

FARMERS WITHOUT FARMS

The Migratory Worker Finds It "A Little Hard to Manage"

SANORA BABB

IN THE brief spring before the long summer heat, the great California valleys are bright with new grass and flowering weeds, fruit blossoms, and the high color of oranges and lemons, ripe on the trees. Sheltering groves of olive trees are gray-green against the delicate white and pink of apricot and peach blooms. Nearer the earth the picked cotton plants are dry and brown. Grape vineyards are not yet green, and the prehistoric-looking fig trees twist their strange patterns along the fertile valley floor. Across the open fields, vegetables are being planted or tended by stooping workers; in another county they are ripe, being gathered in by bending, crawling men and women with baskets on their shoulders. The farthest range of Sierra Madre mountains is pointed with snow, rising beyond the lower range. The air is sweet with spring.

"But you can't eat the scenery," a farm worker's wife said to me, "Even if it's most something to eat, and you can't hardly enjoy the spring when you're hungry. But it is purty, ain't it?"

It's purty indeed, and rich with food, but off the road, between the orchards, in cotton fields, even in the little towns, the people who plant and tend and harvest the crops are living in tents and shacks and abandoned barns. They are hungry and ill and sometimes cold in the California nights. In every direction the low and almost hidden tents of the migratory workers' camps accuse the absent owners of this ripening wealth.

Of the 250,000 migratory farm-workers in California, including thousands of resident Filipinos, Mexican, and Negro workers, the majority have migrated from the Middle West, leaving behind them mortgage-lost farms, bank-claimed machinery and animals, dust-ruined acres. This is another great migration westward in American history. The '49 migrants came for gold; in an older America, they come for bread. They have stopped in California because the Pacific Ocean has made it the last frontier, because the climate is mild, and possibly because the greatest agricultural state in the nation seems a likely place for an uprooted farmer to go. Here he finds a worse poverty, low wages, unemployment, and thousands who have come before him living in the same conditions.

They have no way of living through the three workless months—January, February, March—and in the whole year, they average about three months' work, bare support for

the time, leaving them starving and harassed the rest of the year. Only recently government aid through the Farm Security Administration has reached some of those families who have lived in the state less than a year. Even this is a small and temporary grant of two or three months ending with the beginning of certain harvests. Banker-backed Associated Farmers has already begun to fight the FSA which came in only as an urgent measure to prevent mass starvation among farm workers refused relief from state and county agencies.

The full story of want and suffering and courage is beyond telling. When I walk along the roads, see the families in their tents, see them at their monotonous meals of flour-and-water pancakes and potatoes or beans, see them standing in line, hungry and humiliated, waiting to ask a little help, I think that surely no one can even *know* the presence of these conditions and not wonder at and question the appalling poverty and suffering of these people who produce the agricultural wealth which surrounds them but does not even sustain them. Yet I have heard the big growers, and the people of the little towns prompted by them, say, "It's good enough for them. They're used to it."

At the relief offices where the long lines extend out the door and into the street or alley, they do not talk much. They are hungry and it takes energy to talk. If they have made the mistake of asking at the state relief, they are wondering at the harsh answer, the cruel shoving and herding-out of the poor. These farm workers wait until the last food is gone before they will ask for help. Sometimes they wait two days without food, sure they will find work, trying to get up the courage to ask. Something in their strict Midwestern faces is unasking, unbelieving. A tall lean farmer apologized: "... just till I get a job. I never had to ask for no help before in my life. I always worked and wanted to do the right thing—I was raised like that—but, well, you see, my wife and kids' hungry. I declare, I've hunted ever' place for work, and there ain't no work. I only want this till I get a job, just so's we can eat and keep alive." These words are like the words of the man before him and every other man, repeating unconsciously his way of life, his stern sense of honesty, his genuine pride.

The face of an old man standing beside me was budding with sweat. He wiped his

face with his sleeve and shielded his other arm carefully.

"What's the matter with your arm?"

"Blood poison in my hand, doctor said," and he showed me his right hand, red and swollen twice its size. "Week ago now, and it pains me way up in my shoulder and neck sompen fierce. Terrible headache too." The sweat was on his forehead again and he wiped it off.

"Isn't that doctor helping you?"

"No, he jes looked at it and said he couldn't do nothin for me les' I get \$30. He figgered \$30 would cure me. Fore that I went to the county hospital and the Red Cross both but they wouldn't treat it cause I ain't been here a year. I ain't never been sick a day in my life. I reckon I'll jes naterally have to get over it. Right now, my wife and me got only a mite o' lard left and I got to get a little sompen to eat today if I can."

"What about your hand?"

"Have to let er go, I reckon. When a man ain't got money, he jes lives or he dies. I sure worked hard forty years to end up this way." He wiped the pain-sprung sweat away and waited his turn.

Sunday is a special day even in a migratory camp. If there has been water and soap enough, it means a clean shirt and overalls, a clean calico dress. You can see them trying to tuck their week-day worries away in rest. The men are out in little knots talking, but they are talking about work, *the times*. The women, maybe, are visiting, maybe patching. The kids are jumping rope or chasing one another in a game. One Sunday in a camp I noticed a tent with the flap down and when I walked close I could hear someone sick, trying to breathe. I knocked on the tent pole and a shriveled old woman asked me in. Outside the sun was shining, but in the tent the floor was damp and cold; old dampness has a smell.

"I can't get it out," the old woman said at once, "I'm sicka smellin the ground." Her grown son was lying on a bed without a mattress, the ragged covers pulled up under his chin. His face was flushed with fever.

"Flu, I guess," he said.

"It's too bad you can't feel the warm sun," I said. There was nothing else in the tent but a camp stove, a skillet, a box, and bed spring on the wet ground. There was one quilt on the bare spring.

"It's his bed," the old woman said, "I made him sleep off the ground while he's sick."

"Have you anything to eat?" I asked her.

"A little flour and lard left. Wish I hadda handful apricots, I'd make Darryl a fried pie." She smiled at him.

"I'm all right, mom. I don't feel like eatin anyhow."

When I was leaving the camp, I looked back and saw him wrapped in a comfort, sitting on a box outside in the sun.

In a ditch-bank camp where tents and shacks fringed a muddy stream which served for drinking, laundering, and bathing, there

were a number of single men living a kind of communal life, sharing a dilapidated car and whatever food they could buy from the earnings of those fortunate enough to get a day's work now and then. In one shack with a family, I met two young boys, one seventeen and the other fourteen. I asked if they belonged to the family and they said no, they were just "visitin a minute." They had a few covers and they slept in the windbreak of other shacks.

"How do you get along when you can't find work?" I asked them.

"It don't sound real when you tell it," the older one said, "but sometimes we jus don't have nothin to eat. There's no relief for single men or boys, you know." The women began to joke them about getting married.

"We've been pickin scrub cotton, but that's over. We hunt for work all the time," the younger brother said.

"O' course, we'll go into fruit when it's ripe and maybe we can save some money. I want to keep Bud in school. I want him to be somethin."

"I want to study to be an aeronautical engineer," the young boy said excitedly.

"He's gonna be one, too, if I can keep workin," his brother said proudly. "If I had me a little piece of this valley to farm it'd be a sure thing then."

"Nothins sure these days," said the fourteen-year-old. I saw where the worn soles of his shoes were broken from the uppers and laced together with fine wire.

These accidental neighbors, bunched on a ditch-bank, town edge, or in a field camp, are more fortunate in their proximity than the isolated families who, without tents or money, have wandered into a shambled barn and there may starve alone with no one knowing.

One middle-aged couple living in a decaying barn with their only possessions, an old camp stove and a few quilts, asked me back for a visit. "Come any evenin. We'll get some new hay out of that field yonder and you can stay all night. Mother can make some mighty fine cornbread, but that's about all we can offer company."

These families are like thousands of others. Most of the tents are crowded with children. Most of them are clean. In excusing the box or lard-can offered for a chair, the intense heat from the tin camp-stove, or the cold, or the wet floor, the women say in their proud, unpitied way, "We never had to live like this before so it's a little hard to manage." And somehow they do manage to make good cornbread and rolls in the thin, battered stoves, to keep the one-room tents, with beds (maybe only a mattress or a spring or a pile of rags), a table, boxes, clean and in order. They manage to patch and make over their shabby clothes until they are more patches than anything else. They wash and iron under almost primitive conditions, and sometimes they carry the water for miles, even though the law requires water on the premises. They are a proud, honest, and dignified people, trying

under the most discouraging conditions to continue their lives in the ways they knew before they were dispossessed of even their simple comforts.

The men seem to fare a little better in health than the women and children do. But to see a strong man, with nerves and emotions unhinged by hunger and worry, strain the twitching muscles of his face to keep from weeping, and sometimes to break and weep, is painful proof that none of them are for a moment free of the burden of their lives.

One day along the road a man had fainted. When he revived and sat up he tried to explain but he was so desperately worried, so weak, that it was hard to speak. He and his wife and child lived in an abandoned milk-house, he had hunted all the time for work, he had lost his car and had to walk, and now they hadn't eaten anything for several days. The night before his wife had had a baby. It was terrible because she was hungry, because she had had no help, because now she was lying on the ground waiting for him to

bring a doctor, to bring something to . . . There was no way to get either, but in need he might *make* something happen. If he had fainted. The baby was dead, but somehow the mother kept living. Young women quickly look like old women, living like th-

In this day of decorated hospital room bedside telephones, and Caesarean births, it is shocking to find that these women are subjected to insults and humiliation when they ask admission to the county hospitals, and most of them, as was this woman, are turned away. Sometimes a sympathetic nurse advises an expectant mother to go to the hospital in labor; her screams may admit her as an emergency case. Many of them have no other choice than giving birth to their already malnourished babies without proper medical care, lying on a dirty mattress or a spring on the ground floor, with newspapers for sheets, and possibly the help of the camp neighbors. Such a mother must suffer the heightened pains of an underfed body, and often find that she has no milk for her child. Other milk for



Ben Yomen

"Darling, you're going to have a front-page wedding! Papa's brewery has just increased its advertising budget."

babies and growing children is a rare delicacy, almost unknown. It isn't hard to understand now that in the worst places the death rate of children is one or two a day. The national average mortality-rate for children under one year is fifty-two per thousand. In the San Joaquin Valley, the infant death rate for 1937 was 139 per thousand—over two and a half times as great. Refusal of the county hospitals to admit migrants has forced the FSA to establish the Agricultural Workers Health and Medical Association with offices in Fresno, Madera, Tulare, and Stockton. This will not provide medical aid to all migratory workers needing it, but it is a step forward in an almost unbelievable situation.

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INTELLECTUAL SLUMS

IT is difficult to realize that more than three million children of school age (between five and seventeen years) are not enrolled in any school, but such is the case. Moreover, there are eight states containing blighted school-areas where dwell more than 25 percent of those states' children unable to attend school for more than 150 days in the year.

To cite individual examples of intellectual slums—regions too poor to furnish adequate schools for their children—in Arkansas almost twenty-five thousand children receive less than ninety days of schooling in a year. In Wisconsin, over fifty-five thousand children receive less than this pitiable amount of school opportunity; Alabama has over eighteen thousand children in such extremely short-term schools; and Louisiana has over eight thousand. . . . The average child in South Carolina goes to school for only 147 days. In the rural areas, the situation is even worse; the average child enters his classroom on only 137 days. Negro children have an average of only 117 days of schooling in a year. When we realize that conditions which force abnormally short terms are usually accompanied by inability to pay teachers and buy necessary books and equipment, we can appreciate that in the blighted school-areas, America is building up a large mass of ill-educated citizens who may prove unable to cope with the complicated and pressing problems with which American democracy must deal.

The American Federation of Teachers fears that the present economic recession may deal a crippling blow to the tottering financial structures of many a school system. From states as widely separated as Florida, Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania, has come alarming news of threatened deficits and curtailment of school facilities. The American Federation of Teachers is firmly convinced that if all American children are to receive the education to which they are entitled, the federal government must come to the rescue with financial aid.—PROF. JEROME DAVIS, *president of the AF of T, in releasing results of a study by his organization.*

LIE WITH CIRCUMSTANCE

A Story of Vienna Just Before Hitler

CORA MACALBERT

IT WAS the day of the fall of Bilbao, and we had been sitting around the clinic with very little to do. I had come down from Vienna to work in the Klagenfurt Hospital for the summer, because I had heard that a student could get good training there, and because of the swimming in the nearby Wörther See.

It hadn't been too pleasant for me at the Wörther See. I had been so pleased with the fine cheap room I rented facing the lake. But after a few days my *Hausfrau* told me I would have to move because my concertina-playing annoyed the other guests. I suspected her objection was a dodge, but I said, "Very well, I won't play any more." And she let it go at that for a few days. Then she said, "You say you are an American, but you are really a Jew. And I can't have Jews living in my house." So I had to give up my fine room.

Things weren't going too well at the hospital either. My colleague and immediate superior managed to get me stuck with urinalyses and blood-counts all the time, while he took for himself whatever interesting work came in. We hadn't been very friendly after the first couple of days of talk about Spain when he had said, "Herr Kollege, you talk like a Communist." And I had answered, "It is foolish for you to say that. I am an American down here to study medicine. What can I have to do with politics? But you, Herr Kollege, I believe you talk like a Nazi."

"You have no business to say that," he blustered. "Is it not against the law of Austria to be a Nazi? I am a member of the Fatherland Front. Do you not see my ribbon?"—pointing to the red and white ribbon which he wore even on his white hospital coat.

That didn't mean anything, of course; nearly every Austrian wore the ribbon. He had to, to get a job. And my colleague made it less significant by the white stockings with his knickers, which the Nazis flaunted since the prohibition of their uniforms. I didn't want to antagonize him, because we were to be working together the whole summer, but I couldn't help saying, "You know the popular story, don't you, that all the people wearing Fatherland Front ribbons are either Nazis or Communists?"

We let it go at that and tried to talk about non-political things. He had a high respect for his profession and often enough would tell me that doctors are an elect body. Their

knowledge was hardly won and must be kept secret among them. They must always keep face before the laity. We disagreed about this, of course, but at least we could do it more openly.

But a Nazi is a very hard fellow to get along with. The meager news about Spain in the Austrian newspapers was always pro-Franco, and as to what was actually happening in Spain, I had to guess. At each reported government defeat, he would gloat. This morning, with the news of Bilbao, he was vociferous in his satisfaction. He held up the paper, thumping his fingers against the headlines, and said, "These Reds are getting theirs!" And I was so miserable I couldn't say anything but, "These Reds happen to be Catholics like you. If it's true, it's only a temporary setback."

His gloating presence was a hateful irritant, and when early in the afternoon he said, "I'll step out for coffee, you're in charge," it was a relief to me.

It was a little after three o'clock when two policemen stamped into the clinic, buffeting a thin young fellow between them. They told me they wanted his stomach pumped—that just as they arrested him he swallowed the evidence they wanted.

"Was it jewelry?" I said.

"No, paper," said the policeman.

"Paper?" I said stupidly. I was the foreigner and could make use of the foreigner's supposed stupidity. "What kind of paper?"

"We know he had papers on him with the addresses of his comrades. We've had our eye on him a long time. But he must have swallowed them as we picked him up."

So, the boy was a Nazi or a Communist. He stood between them, quietly defiant. He didn't look like a Nazi. No white stockings for one thing. And no swaggering arrogance. I had a hunch he wasn't a Nazi. "What time did you have lunch?" I asked him. He didn't answer.

"He never had any," said the policeman. "We nabbed him at noon just as he was coming into a WÖK to eat. And had to chase him all over the restaurant too. When we caught him he was chewing on something. We've had him at the station house for questioning ever since."

Well, this was fine. If only I could get through before my colleague returned. I could pump the boy's stomach and there was very