



# GHOSTS IN OUR FIELDS

BY ROLAND WILD

*Pictures for PAGEANT by Joe Pazen*

**As millions of poverty-stricken migrant workers begin a new season of following U. S. crops, Pageant reports on a typical family in Weedpatch, California. Here is a story of unnecessary misery you won't soon forget . .**

■ UNCLE SAM'S COLOSSAL economy lives in a house haunted by miserable ghosts that will not be put down. Barely recognized, periodically forgotten, these ghosts form a labor force of some 2,000,000 men, women and children whose plight has been dignified with the clean-sounding label: "migrant worker."

You may remember these people from John Steinbeck's novel, "Grapes of Wrath." They are still with us. More numerous now than ever before, they are perhaps the greatest shame in the States.

When the frosts have gone and spring makes ready for summer in the richest agricultural areas of the nation, America's ghosts begin to move restlessly and pathetically northward in three major groups.

In the East, Negroes from the deep South follow the crops along the Atlantic Coast to join Pennsylvania miners and Kentucky hill people on the potato mounds and in the fruit orchards of New York and New England.



### Weedpatch, California

In the mid-West, Spanish-Americans from Texas move up toward Colorado, Michigan and the pea and bean fields of Minnesota, crossing the paths of Missourians who are moving into the asparagus fields of Illinois.

**The Rush family is only one out of thousands who roam the U.S. seeking work—finding poverty**

In the far West, the children of the Okies and Arkies of the 1930's move up through California, Oregon and Washington looking for work in the citrus groves, the wine country and the cotton fields.

These are the ghosts who live in Uncle Sam's house. They get no unemployment insurance. They get no social security benefits. The law does not, in the main, protect them.

Because PAGEANT believes that the migrant worker must not slip from the public conscience, it presents on the following pages a detailed report on a typically destitute family—that of Connie Rush (*above*) who lives today in Weedpatch, California, 15 miles from Bakersfield in San Joaquin Valley.



Connie Rush, California cotton-picker, is a dark, perpetually perplexed man of 41. His wife (*above*)



## Weedpatch, California

is 36, a grey-haired, neat woman with a soft voice and lined face. They live in a home-made wooden shack with a canvas roof.

The Rushes' oldest child, Leona May Nallay, 17, is married and the mother of a three-year-old daughter (*bottom right*).

Still at home are Loreta Maria, 16; Norma Jean, 15; Joe Richard, 14; Connie Joyce, a girl, nine; Bill Edward, six; Betty Ann, three—born blind; Charles Ray (*top right*), 18 months. There will be another child born this summer.



Though residents of Weedpatch, they are classified and treated as migrant workers



The Rushes have eight children and one grandchild. Their youngest boy has asthma, their youngest girl is blind—another is expected

### Connie Rush

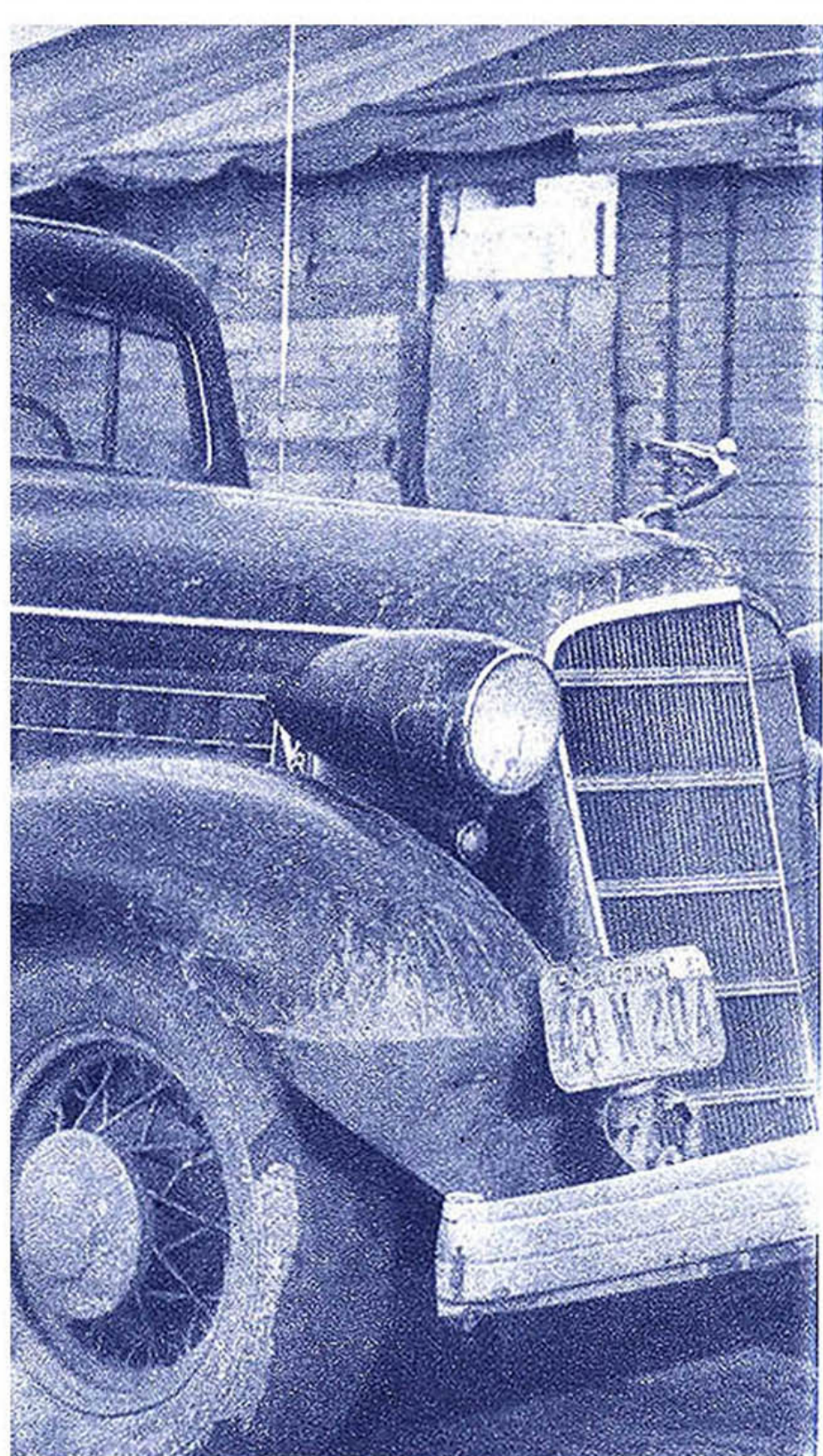
Connie Rush picked cotton in Oklahoma until seven years ago, when he packed his family into a truck and migrated West. Mother, father, the three girls and the oldest boy went straight into the cotton fields, rising at three in the morning and working till dusk.

Rush liked California, paid \$25.00 down for a strip of land, built his shack to replace a tent and contracted to pay \$10.00 a month for



## Weedpatch, California

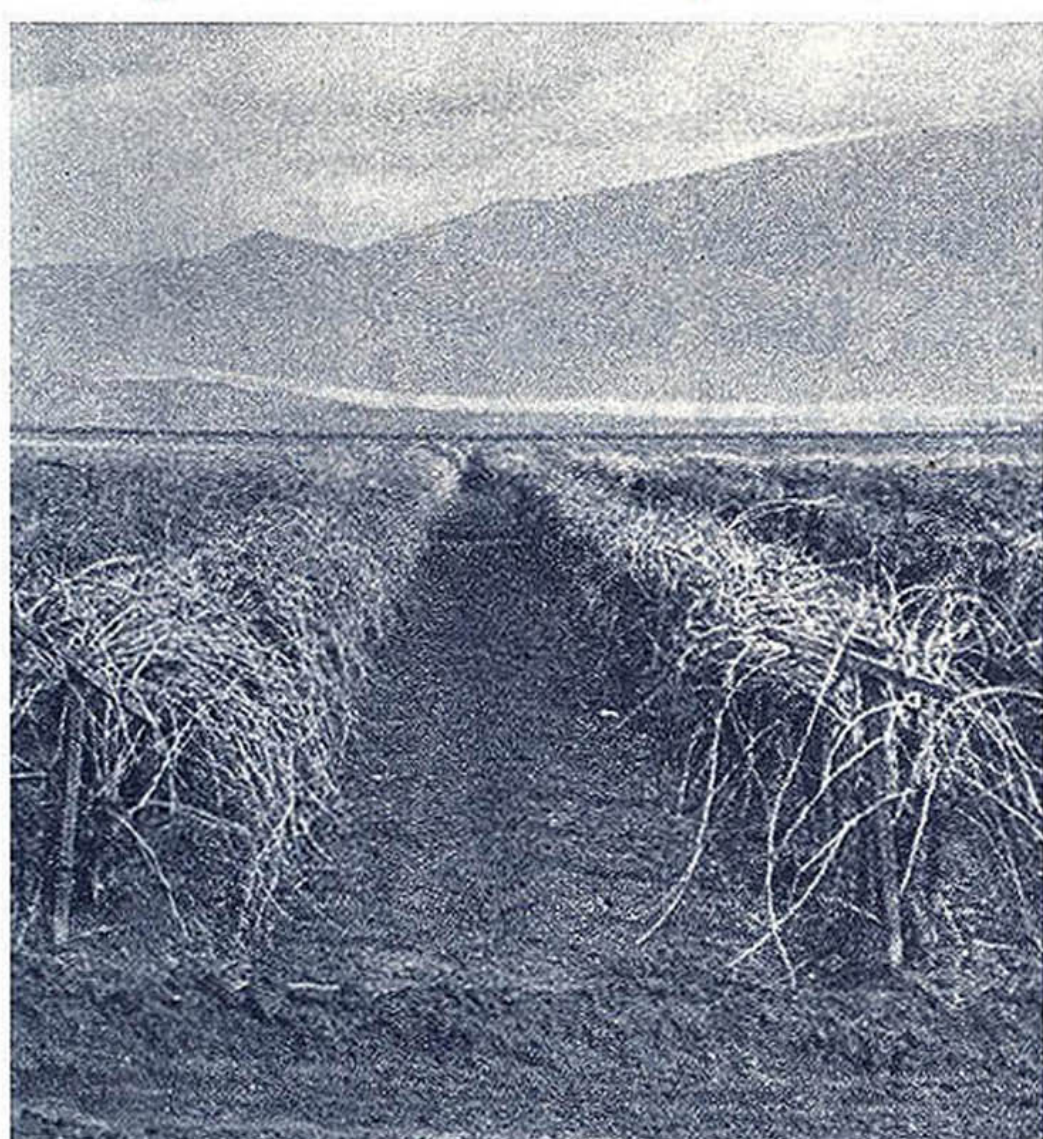
48 months. There was a water pipe in his yard, and he could have had gas and electricity. He preferred kerosene for light and cooking. "In the bad times," he says grimly, "they could cut off the service."



The 1935 Cadillac is theirs.



Weedpatch's main street is muddy, dismal, dull



Weedpatch grows potatoes, cotton and grapes



## Weedpatch, California



Norma Jean

**Though the children live in poverty, they have managed to escape the utter despair of their parents. If they can get through school, they may get away from the fields—but their chances of escaping are very small. The odds are all against them**

A packing-case-wood extension on the Rush home is the bedroom for Loreta, Norma and Connie Joyce. The three girls use an old trunk and six sacks of potatoes to keep their clothes on, and have a closet made of cardboard with a mirror.

Loreta Maria (*right*) is the hope of the family. She is doing well at school, where she is in the 10th grade.

"If I can keep my health," her father says, "she might get to be a bookkeeper in Bakersfield—maybe get the others through school, too." But even as he says it, he looks anxiously at his pretty daughter, perhaps remembering that Leona was married and a mother at 14.

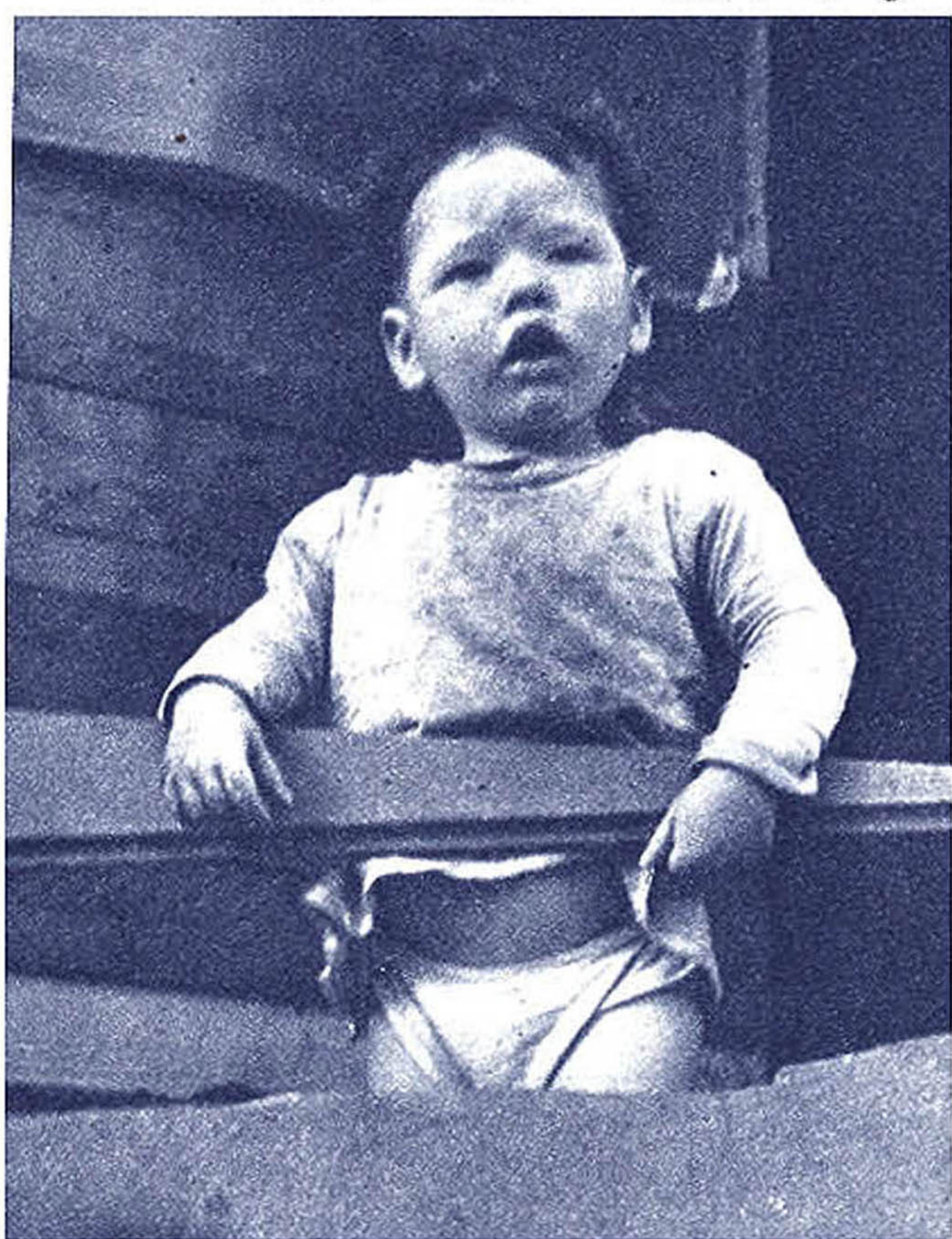
"She's smart," says Connie Rush. "We could have got her a work permit, but then she'd have only four hours' school a week—and the kids just got to get out of the fields."

Loreta has none of the listless despair of the older cotton-pickers. She goes to school-dances and the movies, takes an interest in her class in cosmetics with Norma (*above*)



### Weedpatch, California

and uses the make-up set she got for Christmas. She has three dresses, and borrows another for the dances. When she looks into the luxury stores of Bakersfield, or watches the new Cadillacs rolling



**Boards on door keep Charles Ray from roaming**



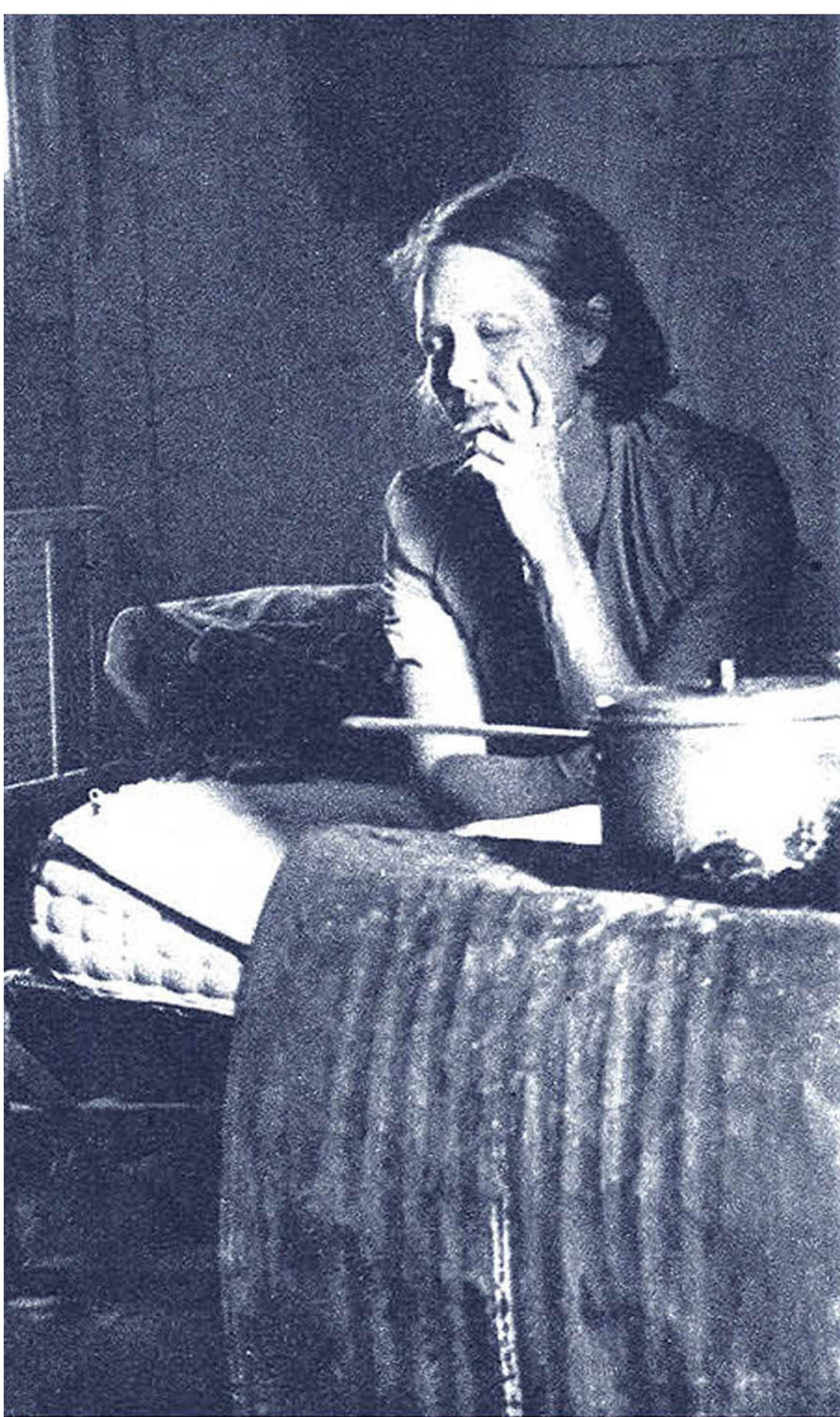
**Three-year-old Patricia is Rushes' grandchild**



## Weedpatch, California

past on fabulous Route 99 to Los Angeles; there is no envy in her eyes. For this is another world, and she has no contact with the rich.

The Rush family once made \$36.00 in a day's picking. The result of their 50 hours of work was one bale. "Connie Rush thinks they made about \$2500 in 1949, but when the workless months of January and February rolled around they didn't have a penny.



**Mrs. Rush uses an old oil drum as an auxiliary stove. Though pregnant, she shares her bed with her husband and one of the children**

The Rush family of Weedpatch, however, is by no means at the bottom of the heap in the fertile San Joaquin Valley.

The Pruetts live in a converted railway coach with five children.



### Weedpatch, California

They pay \$17.75 a month rent.

William Greenfield and his family of six have a hut for \$26.00 a month. The eldest boy has a work permit, and goes to school only four hours a week. He will take 10 years to graduate, and is worried he may not have a pair of shoes for the ceremony. "I guess I'll always be a picker," he says. This winter the Greenfields got powdered eggs, powdered milk and apples every 14 days from the State of California.

John Henry, a burly man of 35 with a wife and four children, has lived in a tent for a year. The floor is the sand of the camp, and the furniture is two double beds with ragged covers. There are no washing facilities.

For all of these people, as for the Rushes, there is no relief, as there is for workers elsewhere, in decent recreation.

With this kind of material, the Farm Workers Union might be expected to operate a promising campaign against the rich landowners. They are waging the campaign, but the promise has been small.



LORETTA MARIA AND JOR RICHARD  
HAVE NEVER KNOWN A BETTER WAY OF LIFE

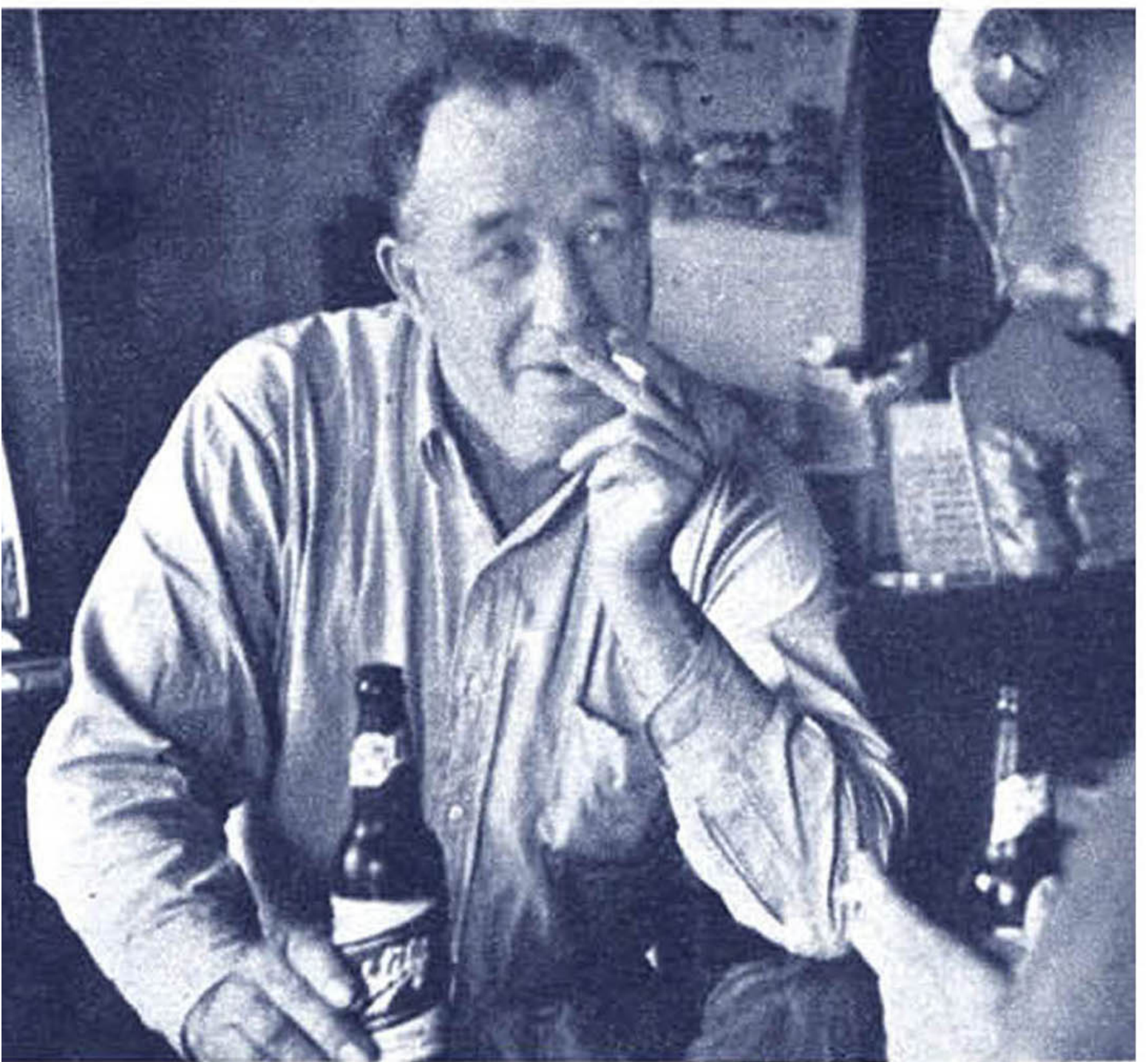
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## Weedpatch, California



**Weedpatch's men play nickel poker in bad times, bet as much as \$100 in good times.**



**Above, Fred Walker sells beer to Weedpatchers  
below, Leona finds daughter's toys in town dump**

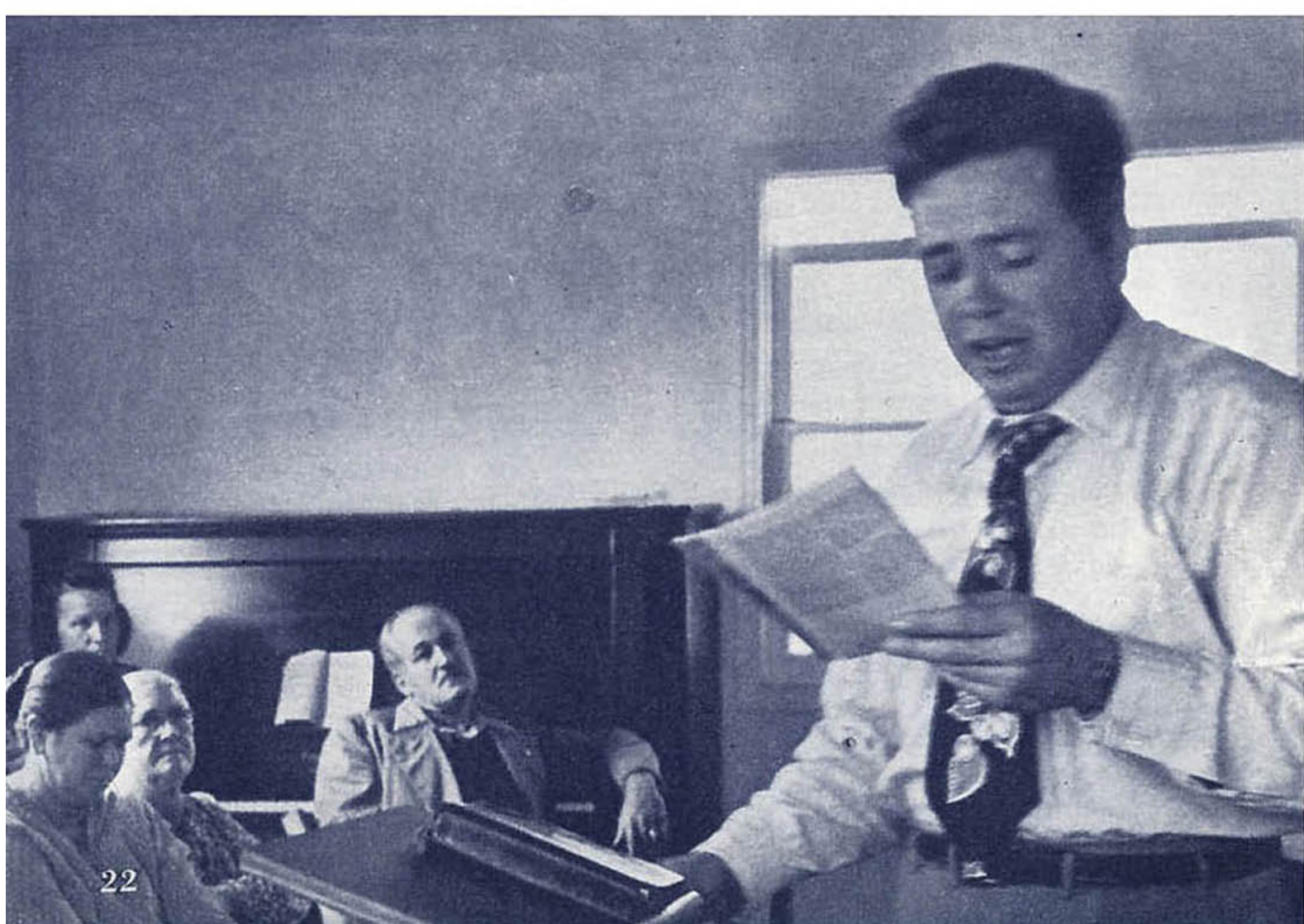


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## Weedpatch, California



**Brother Jim Davis of Pentecostal Church conducts a meeting. The Rushes rarely attend**

### **Union activity in the Valley is weak but militant. The real battle for recognition has just begun**

When the Farm Workers Union sent loud-speaker trucks through the fields in San Joaquin Valley, the land owners obtained a court injunction against their use and stopped them. The union then sent



**Migrant striker**



**Migrants' boss**



## Weedpatch, California

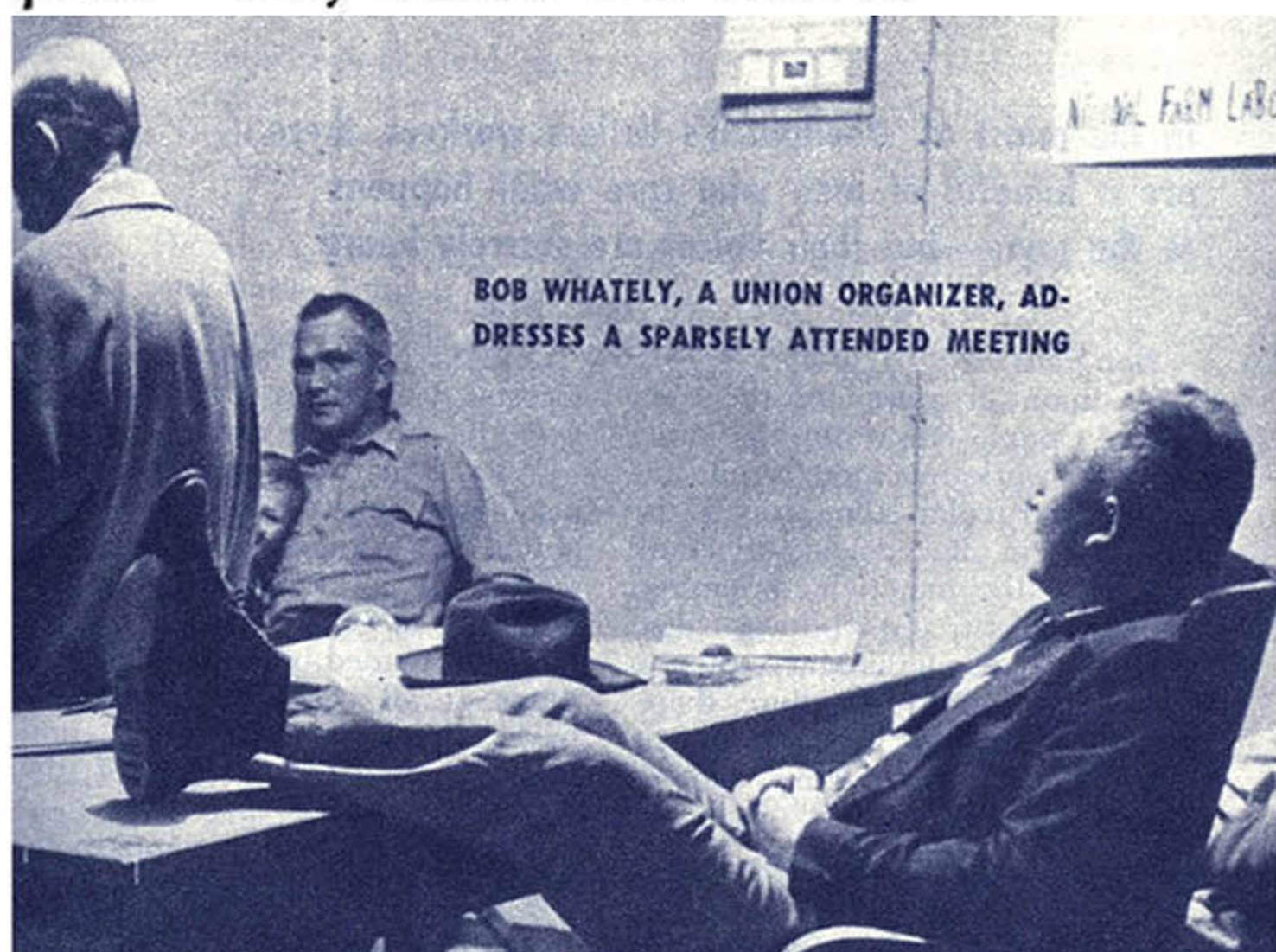
**Weedpatch dreariness is barely compensated by meager recreation. Only the union is energetic**



**For fun, Loreta Maria goes to school dances. She dates carefully to avoid falling in love**

Bob Whately (*below, making report*) on tour to read the Bill of Rights in the same sunlit fields. He was arrested.

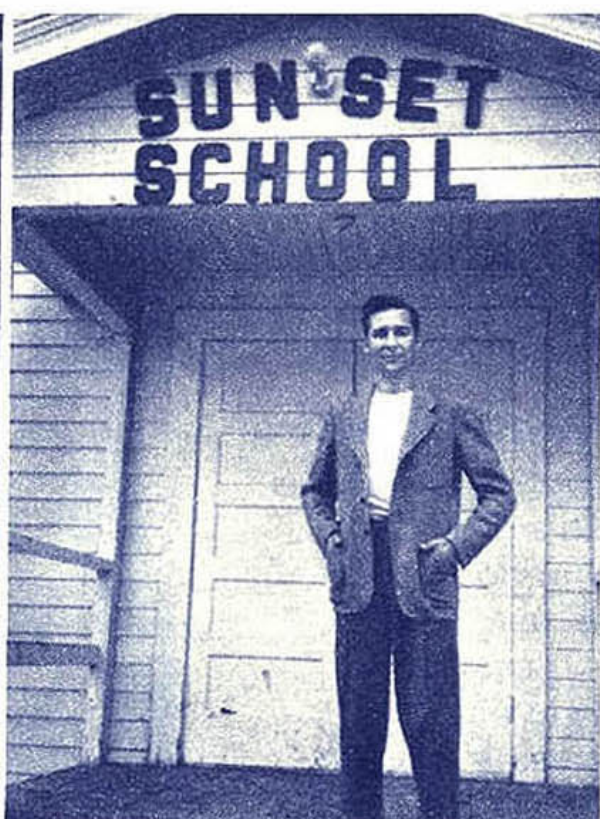
Union propaganda in the Valley makes much of old Joseph Di Giorgio (*above right*), multi-millionaire founder of the Di Giorgio settlement and camp—and one of the biggest “corporation farmers” in the area. The Di Giorgio organization posts “No Trespassing” signs at its camps and labor supply depots—they mean the union.



BOB WHATELY, A UNION ORGANIZER, ADDRESSES A SPARSELY ATTENDED MEETING



## Weedpatch, California



The organizer

The school principal

The editor

**In the midst of Weedpatch's listless workers, there are a handful of men who care what happens to the town—but their voices are scarcely heard**

Bob Whately (*above*) is an active union organizer in the area where Connie Rush and his family live and work, but more significant on this particular labor front is the presence in Bakersfield of Hank Hasiwar, the man who organized the Ford plant, and who was called to Japan by General MacArthur to advise on union procedure there. But even Hasiwar is not optimistic over his new job. "How can we hold out in a strike?" he asks. "We'd win in 60, 90 days. But a family gets awfully hungry in that time. . . ."

If union activity is futile for the time being in the Valley, what hope is there for people like the Rushes? The first answer is always to get off the land as soon as possible. But how many will ever be able to get out of the fields?

Brother Jimmy Davis of the Pentecostal Church is a realist. "A few," he says, "the rest—hopeless."

Peter Bancroft (*above*), principal of the Sunset School in Weedpatch, encourages his pupils to search for a little beauty in the drabness, to get out of the regular rows of tended vines and cotton stems at all costs. Some parents have objected to such talk, and taken their children out of the school.

Willa Marsh, a sympathetic Government administrator of re-



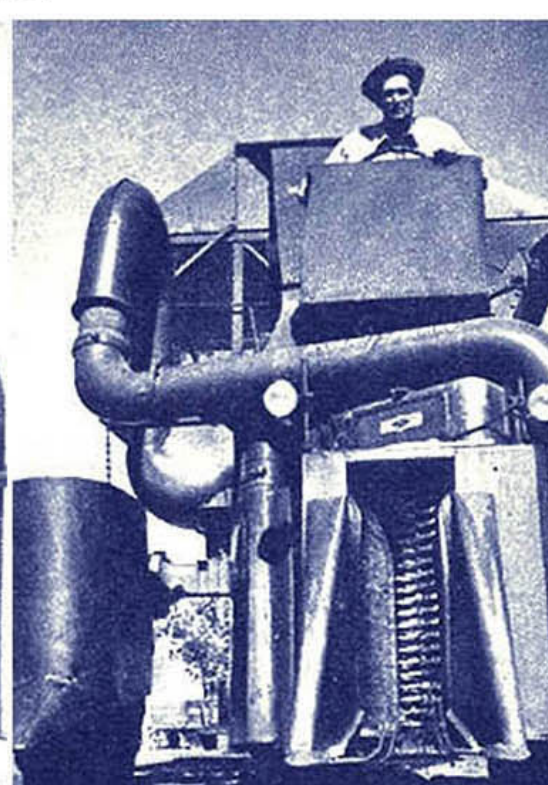
## Weedpatch, California



The grocer



The Judge



The machine

lief, knows that half the 100,000 migrant workers are in distress, admits relief organizations are passing the buck. He says: "Perhaps two per cent will drag themselves out."

James McKinley (*above*), agricultural expert of the Bakersfield Press, holds out the same small hope—while union people and farm owners continue to wrangle.

Chet Hodges (*above*) is one of the few pickers who managed to get out of the fields in the past few years. He runs a grocery in Weedpatch, but most of his business is on credit. His guess is that few men can escape the Valley after a winter of starvation on hog jaws and beans.

Gambling and cheap wine, the curses of California, are responsible for some of the destitution. Connie Rush, who likes a quick shot of liquor before breakfast in good times, points to the three gambling joints and the five bars in Weedpatch's muddy main street. In the State where, last year, 21 million gallons of wine were poured down the throats of "winos," it is inevitable that Judge Oral Parish (*above*) sees a long line of repeaters pass through his white-washed court. "All we can do is try to keep them off the streets," he says. "It stops them being run over."

But the union doesn't look at the weakness of the laborers themselves. "The farmers," it claims, "want a surplus of labor—and poverty. They need half a million pickers for eight months of the year. They let them starve—prefer



### Weedpatch, California

them to starve—the rest of the year.”

Connie Rush, the average picker, doesn't say anything. For him and his kind it is often easier to forget everything but the immediate present—and wine is 50 cents a bottle.

Hope centers more and more on Loreta Maria Rush and her generation. It is too late for her parents, now, to get away from the fields. They must either stay in the Valley, or, if conditions worsen here, migrate elsewhere to settle in a similar rut. In the meantime Loreta's problem—to stay out of love and marriage as long as she can—becomes all the more vital as the family watches the advent of the machine (*above*). Unless Loreta gets out of the fields and gets out fast, she will be consumed by this new monster—a cotton picker that does the work of 35 men and women, and eats nothing but oil.

**Connie Rush's family has been doomed by the coming of the mechanical cotton-picker. Where do the Rushes, their children and their kind go from here?**



**There is no longer any escape for Mrs. Rush**



### Weedpatch, California

Not long ago Loreta Maria Rush and her family watched as Ed Handle climbed up into the driving seat of one of Richard Wilson's big, red cotton-picking machines. The picker advanced on the fields. Its turning prongs twisted off the cotton, sucked it back, and in half an hour filled the great cage on its top. At two miles an hour, working day and night, the machine will do the work of seven times the entire working Rush family.

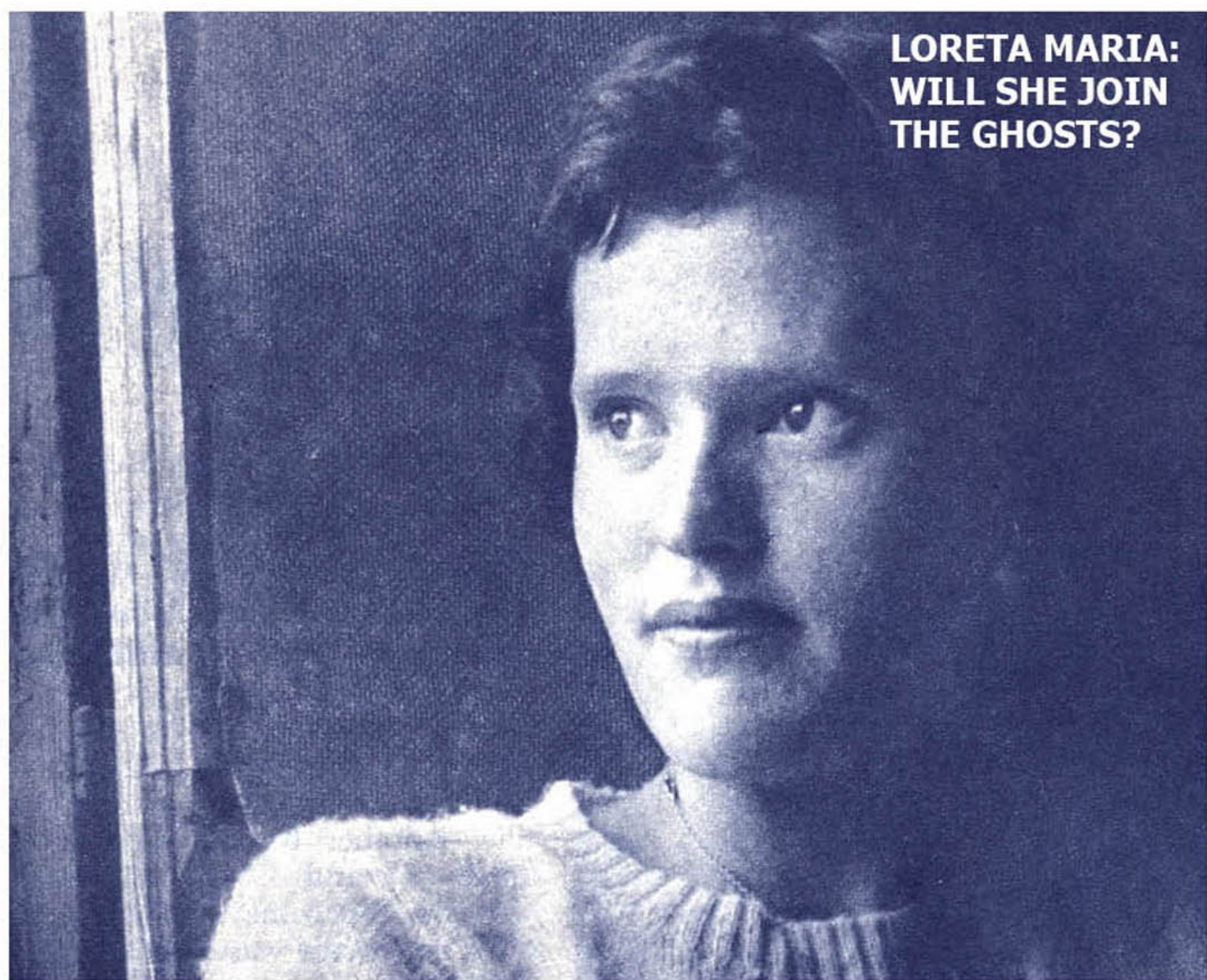
"What's more," says Dick Wilson, "there's no back talk."

There are already 300 mechanical pickers in the region.

"So what do we do now," asks Connie Rush, "disappear into smoke?"

But Loreta Maria shushes him, and he remembers that she is the hope of the family.

For Connie Rush and his wife, the machine foreshadows a day when they will have to move on again. For Loreta Maria, though, it can mean something more. Its threat may strengthen her determination to break away from the fields—to leave the great army of ghosts that creeps through the nation year after year, doomed to roam in atonement for the sin of being forgotten.



**LORETA MARIA:  
WILL SHE JOIN  
THE GHOSTS?**

*NOTE: A quick Google search of her name indicated that a Loreta Maria Rush graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1973 ~ The Editors*