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HEARTLESS HARVEST



A group of migrant children from New Mexico in the sugar-beet and pea country near Berthoud, Colorado. Usually the whole family will work in the fields and schooling for children is generally neglected. Plumbing for migrant workers is along primitive lines, as represented by the outhouses shown in this picture

A new crop of Okies, estimated in the millions, is wandering about the country, following the crops they pick. To get their story the author traveled 9,000 miles through 17 states, toiling in the fields. Here he describes working and living conditions you wouldn't believe could be tolerated in America today

THE open truck rumbled on, mile after aching mile. There was a tarpaulin to stretch over the rattling sideboards but it was unrolled only in a big rain or when the truck passed through a town—so people wouldn't see what was jam-packed inside.

The truck rolled and jounced, day and night, grinding out the endless miles through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota. Fifteen hundred miles. Three days and three nights. If the cargo had been cattle, the law would require a stop every 36 hours to rest and refresh them. If the cargo had been pigs, better still—they would get hose showers along with their rest. But as it was, this rickety truck didn't have to make any rest stops at all. Its cargo was only people.

Jesus Martinez, his wife and four children were among the 38 human beings jammed into the back of the truck, forced to stand up most of the time because there wasn't room for everyone to squat at once. The women and children took turns sitting on the planks along each side, though one spot was reserved for Mrs. Rosa Lopez because she was pregnant.

When the truck stopped for gas, Jesus Martinez and the other men would scurry out and forage for food. Maybe they had a few dimes left for hot dogs and coffee. Or, after their money ran out, they could ask for leavings at a diner. A counterman would look at their faces and give out some bread ends and a little jam.

Then everyone would rush for the toilets, but there was never enough time to take care of 38 people. So along a lonely stretch of road the truck would stop and everyone would clamber down and dart for the bushes.

The first night, Joe the Boss drove straight through without a stop and when Jesus pounded on the cab and begged him to stop for the sake of the women he barked back, "Siddown! How the hell you gonna get to the beets if we don't keep a move on?"

The beets—the sugar-beet fields of Minnesota—were far away, and $22 an acre was going to be good pay, especially since all the jobs in Texas seemed to have been gobbled up this year. The family of Jesus Martinez was just one of thousands of Texas families who had turned migrant. The cotton fields at home had been deluged with surplus hands. And the citrus work had been bad.

When Joe the Boss was rounding up his crew in the little kids. Joe the Boss would take that out of his pay.

Pay? Oh, yes, you get $22 an acre. That's good pay. Maybe if you get the whole family out there working (8-year-old Manuel, too) Martinez could handle fifteen acres or so.

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It would take him ten weeks. In the meantime, Mama Martinez could buy food on credit at the village store. She'd just sign a slip every time she bought something and those slips would be saved up against earnings. Fifty dollars would be held back to make sure they would be on hand to top the beets in the fall. The Martinez family would be in debt the day they started. They'd have to work their heads off trying to get out of debt the whole time they were in the fields.

This, then, is the dirge of the family Martinez. It has the beat of many thousands of families in it. Peace has returned to the fields. The war and the shortage of harvest hands are over. Migrants are flooding out again like a swollen river upon the highways and into the camps and over the fields.

I saw this human tide ooze northward. It mounts in the South and swells mainly into three great streams:

The Eastern stream surges with the ripening crops from Florida up the coast to New York State and New England. Its people are predominantly Negro.

The Middle West stream boils up from Texas and floods northward toward Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado. It is Spanish-American, mostly, composed of Texas families called "Tex-Mex" or "Texicans."

The Western stream swirls with the harvests through California's fecund valleys up north to the state of Washington. Its migrants are mainly Southern California whites, including thousands of Okies and Arkies who fled from the dust bowl in the 1930s.

Besides the main streams there are scores of little rivulets: Pennsylvania mining families who work the orchards of New York, Kentucky hill folks who dig potatoes in New England, and Missouri villagers who cut the asparagus in Illinois.

How many migrants are there? Nobody knows. Those who want to minimize the migrant problem say 600,000. Those who want to wring hands hard say 4,000,000. Edith Lowry of the Home Missions Council of North America—a Protestant church group representing 23 denominations, which has done the most work for migrants with the least noise—tells us there are 2,500,000.



A camp of Pennsylvania migrant workers, located near North Norwich, N. Y. Each shack consists of one room and houses an entire family. Now migrant labor is plentiful again, the problem is increasingly grave



These men are migrants from Florida, working in the fields near Freehold, N. J. They are part of the Eastern stream (predominantly Negro) which follows ripening crops up the Atlantic Coast to New England

Government Migrant Camps to Be Closed

I have seen a good many of them, covering 9,000 miles through 17 states to talk with them and to work in the fields with them. I have seen heads shake in Washington because now, when the need is

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rising, the government is closing shop at its 48 migrant camps—neat, model camps with clean houses, laundries, recreation centers—come December 31st. The federal medical program for migrants has already folded up.

Congress has dropped the migrant problem like a hot potato. In its adjournment jamboree at the end of July, Congress liquidated even the feeble if well-intentioned farm-labor program of the Department of Agriculture. Through its Extension Service, the Department of Agriculture was at least trying to facilitate the movement of migrants, setting up information stations along migrant routes, operating farm placement offices.

Congress had before it the Hope bill—known in some quarters as the "Hopeless bill" because it did so little for migrants—but even this wasn't passed. A futile $1,400,000 was allocated to state employment services for farm-labor placement, with some $200,000 for the U.S. Employment Service "to coordinate activities."

"The Department of Agriculture is left without any farm-labor program at all," Meredith L. Wilson, director of the Extension Work, told me. "As far as migrants are concerned, we're washed up on January 1st."

Just two months before Congress adjourned, Marine Major General Graves B. Erskine had given his report as head of a government committee to investigate the migrant problem. He had told us, "Migrant workers have been robbed of so many normal American and human rights that it is almost unbelievable."

This season, for the first time since the depression, migrants in Florida again knew the vapid taste of boiled potato peelings. It was better than going hungry. Some got a better break—farmers let them dig what spuds they could find in abandoned fields, and they could eat the ones that wouldn't grade.

Some, according to Margaret J. Harris, a Home Missions Council field supervisor, got a worse break; the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, which desperately wanted to help them, were barred from their camps—to avoid "coddling them"—even though the children had only thin broth and grits to keep them alive.

The cry of "surplus labor" came out of California as early as January. The cotton crop was in and migrant communities started reporting "relief loads." Families drove their jalopies dry in search of work. Thousands roamed and waited until May, when they poured into the ripening San Joaquin Valley. All summer California was swamped, its migrant camps bulging with families waiting for work.

Texas began disgorging migrants in February, much too soon, for the crops to northward weren't nearly ready. But the Army and the war plants had thrown so many thousands back upon the land that the fields were overcrowded. Then the citrus market collapsed (they said it was a transportation bottleneck) and the vegetable market sagged, too.

It is a new day in the fields. A good day because there are plenty of hands to bring in the crops, and we do not need to import Jamaicans and Mexicans as we did during the war. *(Continued on page 34)*

But what kind of a day is it for the people?

A sad day, Monsignor John O'Grady, of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, tells us. Monsignor O'Grady, together with the Reverend Hermann N. Morse of the Home Missions Council and Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein of the Synagogue Council of America, has made an inter-faith study of migrants and jointly condemned the "lack of decent housing," the "absence of health and educational facilities" in migrant camps.

"Migrant workers are the most depressed labor group in the United States,' these religious leaders asserted, and the asked, "Can the people of the United States continue to maintain an agricultural economy that takes such a toll, that demands so much in human health and human life?"

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In a migrant camp near Smyrna, New York, Harvey Clayton and his wife, Mary, were eating a dinner of scrambled eggs and beans when I came by.

"Hi, yo!" he called.

"Any work yet?"

"Boss says next week."

Clayton's "home," in the rich beanery of New York State, was a cubicle partitioned off in a cowshed. It was seven feet high at one end and sloped down to five feet at the other. The heavy timbers made it look like a cave. Harvey Clayton and his wife had a board platform to sleep on, covered with loose hay. There was another board platform in the dark back of the room where the Clayton children. Melanie, 14, Joe, 11, Jerome, 6 and Elizabeth, 3, had to sleep.

The Claytons were one of 26 Florida families in the camp. And they were fortunate because the cubicles in the cowshed were a good deal more commodious than what the others had. The stable, for instance. That had been boarded up into tiny cells. The floor was dirt, with some hay in one corner and some more hay on the rough wood sleeping platform.

Nobody in this camp had a bed. From nine-month-old Rebecca Dewitt to 74-year-old Corliss Jones they all slept on the raw planks and some brushed the hay aside and preferred the rough wood because the hay was full of lice and fleas.

The smell of dung filled the stable, though it was much milder in the cowshed and after you stayed in the Clayton family's room for ten minutes you got used to it. Some of the other families lived in tiny hen houses. When Abel Thompson crawled into his house, doubling over to get through the door, there was just room for him to take three steps alongside the plank platform where he and his wife, Jessica, slept. If he took another step he'd be treading on their daughter, Grace, or tipping over the orange crate which was a crib for the new baby.

A preacher, the Reverend David Williams, engaged in welfare work among the migrants at near-by Poolville, New York, had come to this camp the day before the migrants arrived. He found a foreman shoveling dung out of the stables.

"You're not going to put human beings in there, are you?" the preacher asked.

"Who says we're not?"

"Why, man, your whole camp is nothing ing but animal houses. Not one of these is fit for human habitation!"

"Well, they come here, don't they? It must be good enough for them!"

The Reverend Mr. Williams, who had formerly worked among African natives said to me, "I thought I left poverty behind in Africa. But here I find families living in stables and subsisting on corn bread. People do not live and eat like that even in Africa."

Two Families in a Boxcar

Out in Minnesota, the Hernandez family had come to work in the peas and the beets. I found them living on a farm near the town of Blue Earth—in a boxcar partitioned in the middle, and another family lived in the other end. It was a beaten-up boxcar, had a leaky roof, peeling, splintery walls and it sagged to one side on the crossties beneath it.

Cesareo Hernandez, his wife and five children lived in the front end, and in the back end, which was so cluttered with cots and bunks in two layers that you could hardly walk through it, lived another couple with a grandmother and her children, making twenty people in all in the boxcar.

It was raining when I pulled into an asparagus camp near Rochelle, Illinois, and I welcomed the shelter of an old clapboard house not far from the highway. As I approached the sagging porch, I had to sidestep quickly. A young woman

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Mrs. C. Hernandez, with four of her five children. Family shares a boxcar with thirteen other people

giggled from a second-story window "I'm sorry," she said. "I did not mean to throw the garbage on you!"

It wasn't really garbage. It was slop water and all the women threw it out of windows. When you have eleven families in a ten-room house the niceties of waste disposal are often overlooked.

It seemed the house bulged a little when I stepped inside. It already had 58 people. and they slithered in and out of the doorways, the stairways and the landings like worms in a chunk of wood.

Mrs. Maria Herrera was baking *tortillas* on a wood-burning stove.

"Your stove is smoking."

"Ha, ha. You call that smoking," she replied. "You should see when comes suppertime and everybody is cooking at once."

Yes, at suppertime it was worse. Eleven stoves belched into two chimneys and the whole house poured out odors and smoke. What a pyre in case a spark got loose! Luis Perez worried more about that than the others did because his family was in a corner on the top floor. He and his wife, Lupe, took turns staying up at night when the children slept. With no fire escapes, no running water, and only the slop buckets to quench a flame—as Luis Perez pointed out, "Someone is wise to stand guard."

At a big cannery camp outside of Hoopeston, Illinois, I found 26 families living in a warehouse, an immense warehouse with a tar-paper roof.

"Nice big house, eh?" laughed Pedro Rodriquez. He was one of several hundred asparagus cutters in the camp. We walked inside. The Rodriquez family, like the other 25 families, had a cubicle 15 feet square fenced in with wire mesh like a chicken coop. Blankets and burlap were slung over the wire mesh to give each family privacy, though the partitions stood only eight feet high. If you were that sort of person, you wouldn't have much trouble looking down into your neighbor's house.

Pedro Rodriquez peered down the aisle toward the door.

"A lil hazy, huh?" he grinned. Yes, it was. I could just about see the light

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coming in at the other end, even though it was mid-afternoon. There was no floor and in the aisle and in the cubicles where the families lived there was only gravel and dirt, so that when anyone stirred his foot a dust cloud rose up. With 26 families, there was a good deal of stirring of feet, which made a great swirl of dust. At night the dust settled after a few hours, but some of it settled into the lungs of the sleeping people.

"What makes it bad for sleeping is the children," Pedro commented. "You cannot keep them quiet. They are coughing all night long."

With 26 families in the place there wasn't a single window.

Such living conditions are duplicated in the houses made of tree limbs and gunny sacks in the Imperial Valley of California, the crumbling adobe hovels of the Arkansas Valley in Colorado, the houses in Minnesota with roofs so leaky that families must flee to their jalopies when it rains, or with such noisy rats that boys like José Alvarez cannot sleep.

Look at the families in Illinois living in the cramped backs of two-and-a-half-ton trucks, the floorless tents in Michigan, the barns and the stables of New York, the corrugated metal shacks in Florida, which blaze like ovens in the sun.

Some migrants have their own jalopies. Some even have pretty good cars, bought with gravy from the $150-a-week era of the war plants or with discharge money from the Army. A few make their own deals with the farmers and work free lance. Some are recruited by agents of the canneries. But the great bulk of American migrants work for crew leaders like Joe the Boss, sometimes called "row bosses" or "padrones."

The Ways of the Crew Leader

The Reverend Ellis Marshburn, Middle West supervisor for the Home Missions Council and one of the nation's keenest students of the migrant problem, says, "The crew leader's business is done in his hat, so nobody knows just what angles he is playing. It is common for him to make the migrant work out his transportation, and then make the farmer pay for it, too. Of course, neither knows that the other is paying.

"A crew leader lives off cuts. The slick operator will take a double cut on transportation, a cut per head for every worker he brings, a cut for the use of his trucks on the farm, and a cut out of the hourly pay or the piece work of his crew.

"He usually runs a grocery store or commissary, and sells to the migrants on credit. Many of these people can't even read the slips they have to sign. They just put their 'X' at the bottom."

There are, of course, legitimate crew leaders in the business. Some have led the same crews year after year and some migrants are quite attached to "the boss." But, as the Reverend Marshburn pointed out, "The system is basically rotten. For every 'good' crew leader I have found, I've found dozens who take advantage of the migrant—and of the farmer, too."

It is a good paying business, though. In Chenango County, New York, where migrants were getting 60 cents a bushel for harvesting snap beans, I found the crew leaders taking 10 cents for every bushel their workers brought in. With a crew of 200, as many of them had, their personal earnings in one day equaled the earnings of 40 migrants.

Former State Senator John G. Sholl, who heads New Jersey's migrant labor program, told me, "The crew leader has still another angle—sometimes he will swing a card game on pay day and clean out his entire crew." The Consumers League of New York went into this angle in a recent survey, reporting "a particularly vicious contractor system" in which

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"the padrone makes a substantial income from gambling, authorizes the running of a 'house game' and commands a high percentage of 'the take.'"

In Berrien County, Michigan, the crew leaders ran such flagrant dens a few seasons back that the Berrien County Council of Churches stepped in and got the county sheriff to close them. After taking advantage of the migrants every which way, this was the crew leader's last resort. With gambling, liquor—and women, sometimes—he'd try to drain off the last penny the migrants might have saved. This way he could keep them continually 'mortgaged' so they didn't dare leave the crew.

Some crew leaders, called "contractors," make a deal with a big grower to round up so many migrants and deliver them to the fields at so much a head. In the Mississippi Valley I met contractors who collected $20 a head for every worker they brought to the truck farms. A contractor might submit to a little hijacking, too, if the price was right. On his way up from Alabama, if a farmer stopped his truck and had a fistful of money the contractor might let him look over his crew and pick out half a dozen head that looked good. The trouble is that if he picked out a strong-looking father and didn't take his wife and kids the contractor would have hell to pay, because the wife and kids would be whimpering all the rest of the journey.

Waiting Causes Many Hardships

Fenton Hurley, with his wife, Naomi, and their six children, came up the east coast with a crew leader and there were many things he could not understand.

"We're always early birds," he said. "But we don't get no worm."

They had gone to the potato fields in North Carolina but they were three weeks ahead of the harvest, so they sat on their hands and used up their money until, when the work came, they made just enough to pay back the crew leader for their credit at the commissary and they were broke again when he loaded them up for New York.

"Now we been in New York two weeks and nothin' doin'," Fenton Hurley continued. "The boss said we would find all the beans we can pick. We would get half a dollar for a bushel and make 10 or 15 dollars a day, he said. I don't see anything like that."

So the Hurley family was in debt at the commissary again, maybe $30 or $40. And after the crew boss deducted for transportation it was going to take plenty of bean picking to square things up.

Some of the younger men in the crew, including some veterans, took even a dimmer view. One said angrily, "I been wantin' to get out of here since the first day we hit North Carolina."

"Now take it easy," said Fenton Hurley. "The work's a-comin'."

"Yeah, it's a-comin'," the younger man continued. "But I don't see no sense to pilin' up your debts and then workin' your head off to get out from under."

"Man, I'd get out of here right now if I could," said another. "Trouble is the boss has already got me on the hook for $20 and I ain't got a cent."

The crew leader was in his commissary smoking a cigar. We had a discussion and he put it this way, "I try to take good care of my people. The way I see it is this: Who's going to feed them if I don't feed them on credit? I get them the jobs. I bring them up here on credit when they're broke. Who's going to give them credit if I don't?"

He said in a lower voice, "Too much money isn't good for these people. Some of them would go out and get drunk on it. This way, I give them credit and they stick with the crew."

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Why do the crew leaders bring migrants in ahead of the crops? Why do they keep them waiting around idle, going broke?

"It's this way," a crew leader at King Ferry, New York, told me. "Crops depend on the weather, and the weather comes and goes as it pleases. If I get a crew lined up and tell 'em we leave on a certain day, I got to leave on that day. If bad weather stalls the crop off for a couple of weeks, that don't make no matter to me. 'Less I leave on the day I say I'm leavin', my crew is goin' to up and shove north with somebody else."

Farmers agree there's a good reason for having the harvest help in the fields early. They come from long distances and you can't cut the time margin too thin or your crop may ripen before the hands arrive and you may lose your shirt.

It was with this in mind that the Mexican, Jamaican and Bahamian governments insisted that their 250,000 nationals imported by the United States for farm work during the war be paid for a minimum of three fourths of their working time, rain or shine, good crop or bad. No such provision ever has been made for our American migrants.

by Howard Whitman

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