

A MEASURE OF RECOVERY

The other half of California's 200,000 migratory workers are farmers who trekked from the dust bowl area; they found work on farms, but not farming; it's seasonal piecework, like in a mill. Each Oklahoma nomad dreams of a cottage and a cow, but he's just sitting on a barbed wire fence. With the tragedy-publicity over, the government has forgotten the dust bowl refugees. At depression depth, a man might make \$8 a week; now, \$5 is lucky. They are the bitterest folk in America; blood may flow.

THIS recovery," said the old farmer, cocking his head wisely and scratching the red stubble of beard on his chin, "is like the needle beer we used to have. They gave it a shot to make it taste real and when you woke up all you had was a headache."

There were about 50 farmers scattered in small groups outside the one-story, red brick building at the corner of Inyo and L Streets in Fresno, Calif., one of the regional headquarters of the State and Federal Employment Service. Most of them were unshaved, red faced and red necked, and in their faded blue overalls and shirts buttoned at the neck but tieless, they looked as if they had just come in off their farms. They couldn't get into the barn-like room off L Street which was jammed with men standing in line or sitting on benches under walls painted a cockroach poison green, awaiting their turn to add their applications for jobs to the 5,000 already gathering dust in the files.

Several blocks were filled with dusty, battered rattling old cars in which some of these 100,000 dust

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1929 and the unemployed fought for those. Union men forgot union rates and took whatever they could get. Business generally dropped to about half of the 1929 level. But, since 1934, agriculture has been climbing upward in both production and profits and today growers have equalled or surpassed the 1929 level. Retail recovery, however, is only around 70% better than the low it touched in 1933.

Recovery for the great mass of the workers who do most of a community's buying, has not kept pace. Both the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, the Central Labor Council and business men with whom I talked agree that the buying power of the people is not much better than at the depth of the depression. More people are working now and it's their collective buying which has increased retail sales but the individual's buying power has not improved which means that there has been a general reduction in the standard of living.

Even among organized workers, the wage increases which they got were wiped out by the rise in living costs. Fresno, like most cities in the state where unions have secured a foothold, is an A. F. of L. stronghold. Since the depth of the depression the unions have virtually tripled their membership with gains in both hours and wages, so that the buying power of their wages is approximately what it was at the depth of the depression instead of below it.

But wage scales mean little. The wage scales of the migratory workers, for instance, doubled since I was last in the San Joaquin Valley, due chiefly to a communist-directed union drive. The union was broken up but the wage scale gains were kept; but the wages are for seasonal work while eating goes on the year round; and there isn't as much work for each one now because of the great influx of dust bowl refugees. Both in talking with the migratory workers and from a recent study I find that migratory workers' annual earnings have continued to drop even after agriculture started its recovery march. At the

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depth of the depression earnings averaged a little less than \$8 a week. Today they average around \$5 a week and with the cost of commodities up about one-third.

Pleas for relief are consequently enormous. The number on the relief rolls have not dropped because of the migratory workers and the rolls would be infinitely larger had not the state and the counties figured out a way to give them a merry run-around. Dust bowl refugees swarm upon state and county relief offices for aid but seldom get it for the state passed a law prohibiting the granting of relief to an applicant unless he can show one year's residence in California, and the counties went the state one better by requiring proof of three years' residence. Since dust bowl refugees are constantly on the move, very few can prove how long they've been in the state so they are shunted about from agency to agency until in desperation they clamor at the county welfare offices for a crust of bread and the crust is usually given them in the form of a grocery order for a day or two and gas to get out of town. No one with whom I talked among relief, state or federal employment officials, saw any prospects of change in this picture so long as present agricultural conditions and employment customs continue.

From all I could gather, state and federal governments want to forget them. The refugees who made the long trek across plains and mountains because they heard there was work in California have no residence in the Golden State or their native one, no vote to influence legislators to hear their cries for aid and sullen, bitter mutterings at the plight they are in. Any effort to improve their conditions must involve increasing their earnings and improving their living standards but anyone who tries to do that for agricultural workers in California is immediately denounced as a Red and the whole plan branded a Red Plot, probably ordered directly by Moscow, and few are willing to get this tag pinned onto them.

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So, homeless, landless and often ill, these 100,000 native American farmers wander the valleys supplying the country with some of its choicest fruits and vegetables, pleading for work or food.

The state and federal employment offices take their applications for jobs but people are being laid off instead of hired, so the applications collect dust in the files. Relief agencies are prohibited by law from giving them help. The Red Cross is waiting for an earthquake or a flood and the missionaries are apparently tied up shoving a dose of Christianity down the throats of the heathen in some dark corner of the world. But these dust bowl refugees are native Americans and already good Christians so nobody pays any attention to them while they grow more bitter.

Patient, long suffering, hungry for a bit of land, they are slowly realizing that they have nothing and that their dream, as one phrased it, of "a garden and a cow, a smokehouse and a sow, a hen and a rooster so I can have more than I uster" is a fantastic dream for few seem willing to show even a slight interest in their fate. This realization has developed a bitterness which would not take much leadership to translate into overt acts, as near as I could judge. I have found no bitterness like theirs anywhere I have been so far. It closely resembles the seething resentment and anger I found in several areas in different parts of the country during the depth of the depression. It was in those areas where politicians failed to recognize it and grant concessions to calm their developing fury that trouble broke out with people killed and injured.

FRESNO, CALIF.

Industry's Recovery . . .	Complete
Retail Recovery	70%
Worker's Recovery	Very Slight
Unemployment	Reduced
Relief	Stable
Prospects	Trouble
People's Attitude	Growing Bitter

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bowl refugees fled to California when the furious winds whipped the top soil off their fertile fields in Oklahoma and Texas, Arkansas and Missouri, turning them into deserts and the farmers into nomads. They were chiefly former sharecroppers and small landowners who had come to the Golden State in the biggest westward migration since the gold rush. Today they total more than half of the 200,000 migratory workers whose gnarled, strong hands do four-fifths of all the work in the state's leading industry, the picking and sorting, packing and canning of the fruits and vegetables.

"Jesus," said one of the farmers in the group I had joined, stretching a leathery neck so deeply creased with criss-crossed lines that it resembled a checkerboard, "I'm goin' to write to my Congressman about the way they're runnin' this. I've been here four hours and can't even get inside."

The farmer with the red stubble of beard spat again and wiped his chin.

"Might be a good idea," he said. "Yep. Might be a good idea."

"One of my kids took down with the fever an' I can't even get to nobody to talk to," the irritable farmer continued. "Hell almighty! They treat us like we was niggers."

The old farmer's eyes twinkled.

"What makes you figger you're better'n a nigger?" he asked slyly. "Niggers got nothin' an' you got nothin'."

"You said it," one of the younger ones agreed cheerfully.

"Sure," the old farmer said, cocking his head again, "you got no farm, you got no work, you got no relief, you got no job an' you got no vote 'cause you don't live here an' you don't live back in Arkansas. Hell, they got you so that even a sow pig wouldn't look at you now."

"Well, you fellows can kid about it if you want to," the angry farmer said sullenly, "but somebody better do something. I ain't seen it so bad since Hoover's days."

The old farmer spat disgustedly. "Ain't you got it through your head yet that nobody gives a damn about

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you? You're a ditch tramp. You ain't a citizen no more."

As near as I could see, the old farmer was right. Their native states from which they were uprooted by the dust storms seem to show little or no interest in them for they are no longer taxpayers or voters and California's interest in them is only as cheap, plentiful hands to work during the crop season. The federal government, now that all the publicity about the dust bowl tragedy has died down, apparently wants to forget them and has succeeded.

I had seen them in their camps, cities of unpainted shacks and canvas tents under stately willows and cottonwoods beside some irrigation ditch or on some unplowed field, like "Oklahoma City" in the heart of the Kings County cotton belt.

"Oklahoma City" was like an army barracks, 48 brown shacks and gray tents on platforms 9 by 9 feet square, with a quagmire road between them for a street and tangles of uncut grass and wild sunflowers near the gate posts and long level acres of cotton fields all around. The company erected these shacks and tents to house the farmers from the midwest plain states and other migratory workers, for they have nothing when they come into the San Joaquin Valley. One tent or shack is allowed each family and when it rains it seeps through the sides and when it rains heavily, as it does in the winter months, the ground on which the tents are erected becomes saturated and penetrates through the wooden platform and the odds and ends of clothing they stretch on the floor for bedding.

There were 48 shacks and tents when I was there but it was at the end of the cotton picking season and many of the tents had been dismantled to be put up again next sea-

son. Five hydrants of water rose out of the road between the shacks and at the right six outhouses loomed against a cottonfield.

At the height of the season one hydrant served almost 100 people for drinking, washing and cooking water, and one outhouse almost the same number and often they had to stand in line.

Half-way down the center areaway I found J. B. Thompson, who used to be a farmer in Wyniewood, Okla. He was in front of his tent, trying to wipe his three-year-old daughter's running nose. Her thin little legs were blue with the damp cold and he covered them with his jacket in an effort to keep them warm. When I stopped to talk with him his wife opened the flap of their tent and stuck out a sharp, long face, almost hidden by a mop of disheveled hair. Two small, shrewish eyes saw me look into the tent with its bare, damp floor and household furnishings in the center, two bundles of old clothing and a sack bulging with kindling for the small stove. Before I said a word to her she began defensively in a high voice:

"We can't he'p it. We ain't got nothin' 'cept a few boxes but we come by it honest. Can't he'p it, that's all."

She laughed shrilly and added in the same breath, "You know what they say, you know. Hold your head high and die hard. That's what they say, you know."

A bubble formed under the bare-footed child's nose as she slipped from her father's arms and grabbed the mother's loose dress.

"Got to feed these little ones, too," she continued in her high pitched voice. "Got to feed 'em. An' we can't he'p this."

The child was cold and tried to hide her face behind her mother's dress and she slapped it casually but resoundingly. The bubble exploded in the baby's startled exhalation and she rushed back to her father who picked her up, trying to soothe her.

"Lord," the mother said to the wailing child, stretching out her arms, "I didn't mean to smack you, honey. I'm jest settin' on a barbed wire fence."

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She turned to me apologetically. "Livin' here jest makes me feel like I was settin' on a barbed wire fence. Jest jumpy. Jumpy all the time. I can't he'p it."

Her husband said to me: "Cotton pickin' season's 'bout over an' now we got to leave an' we don't know where to go. That's what's the matter."

A tall, thin, scrawny woman in a patched Mother Hubbard came out of the tent across the road, stared at us curiously, coughed and spat a mouthful of phlegm onto the mud and vanished back into the tent. A child cried somewhere in another tent and a mother's voice shrilled at it and the cries quieted down to whimpers.

"How'd you happen to come here?" I asked.

"My farm moved out from under me," he said, hugging the child close to him to keep her warm.

"Farmin' got pretty poor when everything dried up and blowed away," his wife added, "an' we had to do somethin'. Had to eat, you know. Had to feed these little ones. When folks get hungry, they got to get food, you know."

"I meant how did you happen to come to California?"

"We heard there was work. The papers said they needed a lot of farmers out here but it ain't farmin', not like in Wyniewood, anyway."

The difference between farming in Wyniewood and farming in California which Thompson had noticed is the trend which is apparent throughout the entire country and which is profoundly changing the relationship between the farmer and his land. Farming in California is an industry usually operated like a steel mill or a shirt factory. More than half the land which supplies a large portion of the fruits, vegetables and canned goods for the people throughout the country

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is no longer owned by the farmer but by absentee landowners in corporations, banks and mortgage companies. The farmer is the shop superintendent of a factory whose product is grown on the soil instead of manufactured within four walls; and the independent small farmer is so heavily mortgaged and in debt that his "ownership" of the land is really only a courtesy phrase.

The men and women who plow the land, thin the rows, prune the vines, harvest the crop, sort, pack and can, are pieceworkers in a seasonal industry with no root in the land they plant and harvest. When the season's work is done they are laid off as in any industrial factory. They do not have even the advantages of the poverty-stricken sharecropper who, at least, has some root in the land he works on a 50-50 basis, a little plot of ground where he can grow a few vegetables for his own table.

The national trend in ownership of the land which grows America's food is more clearly perceptible in California because it is concentrated in fruits, vegetables and canning. Two-fifths of all the farms in the United States are leased from absentee landowners and the farmer in California, as well as throughout the country, is gradually losing what the lawyers call "the equity rights in his land."

I asked the Thompsons about their earnings and living conditions and a short, tubby woman popped out of the tent at the left, busily wiping her hands on an old dress which fitted her so neatly that her belly protruded like a round, smooth hill.

"Are you an organizer?" she demanded pugnaciously, looking at me with small eyes half-hidden behind horn rimmed glasses. "Scuse me for buttin' in," she added to the Thompsons, "but I couldn't he'p a-hearin' what you was talkin' about an' I jest had to come out. I don't want nothin' to do with no union. They jest take your money—"

"I'm not an organizer," I assured her. "I'm only trying to find out what happened since the depth of the de-

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pression. Are you any better off than you used to be four or five years ago?"

"What're you doin', kiddin' me?" she asked a little less pugnaciously. "Better off! 'Course we're worse off an' goin' downhill all the time, too."

"What do you think can be done about bettering your conditions?"

"I know what'll have to be done but I ain't sayin'," she said, eying me with a sudden suspicion.

"Get yourself into trouble if you rattle your chin too much, you know," said Mrs. Thompson.

"Say," said the tubby woman, "I ain't goin' to say all I think, but the people runnin' this country better get wise, that's all I got to say."

"I don't get it," I said.

"This depression ain't over, is it? Things are gettin' worse, ain't they? Well, the people runnin' this country better get wise."

"I see," I said.

"No, you don't," she said sharply. "Nobody sees or they'd do somethin'."

"Do what? You don't like unions; you won't join with other people to try to improve your conditions so what do you want?"

"Forty acres and a house," she said quickly. "Jest lemme get enough money to get forty acres an' a house. Boy! I'd get me some chickens an' a rooster an' a cow an' I'd get me my own milk an' make my own cheese and butter an' grow my own vegetables. An' I'd fix the place up like a real home so you'd walk on flagstones 'fore you got to the house an' there'd be roses climbin' over the walls right up to my kitchen window an' I could look through it an' see my vegetables growin' an' my chickens an' my cows. That's what I want an' when I get that the whole world can—"

She broke off abruptly and smiled like a kid who's been telling you a fantastic story and suddenly realizes that you know it's fantastic. But the pitch of enthusiasm when she talked of her land hunger actually transformed her. The homely face lost its pugnaciousness and became softer.

"I'm jest talkin'," she said. "We'll

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never get it bein' ditch tramps."

"How'd you happen to come out here?"

"Oh, we was tractored out three years ago."

"Lot of 'em was tractored out," Thompson volunteered.

"Everybody ate 'fore there was tractors," his wife interrupted nervously, running her thumb over the tips of her fingers with swift backward and forward motions.

I came across this feeling that the tractor was responsible for their plight among a great many sharecroppers who had become migratory workers. It seems to be as widespread as their yearning for a bit of land of their own. The tractor threw farm laborers and sharecroppers out of employment as mechanization of industry threw many industrial workers onto the unemployed heap and they tend to blame the machine as the immediate cause.

"What would you suggest? Forbid the use of labor saving machines?"

"You can't stop progress," the tubby woman said sharply. "That ain't no answer. Only idiots would think o' that, but there's plenty o' land, ain't there?"

"How'll you get it if you have no money?"

"Whose land is it?" she demanded. "Did God put it on this earth for the companies ownin' it? Why, there's people ownin' the land that don't even know where it is. They don't grow nothin', they don't pick the crop but they won't let us farm it—"

"What do you think can be done about that?"

She looked wisely at me and smiled.

"I ain't sayin'. All I'm sayin' is the people runnin' this country better get wise. Say, who do you think does the plowin' an' the plantin' an' the harvestin', eh? An' suppose we just up an' says, 'You won't give us no land, eh? Suits us fine. Then you go ahead an' pick your own crop. It can rot on the vine for all we care.' Then what do you think would happen?"

"The country'd have a little trouble eating," I laughed.

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"Sure it would. Like we got trouble now. That's why I'm sayin', the people runnin' this country better get wise. We got nothin' an' it's gettin' worse all the time. Why, just this Sunday I saw where the papers said there's 5,000 dust bowl people a-comin' into California every month. It's bad out there an' it's gettin' worse here. They better get wise, I'm tellin' you."

"There's so many in the camps now that when there is a crop nobody makes a livin'," said Mrs. Thompson shrilly.

The influx of these refugees, coupled with California's own unemployed who have taken to the road and the W.P.A. laying off 50,000 each season "for agricultural work" due to pressure from the growers, has left its influence upon the state's leading industry, the workers in it and the communities through which they wander, economically, socially and physically. Many of these nomads, lacking sanitary facilities and proper medical attention, are seriously ill with infectious diseases. Economically, California is primarily a farming state. With the exception of a few cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles and Hollywood, California cities are farm service communities. As the farmer's business goes, so goes the average city and Fresno, with its 60,000 population, is typical for almost everybody in it, directly or indirectly, lives off the farmer. The earnings of migratory workers lowered the earnings of all unskilled workers throughout the state for employers could always hire them if city workers wanted more. Since unskilled workers are in the majority, the broad earning power of a vast portion of the people was lowered with the inevitable reduction in their purchasing power which left its effect upon retail sales.

When I was in Fresno at the depth of the depression almost one out of every third person capable of working was unemployed and one out of every four was registered for relief. Wage scales for unorganized workers dropped to one-half of what they were in