

PATHFINDER

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Squalid Paradise



*In Wealth-Producing San Joaquin Valley:
Squalor, Misery, Disease and Death*

Between the snowy Sierra Nevadas and the straggling Coast Range lies California's Great Central Valley of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Renowned as an earthly paradise from whose rich soil the brilliant sun draws abundant crops of semi-tropical fruits, the Great Valley is today the state's principal source of wealth. Last week, Californians were acutely conscious that the valley could also produce squalor, misery, disease and death.

To farm its rich vineyards and orchards, the San Joaquin Valley has long depended on the hordes of migratory workers who swarm the state in search of employment. All such work is seasonal, and in the slack periods, these transients have to make shift as best they can. Of late years, depression, droughts and floods have driven increasingly greater numbers of families from such nearby states as Oklahoma, Texas and Arkansas into the fertile valley in search of a livelihood. A serious problem grew.

Just how serious it was became painfully apparent a few weeks ago with the report of a California gospel worker named Harold H. Robertson. Returning from a tour of San Joaquin, Robertson reported 70,000 jobless, homeless families living in frightful squalor and privation. At first his story was discounted as grossly exaggerated, but when valley land-owners themselves backed up his account, California began to worry.

Trouble in Paradise...

By last week, investigations had brought to light a shocking picture. In addition to the 200,000 vagrants already roaming California's valleys, estimates showed an influx of about 50,000 more transients since January 1. Not eligible for relief until they have been in the state three years, thousands of families were described as camping under the broiling sun with only a ragged tarpaulin or a sheet of corrugated tin to shield them. Lack of food and running water was breeding disease. Throughout San Joaquin Valley, hopeless men and women sprawled in the sun as their ill-clad children played in the dirt.

Faced with these conditions. California cried out for a remedy. The state's \$48,000,000 relief appropriation for 1937-39 cannot legally go to non-residents. To many, the only solution seemed to be Federal aid. In 1935, Washington wiped transients off relief rolls, and the Resettlement Administration in California has cut its camps there from 20 to seven. Governor Frank Merriam, bombarded with pleas for action, last week prepared to demand new Federal assistance, but many doubted that the transient problem could be solved. One welfare worker complained.

"You can't change the habits of primitive people from the Southern and Mid-Western states. You can't even force them to bathe . . ."

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