

HOW ONE TOWN LICKED THE
MIGRANT PROBLEM

Trouble was brewing in Sturgeon Bay—
until folks got together and stopped it

By LOUISA R. SHOTWELL



Cherry picking is a family job.

“IF YOU had walked down the main street three or four years ago, you would have seen signs like this in restaurant windows: *For Whites Only—Negroes and Mexicans Not Admitted*. Today you can’t find a one. Go into any of those places and you’ll see customers of all colors.” Mayor Stanley Greene of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, looked at me across his grocery counter. The mayor would be the last person to say that he is personally responsible for the change that has come about in his community. But, being an honest man, neither would he look me straight in the eye and deny that he has had any part in the transformation.

Sturgeon Bay’s problem was tied to cherries. The area which lies half-way up a Wisconsin peninsula jutting sixty miles into Lake Michigan grows the most and best tart red cherries in the country. At least, that’s what they say in Sturgeon Bay, and when you taste their cherry pie you don’t feel like arguing. Along with fishing, shipbuilding and vacationers, cherry orchards make up the backbone of the economy of Kewaunee and Door Counties. For six weeks in the summer, the picking of some 20,000 tons

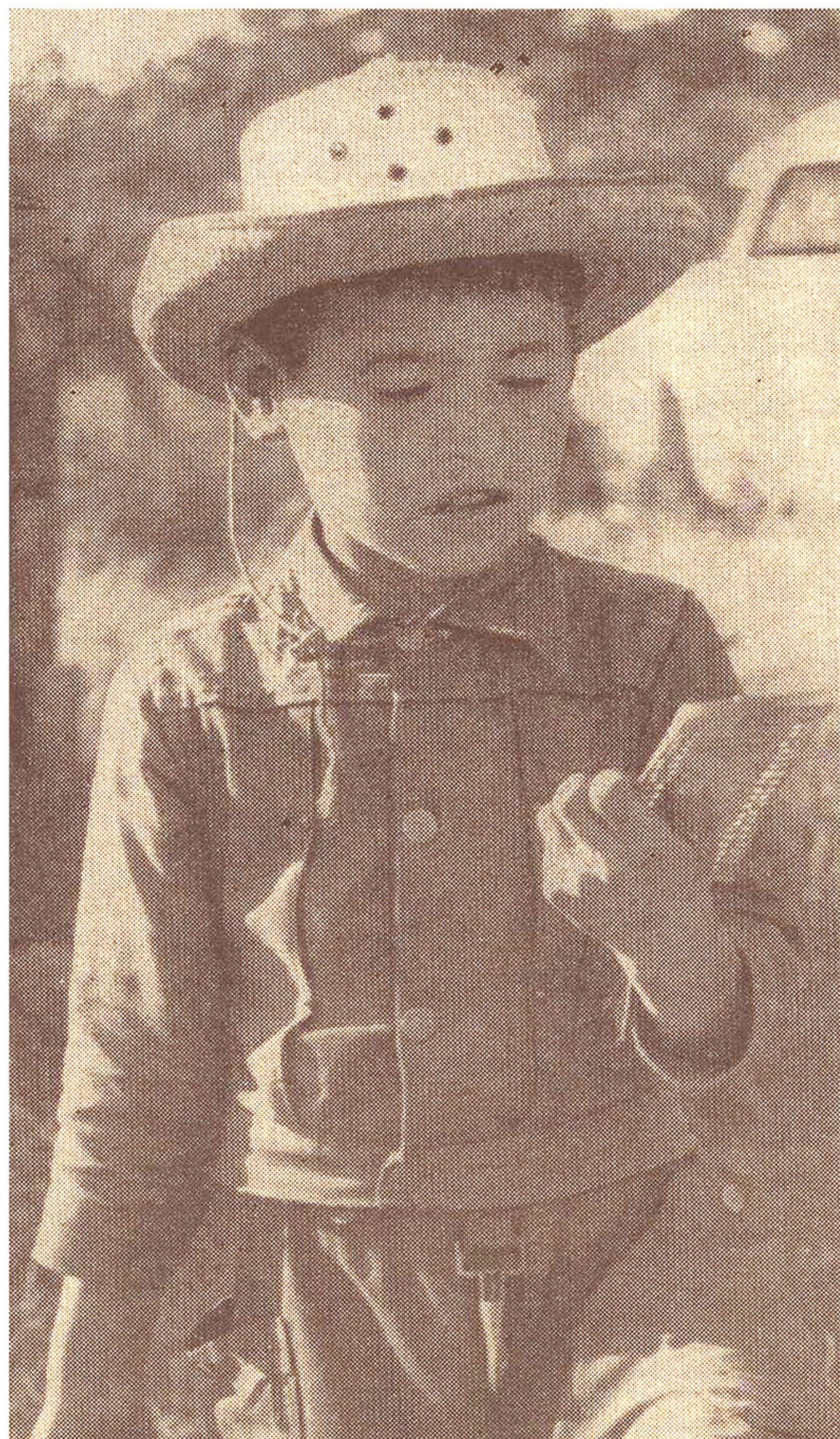
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of cherries takes a lot of nimble fingers.

Back in the twenties Boy and Girl Scout cherry-picking camps were set up by some imaginative growers. Along in the thirties came truckloads of workers from industrial centers in Wisconsin to do the job. But when this labor source was absorbed by defense plants during the war years, Jamaicans, Bahamans and Mexicans were imported.

It was four years ago that the first great influx of Texas-Mexican families came to Sturgeon Bay. Following the crops, they came north as early as April, after stopping in Illinois to harvest asparagus and in southern Wisconsin for onion, carrots and sugar beets. From early July to mid-August the peninsula cherries attracted them. After that it would be Indiana or Ohio for tomatoes, a pause in Arkansas for cotton, and back to Texas in late November for the winter vegetable harvest.

As the migrants began to roll into town in their broken-down carts jammed with chattels and children—or, more often, in jam-packed crew leaders' trucks — Sturgeon Bay grew



Young worker checks his pay card.

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uneasy. A community that had never before bothered its head about race one way or the other, suddenly became aware of a thriving fever of prejudice.

Truckloads of weary men, women and children found filling stations with locked rest rooms. The owners' argument made sense in a shabby sort of way: Why let the place be raided by a mob who wouldn't buy anything?

CHERRY pickers walking down the street began finding the unmistakable signs in restaurant windows. Town talk built up. Shiftless . . . here today, gone in six weeks . . . ragamuffin families . . . unsightly camps . . . you couldn't even understand the gibberish they spoke! . . .

Then some of the church people caught their breath in dismay. What was happening to their town? Why prate of democracy and brotherhood, only to fail miserably when the time came for works instead of words? They tried to visualize how the problem looked from the other side of Sturgeon Bay's neatly starched window curtains. What kind of life was this, townsfolk began to wonder, shuffled from one end of the country to the other? For the children big enough, they found out, it meant a constant scramble to fill cherry pails at twenty cents a filling. For those whose bodies just weren't tall enough to reach, who weren't old enough to climb a ladder, whose hands were yet too little, it meant aimless wandering around the orchards.

What kind of life was it for the older folks? Hard work, yes, but more than that. Didn't they need recreation, community ties, a sense of belonging somewhere — even if for only six weeks?

"Shiftless!" the town had said. "I'm thinking it would take a lot of gumption to chase all over to make a living!" somebody put it.

Mrs. Don Reynolds, whose husband heads a company owning some 1200 acres of cherry trees and three can-

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Lilia Curti, of the Home Missions Council, chats with a young migrant worker in Spanish, native tongue of the small-size breadwinner.

neries, brought the tension out into the open at a meeting of local Council of Church Women. "Prejudice goes with fear and guilty consciences," she said bluntly, and asked, "What are we going to do about it?"

The first thing the ladies did was to name Mrs. Reynolds chairman of the Migrant Committee.

With the added endorsement of the Council of Churches, the group went to work. For guidance they called in the Rev. Ellis Marshburn, supervisor of migrant work for the Midwest under the National Council of Churches.

Things began happening. Mr. Marshburn sent a member of his staff to work with the Spanish-speaking children. Lilia Curti found in her new classes under the cherry trees some of the same youngsters she had taught in asparagus fields down in Rochelle, Illinois, a few weeks earlier. And the Committee was getting ideas. People were relieved to find that they could do something constructive. What about holding open house in the evenings for migrant teen-agers and

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adults? Why couldn't they use the skating rink fieldhouse.

That's where the Mayor came in. Of course they had to get permission, and he realized that a lot of taxpayers were going to have something to say about use of public facilities by church groups for nonresidents. Those restaurant owners, for example. So he had a long talk with Miss Alice Reynolds, the kind of citizen any mayor is grateful for.

His eyes twinkled as he told me, "I wish you could know Alice. She's got ideas that are sometimes hard to take, but she knows how to get things done. Nobody can talk her down, either. Well, she pulled no punches in saying that it was high time I had a Mayor's Committee to sponsor this field-house business and kind of pull together all these goodwill efforts. So that's what I did."

THE Mayor's Committee dipped into



Conferring on migrant problems: (l. to r.) Della Cross, supervisor of Harvester group; Mayor Stanley Greene of Sturgeon Bay; Alice Reynolds; Miss Curti. This conference was held in Miss Reynolds' sparkling kitchen.



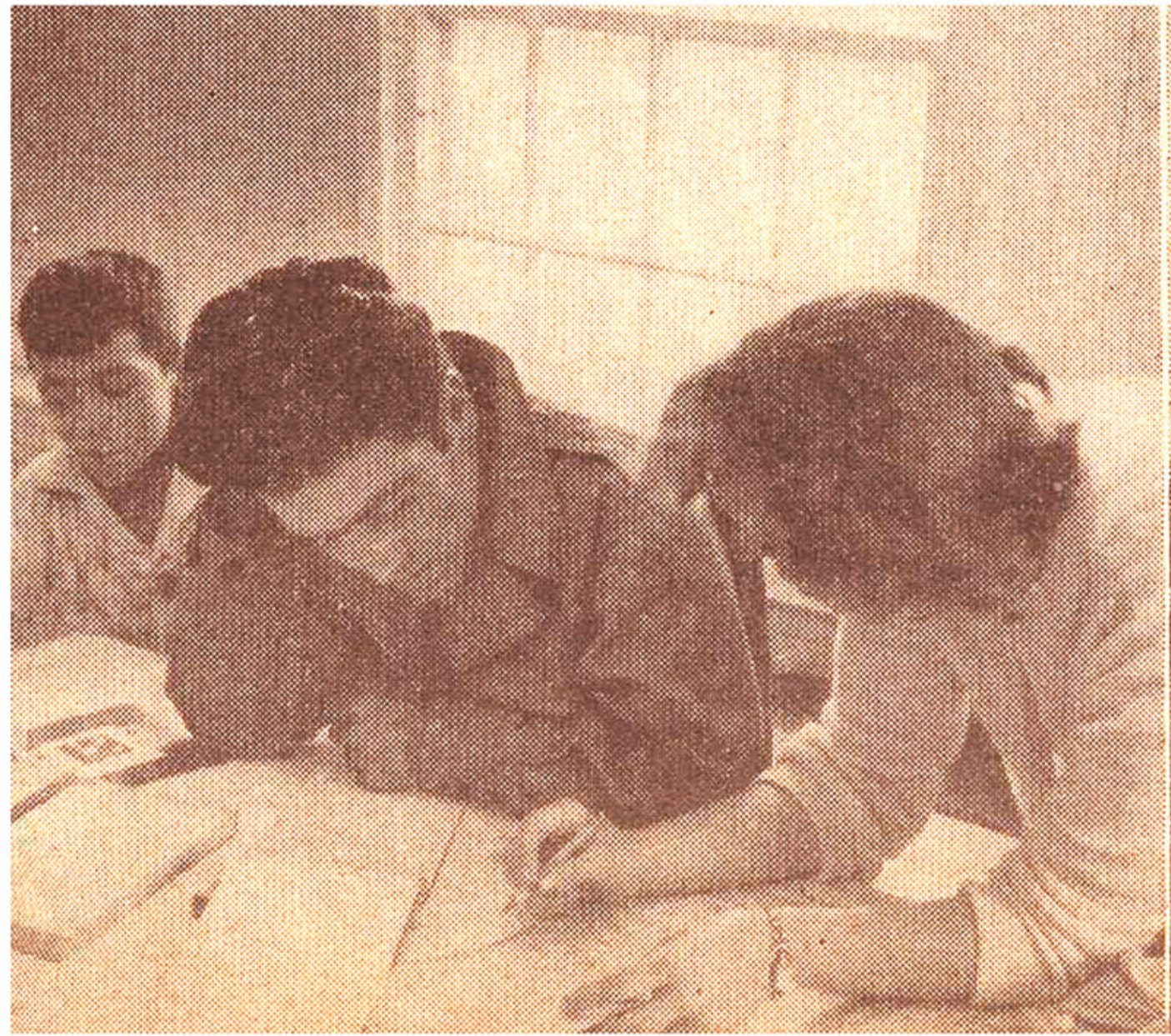
A Council group, their car, and migrant children.

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a wide range of community activities for its members. There were representatives from the Lions' and Rotary Clubs, from the Chamber of Commerce, the regional library, and the various faiths. The town began to buzz. Surprisingly, this thing was fun!

The buzzing brought results. I had seen for myself, the night before at the field house. After being courteously and expertly beaten at checkers by Spanish Lupe Postamento and at dominoes by three Bahamans who had British accents, I was about ready to credit these national strains with an uncanny game-playing facility I knew nothing of! There was no doubt that this was a community project. The atmosphere was easy and friendly as hostesses played records and moved from group to group with soft drinks.

And the school under the cherry trees had gone over so well that more helpers were asked for the second year. The Migrant Committee agreed to help with expenses. Lilia Curti came back, bringing with her five volunteers.

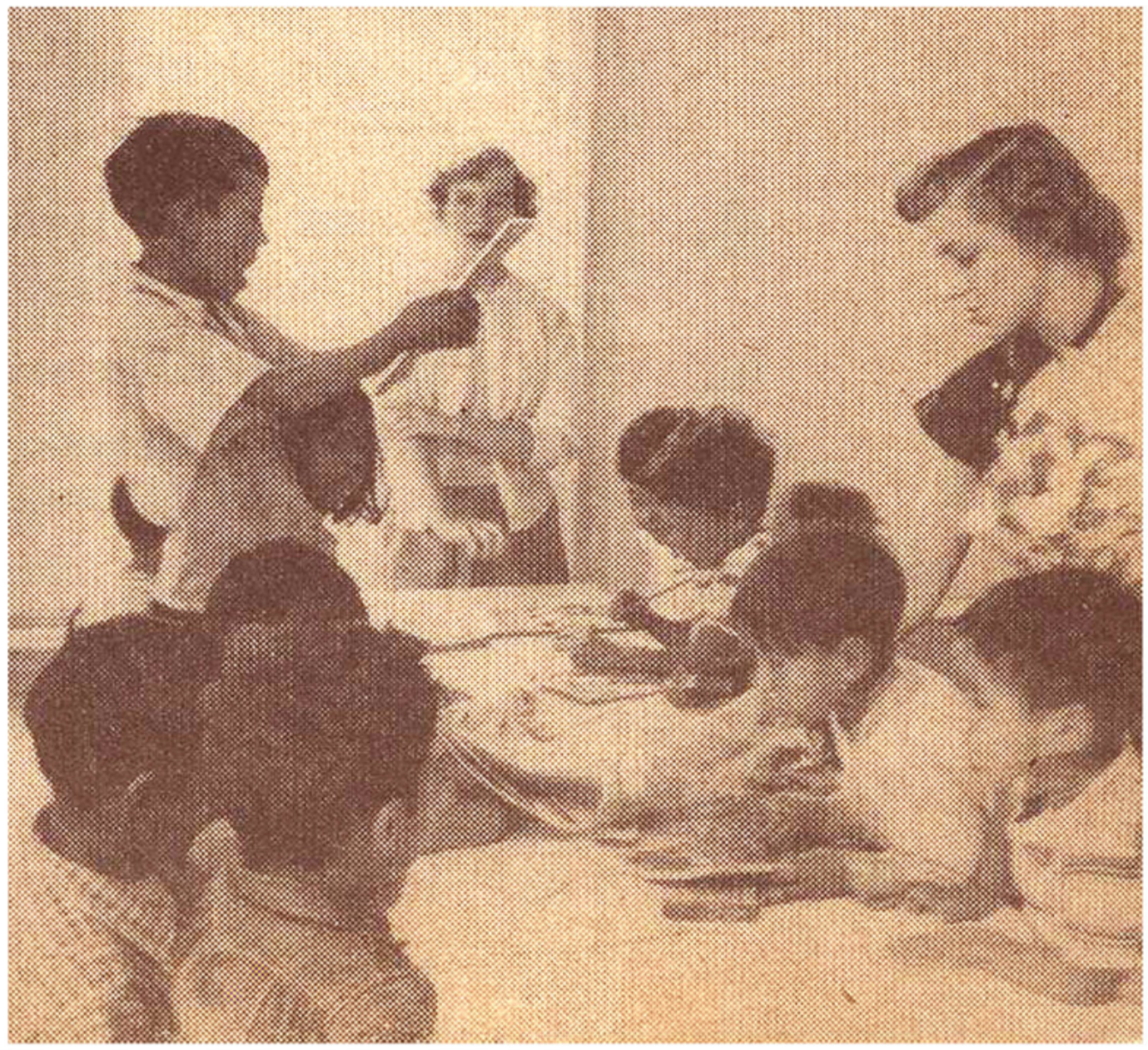


A Mexican migrant is taught English.



HMC girls make family visits and counsel mothers on baby care.

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Coloring books are distributed at Council's day nursery for migrant youngsters.

Della Cross, chosen to supervise the crew, came equipped with her "Harvester," which is one of ten mobile units serving migrant families in twenty-five states under the National Council of Churches' Home Missions Division. This station wagon with its movie projector and screen, balls and bats and table games, and portable organ and folding altar circulates through the cherry orchards.

Della Cross, twenty-four, dark-haired and gray-eyed, demure and capable, was grateful she had stayed out of Phillips University for a year to teach in a one-room rural school in her home country in Oklahoma. Experience there with thirty Anglo-Mexican and Indian children stood her in good stead now as she helped her staff set up classes in the three R's (one was religion).

Three of her staff came from the Evangelical and United Brethren Church. Janet Nafe of Pierson, Iowa, had taught fourth grade for three years. Carol Passow of Dodge, Wisconsin, who had just finished college, would begin teaching home economics in the fall. And Ester Granger of Quiche, Guatemala, was to return as a missionary to her native land when she finished nursing school. These three did more than use their formal training during school hours; they shared themselves in the evenings playing circle games with the smaller children and "Red Rover" and "Too Late for Supper" with the teen-agers. As darkness came on, parents gathered to close the day with group singing and prayer.

Della is quick to say that the community has played a big part. "The

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help we've had has been wonderful. Each of six churches took a different camp, and every week showed movies and held rummage sales at selling prices that barely covered the reconditioning cost. One minister gave up his car for six weeks to help with transportation. And the people of Sturgeon Bay have come to see that the migrants are like themselves, with the same desire to give their children opportunity for healthy, wholesome development."

So that was the story. I had heard it in the tiny grocery store where Della had taken me to find the Mayor. He was thoughtful as Della finished speaking. "There's a lot more we need to do," he said. "We ought to see about public rest rooms for migrants."

"And *what* brought down those restaurant signs?" I persisted.

"Oh, those," answered the Mayor. "Well, they just came down, one by one. You see, you can be as idealistic as you want to be—like Miss Della here—and come in with your Bibles and Harvesters, and you can help some people to see the light. But you can't escape the fact that there are factors that motivate people besides Christian charity. People who object to the color of an extended hand don't mind half so much when it holds a greenback."

He chuckled. "Good idealism is good business! Why, one man here told me, when the color question was tense, that he was serving a white man when two Negroes walked in. He took their order, and the white man called him over and said if they were served, he'd walk out. 'I just told him,' said my friend, 'to go ahead if he wanted to, because his order was a hamburger and the other two had asked for full dinners. He looked a little surprised, and then he laughed and finished his hamburger.' See what I mean?"

I asked him one last question. "Don't you find it a little complicated to run your grocery store and be mayor at the same time?"

"Well, I manage this way," he said. "You see, I've stopped handling perishable goods. So when some problem comes along, I can shut up shop for a couple of hours or even a couple of days and there's nothing to spoil. A little business more or less doesn't

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matter in the long run if I can keep the community on an even keel.”

It's nice to have a mayor like that. And it's nice to be the mayor of a town that has the spiritual stamina to listen to its conscience. **THE END**

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