure in the family budget. The car must be fed gasoline and oil to make the next harvest or to get to and from the fields, and it is more important that its wheels be kept shod than the feet of the children. "We just make enough for beans, and when we have to buy gas it comes out of the beans."

From Imperial Valley the migrants follow the harvest to the San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Sacramento Valleys, distances of from 360 to 550 miles each way by air line, and much longer by road. Within each valley they move about from camp to field, field to camp, and ranch to ranch.

### LIFE IS DIFFICULT

The life of the migrant is hard. It is not a succession of vacation camping trips. Jobs are hard to find and short-lived. The annual income is low. "We like to work and not just set around. I'd rather do anything but set around, but they just ain't no chances here in California, seems like," said a Kern County migrant. "You wait for work two weeks," then "fight like flies for the work." "You eat it up faster than you make it."

A study by the Resettlement Administration of migratory laborers at work in 1935 found average annual earnings of about \$250 a worker and between \$450 and \$500 for a family. A study in the same year of 753 migratory labor cases of the California Emergency Relief Administration showed average family earnings of only \$289.

The plight of these roving field hands in California and Arizona is even worse than that of farm workers in other parts of the country. For sharecroppers in the South and the traditional "hired men" of the Middle West, where agriculture also is seasonal, remain on the farm throughout the year, obtaining shelter and some employment or remuneration in recognition of the necessity of year-round support. But in fruit, vegetable, and sugar beet crops, and in cotton production in California and Arizona, no such protection exists. The seasonal workers in these crops have to migrate from valley to valley to seek work. And they must shoulder the cost of their own "overhead" during idleness in order to be ready for the next season, if, as is so often the case, they cannot get relief. When the early pea crop froze in Imperial Valley a few years ago, the local relief load rose from 188 to 1,638 families.

This very policy of "hire and fire," without responsibility for the cost of supporting workers between seasons, makes the situation worse. For it encourages the agricultural employer to raise specialized crops, thus increasing the need for mobile laborers.



*Oklahoma child with cotton sack ready to go in field at 7 a. m.  
Kern County, California.*

#### CHILDREN PENALIZED

This being continually on the move is especially bad for the children. Some parents are beginning to complain that their children cannot write as good English as they can themselves. There is growing feeling that the future carries no hope of progress, but that their children will be worse off than they are.

"These days people can't raise children as good as themselves," said a "fruit tramp" at Winters. "My children ain't raised decent like I was raised by my father," was the cry of a cherry picker.

#### TREATED AS "OUTLANDERS"

Normal relationships between citizens and community, and between employer and employee, are hindered by this constant moving about. "My father was a track foreman at \$1.25 a day, but we lived in a house and everybody knew us,"

said another "fruit tramp." "This rancher has us for two or three weeks, and then he's through with me. He knows me till he's through with me." "Residenters" look askance at the nomads, and treat them as "outlanders." Children are stigmatized at school as "pea pickers," "Okies," and "Arkies."

The bad housing and camp conditions of migratory workers in California have been thoroughly publicized during the past five years. After a strike of pea pickers in 1934, a United States Special Commission on Agricultural Labor Disturbances was set up in Imperial Valley. It reported:

Living and sanitary conditions are a serious and irritating factor in the unrest we found in the Imperial Valley. . . This report must state that we found filth, squalor, an entire absence of sanitation, and a crowding of human beings into totally inadequate tents or crude structures built of boards, weeds, and anything that was found at hand to give a pitiful semblance of a home at its worst.

Recently agricultural employers, officials, and government agencies have been making serious efforts to cope with this phase of the problem. However, in California as in other states of the West, the living conditions of migratory workers are degrading and breed resentment.

The very nature of those types of agriculture which require migration to secure employment makes establishment of legal "residence" difficult. A migratory worker in *An American Exodus* who reaches the orchards only to find the season delayed three weeks, and the county reluctant to give groceries for emergency relief because of lack of "citizenship" or "residence" in the county, protests: "My boys are American citizens. If war was declared they'd have to fight no matter where they was. I don't see why we can't be citizens because we move around with the fruit tryin' to make a livin'."

Practically speaking, these men and women have all the obligations but few of the advantages of citizenship. They have difficulty in voting. In their efforts to achieve California citizenship, these native American migratory farm laborers, coming originally, like the majority of Californians, from other states, face obstacles erected by a hostile community. As non-residents they are frequently barred from relief. Officials raise the question whether living in a camp erected by the

federal government can be accepted as legal residence for voting, even after all time requirements of the law are met. Newspapers publish articles which can only have the effect of discouraging migrants from exercising their right to vote. Or they print biased statements of some prominent citizen, such as that which appeared in the *Bakersfield Californian* on September 21, 1939:

Registration in the Central Valley counties shows how fast the migrants are becoming voters—how many illegally we do not know—but the increase in registration is not normal.

. . . the migrants, most of whom come from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and Missouri, have brought to California with them a moral and political philosophy alien to California.

. . . Unless we educate these migrants and their children in the constructive way of thinking which characterizes our economic and social outlook, our free institutions are doomed.

In the early 30's, when the tide of Americans coming to California began to rise, farm wages in California dropped to low levels. In 1932, in the midst of the depression, cotton pickers harvested the crop in the San Joaquin Valley at 40 cents a hundred pounds, as compared with \$1 a hundred pounds which the cotton growers of Imperial Valley offered in 1910 in advertisements to bring pickers from the Southwest. Destitution increased. Organizers from outside, Communists among them, went into the valleys and agitated among the migrants for unionization. Since that time representatives of the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. have had some success in organizing various groups of these seasonal workers. They found that Mexican and Filipino leaders had preceded them in attempts to unionize their own people. And they found the discontent and distress without which their efforts would have had little effect.

Just as agricultural employers fear collective bargaining, so some migrants raise the question whether they can protect themselves without it. In a squatters' camp on a creek bank in 1935, a migratory laborer said to me: "It's the unfairness of the thing. Our President gave the right of collective bargaining. If I say to a grower give me 5 cents, he says, 'Well,

if you don't like it, you can quit,' but if you strike the first thing they say is that you are a radical and a Communist. How in the name of sense can we do anything? You can't do it by yourself and you can't do it with others and they won't raise wages 5 cents voluntarily. If I say on the street what I am saying to you, you'd see a cop grab me for a Bolsheviki."

#### DENIAL OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

From these causes spring the conflicts in which basic American civil liberties are ignored. In the heat and desperation of their strikes, migratory agricultural laborers, like strikers in other industries, seek to bring the economic process to a halt, and at times they break the peace while attempting it. At times the employers violate civil liberties when the strikes threaten to become effective, insisting, in the words of a farmer-deputy sheriff before the Senate Civil Liberties Committee, "that law and order be maintained and that the cannery operate." The attitude of substantial citizens in defense of their openly illegal use of force against striking migrants is plainly evident in the testimony of employer witnesses:

... the farmers had definitely made up their minds to, as we put it, squeeze the core out of the boil in that park [where the strikers were meeting] because that's what the whole community considered it.

✓ It was done in good style, with rubber hose and fan belts, and what have you. I feel very proud of all the growers in the county. I have no criticism of none of them. The ministers of our town said we done a swell job and they was very appreciative of the meetings being stopped.

The effect of denial of civil liberties to a group, unfortunately, is not limited. It affects many elements of the community and has caught private citizens and public officials alike in its meshes. The published report of General Pelham D. Glassford, who represented the Departments of Labor and Agriculture and the National Labor Board in Imperial Valley in 1934 makes this plain:

✓ After more than two months of observation and investigation in Imperial Valley, it is my conviction that a group of growers have exploited a Communist hysteria for the advancement of their own interests; that they have welcomed labor agitation, which they could brand as "red," as a means



of sustaining supremacy by mob rule, thereby preserving what is so essential to their profits, cheap labor; that they have succeeded in drawing into their conspiracy certain county officials who have become the principal tools of their machine. . . .

Spread upon the pages of recent Imperial Valley history are certain lawless and illegal events which have been suppressed or distorted in local news accounts, and which have not been investigated by the officials who are charged by law with that responsibility. Reputable clergymen, lawyers, business men, and other citizens of Imperial Valley have informed of their personal knowledge and observations, insisting upon a promise of confidence, so great was their fear of retaliation, boycott, or actual violence. One active vigilante remarked, "I'd like to be out of this mess, but what can I do? If I don't 'line up' my business will be ruined."\*

### Excess Labor

Fifth among the factors affecting labor conflict in California is the presence of what is undoubtedly a surplus of farm workers. We have seen how in the past California has drawn farm labor from among the Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Filipinos, and Mexicans. To these have been added hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Great Plains. The very abundance of this labor has helped keep wages down, and thereby made for dissatisfaction and conflict. And it has encouraged the further industrialization of agriculture. Mechanization in the Cotton Belt may intensify the problem still more by creating new reservoirs of unneeded labor which will drain toward the West.

## SITUATION IN OTHER STATES

THE problems relating to migratory labor in California should not be considered as local or isolated. In a sense, it may be that the situation in that state provides a "pre-view" of what will occur in varying degrees and in modified forms on a national scale. For some other sections of agriculture now are facing the forces that in the past half-century have transformed whole sections of manufacturing from the small shop and the artisan to mechanical industry and the wage earner.

\* Hearings before House Committee on Labor, 74th Congress, 1st session, on H. R. 6288, p. 37.

In Hardin County, Ohio, lie two marshes, one of 17,000 acres, the other of 4,000 acres. In the onion fields of this county there occurred in 1934 one of the bitterest and most violent agricultural labor strikes the country had yet experienced. Laborers were largely southern whites who had migrated there a few years earlier for seasonal employment, but at the time of the strike had settled in Hardin County, still depending upon seasonal employment. *The Monthly Labor Review* in February, 1935, stated:

A considerable percentage of the acreage of both marshes is controlled by a few growers. In the Scioto Marsh one corporate farm, operated by a general manager who is also a large stockholder, controls approximately 3,500 acres; another corporate farm owns 900 acres; and one family owns 600 acres and leases another 300 acres. Thus, three owners control 30 per cent of the land of this marsh. In the Hog Creek Marsh one grower owns approximately 1,200 acres, or about 30 per cent of the entire marsh. The remaining acreage is divided among a large number of small growers.

It is significant but not surprising that when agricultural labor conflict came to Ohio, it struck first in these onion fields.

In the Yakima Valley of Washington, bitter strife already has occurred, and employers are apprehensive of it happening again. A study by Professor Landis of the Washington State Agricultural Experiment Station, published in 1936, shows that migratory labor families in that valley received a typical annual cash income of only \$297. Sixty-six per cent of the migratory single laborers earned less than \$400.

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Winter Garden districts of southern Texas, where truck and fruit crops are grown, dependence on large numbers of migrants is well established. In the Lower Valley labor strife and attempts to organize have already occurred. On the Atlantic seaboard, truck areas are expanding, and with them the migratory labor pattern. Acute labor conflict has appeared on the truck farms of large corporate agricultural employers in southern New Jersey, and there have been strikes and beginnings of union organization among fruit packers in Florida. Some corporate agricultural employers in truck and fruit crops operate in areas scattered from California to Florida.

## In the Southwest

The Texas Panhandle and southwestern Oklahoma cotton area has been scourged for successive years by severe drought and depressed cotton prices. These factors, and even the public measures to relieve rural distress, have profoundly affected rural society. Now the tractor is added to the forces altering the landscape and changing the social scene. On the landscape are the marks of farms growing bigger and fewer—abandoned houses and rural depopulation, tenant farmers reduced to the status of wage laborers, thrown on relief, and scattered to other districts. Landlords have clashed with their tenants over the crop-adjustment checks, though not openly or in organized fashion. In Arkansas, however, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union arose under circumstances similar to those in Texas. Landlords in the Texas Panhandle have forced tenants off the place, then used the increased cash income resulting from the agricultural adjustment program and funds received for the sale of their own livestock to pay for tractors, so that more and more tenants "can't get a farm," and people say: "The tractor is ruining our country." The driving force of mechanization, like drought and depression before it, is driving out families. Like others before them, they load all their household possessions and children in the car, and flee half-way across the country. These are not just "croppers," but yeoman farmers—tenants on thirds and fourths; not only Negroes, but white Texans as well.

Large-scale tractor farming will support fewer operators, who will depend on wage laborers. The form of organization for cotton culture will probably be like that now found in Nueces County, Texas, which is one of the leading cotton-producing counties of the United States: large farms, a few operators, a few laborers, who have very small bits of cotton land in addition to their wages to hold them on the farm the year round, plus hordes of migratory laborers for the harvest.

When the rains return to the Great Plains, the tenants who have been forced out will probably not go back to raise cotton in the Texas Panhandle and southwestern Oklahoma. The new methods of farming leave no place for them.

## In the Deep South

In the Delta lands of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, the old plantation system survives probably more vigorously than anywhere else in the Cotton Belt. It is the most concentrated cotton-producing section of the deep South. About 85 per cent of the farm land is operated under the plantation system. Land holdings are large, and operated by many tenant or sharecropper families, each on its own small acreage. Landlords customarily "furnish" groceries and credit while the crop is being made, and settle with their croppers after the harvest by dividing the proceeds.

Now power farming is invading the Delta. In many parts the "one-man-one-mule" method still rules, but in the counties near Greenville and Clarksdale, Mississippi, and in the Arkansas Delta opposite Memphis, Tennessee, mechanization is already well advanced. Tractors, and two- and four-row planters and cultivators are making great headway and economizing man power on the larger plantations and better lands. Between 1930 and 1938, Mississippi led the Old South both in number of tractors added and in the rate of increase.

With the development of power farming, old methods of pay are being abandoned. Instead of paying by the year, according to an agreed share of the crop, supplemented by the system of "furnish," laborers are getting a wage of from 75 cents to \$1.25 a day when employed. A large part of these plantations now operate with day labor.

## Mobile Labor Reservoirs

The introduction of machinery necessitates a mobile labor reserve to meet seasonal hand labor peaks. The extensive growth of large-scale, semimechanized cotton farms in California, Arizona, Texas, and Oklahoma is based on the availability of mobile labor. A reserve of roving cotton workers is growing up in the towns and cities of the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. It is being recruited largely from families who, until recently, were tenants, croppers, or laborers on the plantations, but who are having the ground cut from under them. The failure of industry to absorb these country families, or even to hold those who had left the farms earlier, adds to the

available reserves. It is the presence of this reserve, comprised chiefly of cotton workers recently swept from the land into the towns and supported largely by relief, which makes tractor farming economical.

The invasion of southern cotton culture by power farming is well under way in important areas. Its progress is "spotty," but the pattern of social and economic effects which it produces is already clear—fewer family farms, larger farms operated by wage labor, dependence on mobile labor reserves to meet seasonal peak demands for cotton choppers and pickers. Mechanization will never be completely achieved throughout the present cotton-producing belt of the South, but the direction and the seriousness of farmer and labor problems raised by current changes are already evident.

### Tomorrow's Problem

In February, 1939, Professor B. O. Williams of Clemson College, South Carolina, formally warned that:

The mechanization of agriculture in the South will result in a disruption of the family-farm institution [and that it will result in] either (1) a lowering of material living standards of large numbers of the farm population; or (2) the migration of large numbers of surplus and displaced laborers to other areas.

The harvest will remain a hand operation requiring large numbers of seasonal laborers until mechanical pickers become available on a commercial basis. When this occurs, then the mobile labor reserves required by semimechanization will sustain a second shock. Their present displacement from the land will be followed by the loss of even the seasonal jobs which now remain.

The march of power farming in cotton raises grave questions for the South, and it has national repercussions. For it is feeding the steadily westward-flowing stream of refugees who join the mass of roving labor from Arizona to Washington. If it were not for government agencies of relief and rehabilitation, the stream would now be even greater.

Shall transformation of farming along industrialized lines be allowed to pursue its own course? Can it be impeded or modified? What of the cotton farmers and workers on lands

which cannot mechanize to cheapen costs? What of the thousands of families already displaced from the land, their numbers growing as power farming grows? Can other kinds of employment be developed that would make the mechanization of agriculture serve as a base on which to build better agricultural incomes? Despite the obstacles which will retard the spread of mechanization in cotton, it is clear that the problem of human displacement in the Cotton Belt is not to be postponed to the future. It faces us now.

### Past Indictments

For forty years migratory agricultural labor has been regarded as substandard and an undesirable way of life. In the reports of the United States Industrial Commission of 1901 it is stated that:

. . . the annual inundation of grain fields in harvest time, hop yards in the picking season, fruit picking in districts of extensive market orchards, and similar harvest seasons requiring large numbers of hands for a short time, has a demoralizing effect on farm labor, reducing its efficiency in those lines. Such employments demand little skill; the requirements of each are simply and easily satisfied. They constitute a low order of farm labor, if worthy to be classed with it at all, and are excrescences upon its fair face.

There is no reason to regard the condition of migratory workers any more favorably today. However, it is coming to be recognized that migratory labor is not so much an "excrescence" as an integral and necessary part of agricultural production when it is carried on in certain ways. Migratory labor increases, not because more and more people have become restless, but because the demand for seasonal workers unattached to the farms which require them has increased. Will Alexander of the Farm Security Administration estimate that "there are probably between 250,000 and 400,000 of these farm families wandering around over the face of the earth."

Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life in 1910 regarded opportunity for farm laborers to rise as essential to "true democracy." As industrial opportunity for farm youth continues to lag, however, and agricultural depression



is prolonged, evidences of the growing class character of agricultural labor, whether mobile or not, become plainer and more widespread.

The President's Committee on Farm Tenancy of 1937 was as alert as the Country Life Commission of 1910 to sense the danger to democracy of the fundamental change in condition of farm workers. Its report declares:

Should the rungs of the agricultural ladder become rigid bars between classes, an American ideal would be lost. In a community of rigid groups, normal democratic processes are unable to function. ✓

The attempt to meet stratification of agricultural labor into a class with denial of the right to organize or to share the protection of social security and labor legislation already extended to industrial workers plainly is not in the tradition of our best public thought on rural life.

### Farmers Without Land

The "farm problem" means to most Americans: How can farmers get higher prices for their produce? "Cost of production" or "parity prices" equal to those of some earlier and more prosperous year are familiar demands of the spokesmen of farmers. For more than a decade government has sponsored loans to farmers on their crops at prices above market, a "plow-up" of cotton, "soil conservation" payments, "marketing agreements," and "pro-rates"—all of them machinery designed to raise farm prices and devised to make more adequate and more secure the livelihood of those who work on the land.

But the "farm problem" is becoming no longer the problem of price alone, for even when price is adequate there remains insecurity in a variety of forms. The farm problem is becoming also a problem of the relation of people to the land on which they work. Among the most dramatic symptoms of insecurity is our migratory agricultural labor. The disarranged human relationship to land finds no clearer expression than that by a displaced sharecropper, now a mobile seasonal laborer, as he was waiting for work on the plantations of Arkansas: "Now," he reflected, "we've got to till the land of a man we don't know."

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- Restless Americans*, by Clifton T. Little. No. 9
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