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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MIGRATORY FARM LABOR SYSTEM IN TEXAS: 1900-1954

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MIGRATORY FARM LABOR

SYSTEM IN TEXAS: 1900-1954

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PREFACE

The present system of migratory farm labor in Texas has developed since 1900. During the past fifty years, the traditional labor requirements were altered on thousands of Texas farms, forcing farmers to become dependent upon non-resident labor to meet their seasonal labor needs. The demand for seasonal labor was met by workers, drawn largely from the Mexican population in the southern part of the state, who were willing to follow the crops throughout Texas, working wherever and whenever they were needed.

The present paper was written in an effort to trace the development of this system of migration. No attempt has been made to present a sociological study in which recommendations are made to solve the complex problems which have arisen as a result of the growth of the migratory farm labor system. Instead, the problems have been treated more in respect to their historical perspective and chronological sequence.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to those who gave encouragement and help in the writing of this manuscript. I am especially indebted to Dr. W. Eugene Hollon

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George O. Coalson

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MIGRATORY FARM LABOR SYSTEM IN TEXAS: 1900-1954

CHAPTER I

THE CREATION OF A DEMAND FOR MIGRATORY LABOR

Various developments occurring in agricultural labor requirements have changed the basic character of Texas agriculture within the past fifty years. Prior to the twentieth century the agricultural scene was characterized by the farmer who performed all the necessary work on the farm. Whether owner, tenant, or sharecropper, he and his family planted, cultivated, and harvested the crops throughout the year. Very little outside labor was required, and then it usually was provided by a single hired hand or neighbors. The twentieth century, however, witnessed the alteration of the traditional labor requirements on large numbers of Texas farms. The resident labor force, once able to perform all the tasks on the farm, came to be supplemented by a new type of labor -- seasonal and migratory by nature. This labor force consisted of thousands of workers who were willing to travel hundreds of miles each year, following the crops as they matured throughout the state and working only a few days

or weeks on each farm.

In Texas the demand for non-resident labor resulted largely from certain changes in the state's farm economy: (1) the development of new cotton producing areas, (2) the partial mechanization of cotton production, and (3) the introduction of fresh fruit and vegetable industries in South Texas. Cotton has always been an important crop in Texas since it was first introduced in 1822 by Stephen F. Austin's colonists.[1] During the period before the Civil War, cotton production was confined generally to two regions: the first and most important one was the Brazos River Valley, extending about 150 miles into the interior; the second was located in the northeastern and eastern section of the state.[2] Indeed, cotton culture proved so successful in these areas that by 1859 Texas ranked fifth in the nation in the production of this crop.[3]

It was not until after the Civil War that the present great cotton producing areas were opened up. The first to be developed was the Black Waxy region, a narrow strip of land more than three hundred miles long and from twenty-five

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[1] Rupert B. Vance, Human Geography of the South (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1935), 326-327.

[2] L. P. Gabbard and H. E. Rea, Cotton Production in Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Circular No. 39 (College Station, Texas, 1926), 8.

[3] Elmer H. Johnson, The Basis of the Commercial and Industrial Development of Texas, University of Texas Bulletin No. 3309 (Austin, Texas, 1933), 62.

to seventy-five miles wide stretching across the central part of the state from the Red River north of Dallas to just above San Antonio. Before the Civil War this part of Texas had been given over largely to sheep and cattle ranching. The lack of transportation for getting farm products to market and the prejudice which many farmers had against prairie land had held up settlement in the area. However, the 1870's brought railroads into the region and with them many farmers who soon discovered that the dark prairie soils were ideally suited for growing cotton.[4] In subsequent years the production of cotton gradually supplanted ranching as the main industry in the Black Waxy region, and by 1922 approximately ninety-three percent of the land was under cultivation with about sixty-seven percent of the total cultivated acreage planted in cotton.[5]

Meanwhile, cotton continued to spread westward across the state. It was not long before the discovery was made that it would grow well in the sandy loam of the more level areas of the Rolling Plains, nor was the subhumid climate of the section too severe for the plant. In the 1880's there

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[4] Edmond C. Day, "History of the Agricultural Development of Texas" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of History, University of Texas, 1926), 87, 101.

[5] L. P. Gabbard, J. B. Hutson, and T. L. Gaston, Jr., Systems of Farming for the Black Waxy Prairie of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 395 (College Station, Texas, 1929), 7.

began a steady migration of farmers into this predominantly ranching area -- a migration which was accelerated during the first decade of the twentieth century by the extension of railroads into the region. The acreage in cotton constantly increased, and by 1909 it was the principle cash crop in the area.[6]

The areas of the state into which cotton was next introduced were the High Plains, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the Corpus Christi region. The High Plains, or Llano Estacado, is a tilted plain, separated from the Rolling Plains by a steep escarpment of a few hundred feet known as the cap rock. Prior to 1910 this section of Texas was used almost exclusively for grazing, with the exception of some acreage which was devoted to the production of corn for livestock on ranches.[7] Corn, however, did not grow well because of the hot, dry weather; and it was not until a substitute for it was found in milo maize and sudan grass that the small farmer began to push his way into the ranching economy.[8] Experimenting with cotton, the farmers of the region early

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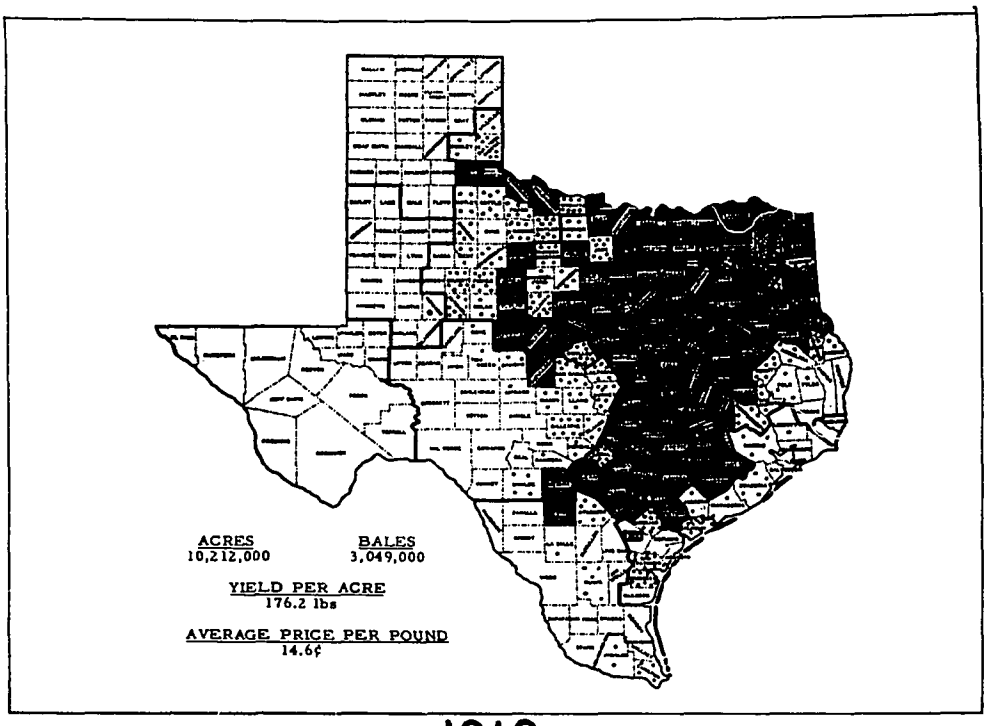
[6] P. H. Czarowitz and C. A. Bonnen, Information Basic to Farm Adjustments in the Rolling Plains Area of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 617 (College Station, Texas, 1942), 9, 86.

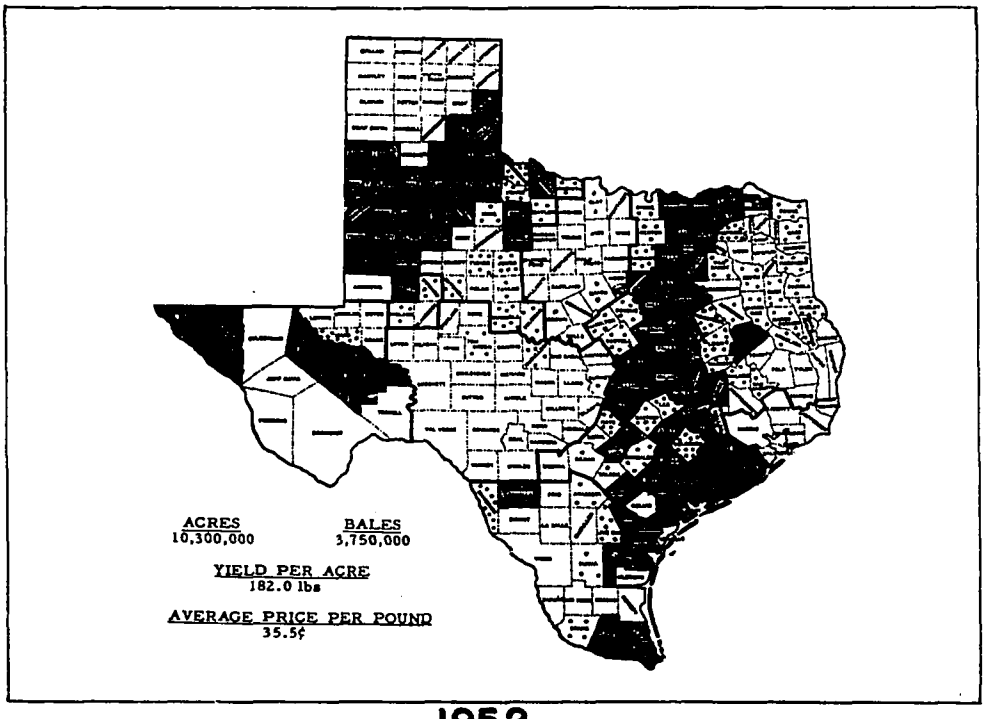
[7] B. H. Thibodeaux, C. A. Bonnen, and A. C. Magee, An Economic Study of Farm Organization and Operation in the High Plains Cotton Area of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 568 (College Station, Texas, 1939), 5.

[8] Vance, Human Geography of the South, 330-331.

TEXAS SHIFTING COTTON PRODUCTION



1910



1952

Source: Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement in Texas, 1953 (Austin, Texas, n.d.).

discovered that the sandy, fertile soil was perfectly suited for growing cotton, and that the dry climate and high altitude would keep the weeds and boll weevil in check.[9] The production of cotton spread very rapidly. In 1909 only seven percent of the harvested crop land was planted in cotton; in 1919 it occupied around twenty-eight percent; and by 1929 the crop land harvested in cotton had increased to fifty-three percent.[10] The development of the cotton industry on the High Plains naturally resulted in the decline of the cattle industry and was marked by the breaking up of the large cattle ranches, often comprising thousands of acres, into relatively small units.[11]

During the time that cotton was taking over the High Plains, similar changes were occurring in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Corpus Christi areas. The Lower Rio Grande Valley, located in the southernmost part of the state, had only a few farmers in 1900; but, the construction of a railroad into the Valley in 1904 and the expansion of irrigation after 1907 brought thousands of persons to take advantage of the agricultural opportunities offered by the smooth, fertile

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[9] E. O. Wooten, "Cotton in the Texas High Plains Area," in U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Yearbook of Agriculture, 1926, (Washington, 1927), 272.

[10] Thibodeaux, Study of Farm Organization in High Plains, 13-14.

[11] Ibid., 14.

soils and the long growing season of this "magic" valley. Cotton was one of the first crops introduced into the Valley, and, gaining in importance through the years, it occupied over half the harvested acreage in 1948.[12]

The Corpus Christi area, comprising most of Nueces and San Patricio counties and parts of Jim Wells and Kleberg counties, grew small amounts of cotton in the nineteenth century, but it was not until the turn of the century that large-scale cotton growing really got started. Between 1900 and 1929 the number of bales ginned in Nueces County rose from 1,941 to 123,703, which made it the leading cotton producing county in the state during the latter year.[13]

The last of the present great cotton producing areas of the state to be developed was the El Paso region. This area consists of a narrow strip of alluvial land extending along the Rio Grande for approximately seventy miles on each side of the city of El Paso. Cotton farming in this section spread very quickly as irrigation became practical following the construction of the Elephant Butte Dam in southern New Mexico in 1916. In fact, cotton became the chief crop of the region by 1924, and has maintained that position ever

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[12] William F. Hughes and Joe R. Moteral, Irrigated Agriculture in Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Misc. Pub. No. 59 (College Station, Texas, 1950), 30-31.

[13] Paul S. Taylor, An American-Mexican Frontier (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1934), 84, 295.

since.[14]

The spread of cotton culture into these new areas was greatly facilitated by the use of larger machinery. Because of their favorable climatic conditions and acres of level land, the Corpus Christi and High Plains areas were the first to use larger equipment in cotton production. Instead of the one-man one-mule methods with a one-half or one row cultivator of the old cotton regions, four and even six-mule teams pulling two-row cultivators were used.[15] The present era of cotton mechanization really began in 1926 when the first tractor which could be used for planting and cultivating was introduced in the Corpus Christi area.[16] The tractors available prior to that time were designed primarily for flat breaking, discing, and harrowing and could be used only for short periods when the ground was being broken.[17] In subsequent years the tractor was improved as new labor and time saving attachments were introduced. By 1930 an estimated 37,000 tractors were operating in Texas, the majority in the

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[14] Hughes, Irrigated Agriculture in Texas, 22, 25.

[15] Paul Taylor, "Power Farming and Labor Displacement in the Cotton Belt, 1937," Monthly Labor Review, XLVI (March, 1938), 596.

[16] H. P. Smith and D. L. Jones, Mechanized Production of Cotton in Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 704 (College Station, Texas, 1948), 5.

[17] C. A. Bonnen and A. C. Magee, "Some Technological Changes in the High Plains Cotton Area of Texas," Journal of Farm Economics, XX (August, 1938), 605.

TABLE 1

COTTON ACREAGE AND PRODUCTION IN TEXAS: 1910-1950*

Year	Harvested Acreage	Number of Bales
1910	10,212,000	2,049,000
1911	11,261,000	4,256,000
1912	11,134,000	4,880,000
1913	12,352,000	3,945,000
1914	12,020,000	4,592,000
1915	10,523,000	3,227,000
1916	10,954,000	3,726,000
1917	11,339,000	3,125,000
1918	11,851,000	2,697,000
1919	11,165,000	3,099,000
1920	12,323,000	4,345,000
1921	10,426,000	2,198,000
1922	11,963,000	3,222,000
1923	14,851,000	4,340,000
1924	17,049,000	4,949,000
1925	17,336,000	4,163,000
1926	17,749,000	5,628,000
1927	15,689,000	4,352,000
1928	16,887,000	5,105,000
1929	16,875,000	3,940,000
1930	16,138,000	4,037,000
1931	14,754,000	5,320,000
1932	13,334,000	4,500,000
1933	11,069,000	4,428,000
1934	10,097,000	2,401,000
1935	10,657,000	2,956,000
1936	11,597,000	2,933,000
1937	12,539,000	5,154,000
1938	8,784,000	3,086,000
1939	8,520,000	2,846,000
1940	8,472,000	3,234,000
1941	7,717,000	2,652,000
1942	8,044,000	3,038,000
1943	7,780,000	2,823,000
1944	6,950,000	2,646,000
1945	5,800,000	1,794,000
1946	6,000,000	1,669,000
1947	8,350,000	3,437,000
1948	8,750,000	3,200,000
1949	10,900,000	6,040,000
1950	6,700,000	2,946,000

*Source: Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1952-1953 (Dallas, Texas, 1951), 190. Figures for 1950 from U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Agricultural Statistics, 1952 (Washington, 1952), 77.

production of cotton.[18]

After 1930 the shift from horses and mules to tractors took place very rapidly, particularly in the Corpus Christi and High Plains areas. In 1937 nearly seventy-eight percent of all farms in the High Plains depended upon tractor power.[19] Although the greatest mechanization occurred in those two areas, tractors were also used in other sections of Texas. In the Rolling Plains approximately forty percent of the farms were using tractors in 1935.[20] Thirty percent of the farmers in the Black Waxy Prairie were using tractors to such an extent in 1940 that fifty percent or more of the cropland was being cultivated with power machinery.[21] Still greater use of tractor power was stimulated by the shortage of manpower resulting from World War II. During the 1940's the number of tractors in Texas more than doubled, increasing from 98,923 in 1940 to 232,328 in 1950.[22]

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18 Joseph Motheral, Recent Trends in Land Tenure in Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 641 (College Station, Texas, 1944), 5.

19 Bonnen, Journal of Farm Economics, XX (August 1938), 609.

20 Czarowitz, Farm Adjustments in the Rolling Plains, 65-66.

21 U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, House of Representatives, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess., pursuant to H. Res. 63 and H. Res. 491, Part 5, Oklahoma City Hearings, Sept. 19-20, 1940 (Washington, 1941), 2196.

22 U. S. Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Agriculture. Counties and State Economic Areas: Texas, I (Washington, 1952), 7.

The increasing use of and improvements in farm machinery brought about a tremendous reduction in the labor requirements for the production of cotton. By 1936 the average amount of labor required per acre in the western cotton regions of Texas was fifty hours -- thrity-eight hours less than the national average.[23] The great saving of labor occurred almost entirely in the preparation of land, in the planting, and in the cultivating of cotton. The effect of mechanization on the preharvest operations was clearly shown in two studies made of farming in the High Plains and the Rolling Plains by the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. In the Rolling Plains it was found that on farms using one-row horse-drawn equipment 14.9 hours of labor per acre was needed for pre-harvest operations as compared with a total of 7.2 hours on farms using three-row and four-row equipment drawn by tractors.[24] Had the hoeing and chopping operations been mechanized, the drop in man hours per acre would have been still greater. In the High Plains the reduction in labor requirements for pre-harvest operations was even greater than on the Rolling Plains, dropping from 10.45 hours per acre using single-row horse-drawn machinery to 4.3 hours

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[23] W. C. Holley and Lloyd C. Arnold, Changes in Technology and Labor Requirements in Crop Production: Cotton, W. P. A. National Research Project, Report No. A-7 (Philadelphia, 1938), 105.

[24] Czarowitz, Farm Adjustments in the Rolling Plains, 45.

employing four-row tractor-drawn equipment.[25]

Yet, for all the reduction of labor required in producing cotton due to the mechanized preharvest operations, the amount of labor needed per acre for harvesting remained virtually the same. Such a situation, occurring mainly in the western and southern parts of the state, created labor requirements much different from those prevailing in the older cotton growing areas of East Texas. In the latter region farms had always been small, ranging from thirty-five to forty-five acres, and large-scale machinery was used only to a very limited extent because of the topography, poor soil, and the wooded nature of a great portion of the section.[26] An analysis of the labor requirements per acre of cotton in this area showed that 16.2 percent was needed in pre-planting operations, 2.1 percent in planting, 46.3 percent in cultivating, and 35.4 percent in the harvesting.[27] On these small farms, then, it was possible for the operators to plant, cultivate, and harvest the cotton crop, using only

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[25] A. C. Magee, C. A. Bonnen, and B. H. Thibodeaux, Information Basic to Farm Adjustments in the High Plains Cotton Area of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 652 (College Station, Texas, 1944), 3.

[26] C. A. Bonnen, B. H. Thibodeaux, and J. F. Criswell, An Economic Study of Farm Organization in the Piney Woods Farming Area of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 453 (College Station, Texas, 1932), 5-6.

[27] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, pp. 1888-1889.

the labor residing on the respective farms.

On the western and southern cotton lands the Texas farmer, through the use of machinery, could plant and cultivate many more acres than was possible for the operator of a small East Texas farm. On the High Plains one man, with the help of extra labor for hoeing, could plant and cultivate 100 acres using one-row horse-drawn equipment, or 450 acres by employing four-row tractor-drawn implements.[28] Such mechanization in preharvest operations resulted in harvest operations accounting for approximately sixty percent of the total labor(25.5 hours per acre) required in producing cotton when using single-row equipment, or seventy-seven percent of the 19.05 hours needed for four-row equipment.[29] Thus, as the power and equipment unit was increased, the percentage of labor required during the harvest season rose proportionately. As a result, farmers who operated large acreage were forced to depend upon outside seasonal labor to supplement the resident labor force during the time of harvest.[30] Therefore, it was the areas where large scale cotton farming was practiced -- the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the Corpus Christi

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[28] Magee, Farm Adjustments in the High Plains, 3.

[29] Ibid., 17-18.

[30] C. A. Bonnen, "Mechanization and Its Relation to the Cost of Producing Cotton in Texas," Southwestern Social Science Quarterly, XXII (June, 1941), 70-71.

region, the Black Waxy Prairie, and the western part of the state -- that formed the basis for a migrant labor force.

In addition to the mechanization of cotton farming, another change in Texas agriculture which created a demand, although to a lesser degree, for seasonal farm labor was the development of the citrus and vegetable industries of South Texas. The growth of these industries in Texas paralleled the development of the fresh fruit and vegetable industries on a national basis. Prior to 1900 most urban communities were able to get fresh fruits and vegetables only during the summer months from growers located on the outskirts of the cities. In some localities vegetables and fruits were grown in hot houses during the out-of-season periods, but only the wealthy could afford the high priced products. The majority, if they had vegetables and fruits at all during the winter, bought canned or dried produce. It was not until around 1900 that the fresh fruit and vegetable industry as it is known today developed. The development, made possible by improvements in transportation and perfection of techniques for preserving perishable goods, was marked by the growth of winter and spring garden areas in Florida, California, and Texas. These areas have become the source of supply for fresh fruits and vegetables during the fall, winter, and spring months when northern truck farms are not in production. Fresh produce is now available throughout the entire year at

reasonable prices, and the production of truck crops has assumed an ever increasing importance in American agriculture.[31] In 1949 these crops contributed over one billion dollars to cash farm income in the United States -- approximately twelve percent of the total for all crops.[32]

A substantial part of the nation's supply of fruits and vegetables comes from Texas. In 1950 the state produced 1,011,800 tons of the 15,038,800 tons of commercial vegetables grown in the United States.[33] Over half of the vegetables and nearly all of the citrus produced in Texas comes from the Lower Rio Grande Valley.[34] The development of truck farms in the Valley came with the expansion of irrigation after 1900. Vegetables were introduced into the Valley economy about 1904 and rapidly assumed commercial importance. The mild temperatures, long growing seasons, and control of moisture through irrigation encouraged the cultivation of vegetables, and by 1948 commercial truck crops were grown on 163,000 acres, or about twenty-six percent of the harvested acres.[35] A variety of vegetables are grown in the area, the

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[31] Harry Schwartz, Seasonal Farm Labor in the United States (New York, 1945), 28-29.

[32] U. S. Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Agriculture. General Report, II (Washington, 1952), 521.

[33] U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Agricultural Statistics, 1953 (Washington, 1953), 223.

[34] Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1952-1953 (Dallas, Texas, 1951), 197, 200.

[35] Hughes, Irrigated Agriculture in Texas, 29-31.

most important of which are spring tomatoes, carrots, cabbage, and beets.

The development of the citrus industry in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas occurred largely after World War I. During the 1920's thousands of acres were planted in citrus -- primarily grapefruit. In that decade the shipments of grapefruit increased from 3,000 boxes to 1,530,000.[36] The 1930's and 1940's witnessed a continued increase in production, reaching a peak of 25,000,000 boxes of grapefruit and 5,000,000 boxes of oranges in the mid-1940's.[37] By 1948 there were 167,000 acres of citrus planted in the Valley.[38]

The other important truck gardening areas in South Texas are the Winter Garden and Corpus Christi regions. The Winter Garden has been dependent upon the development of irrigation for its growth. Prior to 1900 ranching was the principal enterprise in the area, but with the introduction of irrigation after 1900 four important truck farming districts were developed: (1) the Rio Grande Valley in the vicinity of Laredo, (2) the Rio Grande Valley around Eagle Pass, (3) the eastern and southern parts of Zavalla County,

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[36] D. C. Alderman, Citrus Variety Trends in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 742 (College Station, Texas, 1951), 7.

[37] Texas Almanac, 1952-1953, p. 200.

[38] Hughes, Irrigated Agriculture in Texas, 31.

and (4) the rich farming lands near Carrizo Springs in Dimmit County.[39] Many vegetables are grown in the Winter Garden area, including spring onions, spinach, carrots, peppers, and fall tomatoes. Every year hundreds of carloads of these crops leave the area for markets in the North and East.

In the Corpus Christi area the cultivation of vegetables also began after 1900. During the early years, crops were grown on irrigated land, but since 1931 dry-land farming has become common.[40] Onions, cabbage, radishes, and beets are among the many varieties of vegetables that are shipped out of the area each year.

The development of the fruit and vegetable industries in South Texas has brought about a great demand for seasonal labor. Although all farm crops are seasonal in nature and require varying amounts of labor, it is the above crops with peak labor requirements that create a need for non-resident labor. Where labor requirements are low and fairly constant, and particularly if operations are mechanized, crops can be produced with little or no outside help. For example, wheat production is now completely mechanized, and as a result requires only 4.1 hours of labor per acre -- 2 hours for preharvest operations and 2.1 hours for harvesting.[41]

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[39] Ibid., 27.

[40] Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 84-85.

[41] M. R. Cooper, and others, Labor Requirements for Crops and Livestock, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Farm Management Report No. 40 (Washington, 1943), 17.

The same holds true for grain sorghums, corn, oats, and rice. On the other hand, almost all of the fruits and vegetables grown in South Texas require from 100 to 220 hours of labor per acre (see Table 2).

The labor requirements for citrus fruit and truck crops are highly sporadic due to the nature of the crops and the method of production. For citrus fruit labor requirements are highest during the preharvest period when the trees are pruned, irrigated, fertilized, cultivated, and protected from insects.[42] Bermuda onions also require a great deal of preharvest labor because the transplanting and much of the cultivation is done by hand.[43] In the production of spinach, however, the planting and cultivation has been almost completely mechanized, and a relatively small number of workers can perform the preharvest operations. Nevertheless, the harvesting must be done by hand, and it is during the several months of the harvest that a large amount of labor is needed.[44]

In summary, an increasing need for seasonal farm labor in Texas resulted from the widespread mechanization

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[42] W. H. Friend, Citrus Orcharding in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Circular No. 111 (College Station, Texas, 1946), passim.

[43] Leslie R. Hawthorne, Bermuda Onion Culture in Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Circular No. 65 (College Station, Texas, 1932), 6-7.

[44] Seldon C. Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, W. P. A. Division of Research (Washington, 1941), 16.

TABLE 2

LABOR REQUIREMENTS PER ACRE FOR SELECTED CROPS: TEXAS*

Crop	Preharvest (Hours)	Harvest (Hours)	Total (Hours)
Fruit			
Cantalope	45	35	80
Grapefruit	95	70	165
Lemons	115	60	175
Oranges	105	70	170
Vegetable			
Beets	70	100	170
Cabbage	50	50	100
Carrots	90	150	214
Cauliflower	80	95	175
Cucumbers, early	60	40	100
Eggplant	80	45	125
Onions, early Bermuda	170	50	220
Peppers	80	40	120
Snap Beans, early	30	80	110
late	30	75	105
Spinach	40	60	100
Tomatoes	55	95	150
Grain			
Barley	2.5	2.5	5
Corn	19.8	6.2	26
Grain Sorghums	5	6.5	11.5
Oats	4	6	10
Rice	18	13	31
Wheat	4.1	2	2.1

*Data from M. R. Cooper and others, Labor Requirements for Crops and Livestock, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Farm Management Report No. 40 (Washington, 1943).

of preharvest operations in the production of cotton. The use of large-scale machinery allwed farmers to plant and cultivate many more acres than could be harvested by the resident labor force. Then too, additional seasonal labor was required on the fruit and vegetable farms which developed in South Texas. The result was a demand for migratory agricultural workers, willing to travel throughout the state and work for short periods of time wherever they were needed.

CHAPTER II

THE BUILDING UP OF A LABOR RESERVOIR: 1900-1930

The increased need for seasonal migrant farm workers was filled almost entirely by the Mexican[1] population of the state. Indeed, the existence of a reservoir of poorly paid, underemployed Mexican labor has been an important factor in the development of the migratory farm labor system of Texas. It is from this group that about eighty-five percent of the migrants are recruited.[2] The Mexican population is not spread evenly throughout the state, but is concentrated in

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[1] The term "Mexican" is used here very broadly to include citizens of Mexico residing temporarily in the United States both legally and illegally and also persons of Mexican descent who are citizens of the United States by virtue of being born in this country or by naturalization. Within recent years, there has been much objection to the loose use of the term "Mexican" in referring to all of the Spanish-speaking peoples of Texas on the grounds that a majority of this group are American citizens and should not be confused with people from Mexico. The terms "Latin American" and "Spanish-speaking people" are often used to designate American citizens of Mexican descent living in the state. Due to the fact that the migratory labor force of Texas consists of citizens of both the United States and Mexico, the broader and simpler term "Mexican" is used in this thesis. It is used in the same sense that the term "German" is used when referring to persons of German extraction who have lived in the state for generations.

[2] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1800.

certain areas. For example, Bexar and Hidalgo counties in 1948 had a combined population of more than three hundred thousand Mexicans -- over twenty-five percent of the total number of Mexicans living in Texas. The main areas of concentration are the big cities of the state and the counties in South Texas. In the latter area Mexicans make up more than half of the total population, and in the majority of these counties the figures range from seventy to ninety percent.[3] From the southern part of the state come the majority of the migrant farm workers.[4] A great number of the towns in South Texas annually lose half of their population with the temporary migration of their citizens to other parts of the state and nation in search of employment.[5]

The reservoir of Mexican labor has grown up in Texas within recent years. There are two reasons for this: (1) the high birth rate of the Mexicans in Texas and (2) Mexican immigration. A study made in 1941 of the families of agricultural workers in Hidalgo County revealed that the average

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[3] Lyle Saunders, The Spanish-Speaking Population of Texas, Inter-American Education Occasional Papers No. 5 (Austin, Texas, 1949), 14, 55.

[4] In testimony presented in 1940 before a Congressional Committee, the Texas Employment Service estimated that sixty to sixty-five percent of the workers, mainly Mexicans, claimed South Texas as their home. U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1925.

[5] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Stenographic Report of Proceedings held at Brownsville, Texas, August 1, 1950 (Mimeographed), 250.

unit consisted of 6.6 persons.[6] Similar findings were reported in surveys of Mexican families in Crystal City and Eagle Pass.[7] In another study, made by Walter G. Browder of the population of the state, it was found that the size of families in counties which had a large Mexican population was above that of the state average.[8]

More important in the development of a large reservoir of Mexican labor in Texas is the great numbers of immigrants from Mexico who have entered Texas since 1900. Prior thereto, the records show that the number of Mexican-born persons living in Texas was few. The movement of Mexicans into the state after 1900 was part of a larger migration to the United States during the period. Although no one knows for certain how many Mexican immigrants entered the United States between 1900 and 1930, due to the large numbers who entered illegally and therefore were not recorded, it has been estimated that over one million came into the country

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[6] Amber A. Warburton, Helen Wood, and Marian M. Crane, The Work and Welfare of Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, Texas, U. S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 298 (Washington, 1943), 10.

[7] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 11; Gladys R. Wueste, "A Survey of Factors Relating to the Education of the Children of Migratory Parents of Eagle Pass, Texas" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Dept. of Education, University of Texas, 1950), 13.

[8] Walter G. Browder, The Pattern of Internal Mobility in Texas, University of Texas Publication No. 4434 (Austin, Texas, 1944), 43.

during the above decades.[9] According to the census figures below, prior to 1930 the majority of the Mexican-born persons in the United States resided in Texas.

TABLE 3

MEXICAN-BORN PERSONS RESIDING IN U. S. AND TEXAS, 1900-1930*

Year	United States	Texas	Percent in Texas
1900	103,393	71,062	68
1910	219,802	124,238	56
1920	478,383	249,652	52
1930	639,017	266,046	41

*Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, II (Washington, 1943), 43, 781.

There were various reasons for the great increase in Mexican immigration that took place during this time. One reason, and undoubtedly the most important, was the opportunities for employment that became available in the Southwest. The first three decades of the twentieth century was a period of great agricultural expansion. Cotton culture was spreading throughout Texas as well as into Arizona and California. The fruit and vegetable industries of South Texas and California were developing rapidly, and in Colorado sugar beets were becoming an important crop. With the expansion of agriculture came the need for clearing brush from

[9] Donald M. Taft, Human Migration (New York, 1936), 516.

thousands of acres of land in the Southwest. At the same time, the railroads and mining industries in the region were developing. All three of these industries -- agriculture, railroads, and mining -- required a considerable amount of manual labor.

Since the development of the Southwest occurred at a time when the standard of living of the American workman was rising rapidly, it was difficult to find American laborers who were willing to perform the backbreaking labor demanded by the industries in the Southwest as long as there was more attractive and remunerative work to be found elsewhere.[10] The Mexican worker, on the other hand, was eager to work regardless of the conditions. He would work for lower wages than would the American laborer and would do practically any task no matter how hard or menial.[11] Reporting on the use of Mexican labor on the railroads of the Southwest, the Immigration Commission in 1911 wrote:

> The employment of Mexicans in the Southwest is largely in parts of the country which are sparsely settled and in which climatic and other conditions are such that it is difficult to secure laborers of any other race, including the Japanese. It was partly because of this fact, partly because of the low wages for which they

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[10] Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico (Philadelphia: 1949), 178; Max S. Handman, "Economic Reasons for the Coming of the Mexican Immigrant," American Journal of Sociology, XXXV (January, 1930), 605-606.

[11] U. S. Immigration Commission, Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission, I, Senate Document No. 747, 61st Cong., 3rd Sess., (Washington: 1911), 688-689.

were willing to work, and partly because of the road-masters preferences for them that within ten years their employment has become general.[12]

Moreover, because of the feeling, prevalent in the Southwest, that Mexicans are inferior to the Anglo-Americans, employers had few compunctions about paying this group starvation wages and forcing them to work under almost any conditions. In this connection, Ruth Allen, describing the terrible conditions under which women in the cotton fields of Texas had to work, wrote in 1931:

> It is hardly necessary to add that toilet facilities and water supply are seldom arranged. Living conditions could scarcely be worse unless with greater congestion, and one of the factors that is making the Mexican a welcome laborer in some sections of the State is that the American landowner and his wife dislike to see 'white people living that way.'[13]

The demand for common laborers on the farms, railroads, and mines of the Southwest was intensified during World War I when thousands of persons formerly employed in these industries were called into the armed services or lured away into better paying jobs in other parts of the economy. Since the unsettled conditions in Europe made it impossible to get workers from that source, the government began investigatin ways of speeding up the flow of laborers from

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[12] Ibid., I, 685.

[13] Ruth Allen, The Labor of Women in the Production of Cotton, University of Texas Bulletin No. 3134 (Austin, Texas: 1931), 113.

Mexico.[14] Consequently, on June 12, 1918, the Secretary of Labor suspended the literacy test, the payment of the head tax, and provisions of the contract labor law applying to citizens of Mexico who desired to enter this country for temporary employment. This policy of waiving restrictions on Mexican immigration remained in effect until 1921, and during this time, approximately 73,000 persons entered the United States from Mexico. After the termination of their contracts many of the immigrants refused to leave and remained in the country illegally.[15]

Following the passage of the Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924, the demand for Mexican labor continued to be great. These laws drastically curtailed the number of immigrants that were permitted to enter this country from Europe, but citizens of countries in the Western Hemisphere were exempted. The result was that employers turned more and more to Mexico as a source of common labor.[16]

Workers in Mexico were not slow in responding to the increasing demand for labor north of the border. Although

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[14] Elizabeth Broadbent, "Mexican Population in Southwestern United States," Texas Geographic Magazine, V (Autumn, 1941), 18.

[15] Darrell H. Smith and H. Guy Herring, The Bureau of Immigration, Institute for Government Research, Service Monograph of the U. S. Gov't. No. 30 (Baltimore: 1924), 32.

[16] Broadbent, Texas Geographic Magazine, V (Autumn, 1941), 18.

the wages offered in most industries were low and working conditions poor by American standards, the Mexican found this employment more attractive than that available in his own country. Indeed, the disparity in wage rates between the two countries was the major factor inducing Mexicans to emigrate. A study of the prevailing wage scale in over four hundred towns and cities in central and northern Mexico in the 1920's showed that the average daily wage of agricultural and industrial workers was 1.15 pesos, or 57 cents in American money. In this same study, it was estimated that in order to provide for the necessities of life (not counting education or recreation) a worker with a family of five would have to earn approximately 287 pesos a month or $143 in American currency. At the prevailing wage of 1.15 pesos, however, a laborer could earn only 35.65 pesos or $17.67 per thirty-one day month. Therefore, in order to satisfy his basic needs the worker would have had to increase his wage about eight times.[17]

At the same time, across the border in the United States Mexican workers in agriculture and industry (mining, brick kilns, railroads, etc.) were receiving an average daily wage of $3.38 or $104.78 for a thirty-one day month. In Texas wages were somewhat lower with cotton pickers earning an average of $1.75 per day and railroad workers $.30 an

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[17] Manuel Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the United States (Chicago: 1930), 35-37.

hour or $2.40 per eight hour day.[18] Nevertheless, an unskilled Mexican worker could earn as much in ten days by picking cotton in Texas as he could make in a month in Mexico. Nor was the cost of living much higher in the United States. "In Mexico," reported Manuel Gamio, "the cost of living is very high and the pay very low, while in the United States in comparison the pay is very much higher and the cost of living lower."[19]

Another reason for the Mexican exodus was the periodic revolutionary disturbances in Mexico after 1911. Manuel Gamio found that during the periods of revolution, emigration was higher than in the years of tranquility.[20] No doubt, the inflation and lack of personal security resulting from the various revolutions were compelling reasons for the temporary migration of many Mexicans as well as a factor in permanent emigration. Paul Taylor, in describing the effect that the Cristero Revolution during the 1920's had on the village of Arandas in central Mexico, wrote: "Relatives already in the U. S. were advised not to return to Arandas, both in the interest of personal security and because of the greater need for wages which emigrants remitted, and thus the usual

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[18] Ibid., 38-39.

[19] Ibid., 40.

[20] Ibid., 163-165.

temporary return movement to Arandas was retarded."[21]

Word of the availability of jobs and higher wages in the United States spread to all parts of Mexico. Typical of how the word spread was the case of Arandas:

> Doubtless the ranchers and small merchants who for many years previously had gone on horseback as far as Aguascalientes, Queretaro, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, and Michoacan to market their produce... were among the first to carry the news or employment offered by the railroads, and with the return of the first emigrants to Arandas there was a wave of enthusiasm to take advantage of the wages in the U.S....[22]

Although workers came from all parts of Mexico to find employment in the United States, the majority came from the states of the central and northern plateaus.[23] Most of the emigrants were from the lower economic classes of society, and therefore, considerable sacrifice had to be made on their part to secure the funds necessary for the trip to the border. Some sold their farm animals; some borrowed from friends; while others secured loans from merchants and rancheros, often at high rates of interest.[24] Then, after bidding their families goodbye, the workers

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[21] Paul S. Taylor, A Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community: Arandas in Jalisco, Mexico, Ibero-Americana Series No. 4 (Berkeley, California, 1933), 39-40.

[22] Ibid., 35-36.

[23] Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the U.S., 13.

[24] Taylor, Spanish-Mexican Community: Arandas, 44: Victor S. Clark, Mexican Labor in the United States, U. S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin No. 78 (Washington, 1908), 472-473.

departed on foot or by rail to seek employment in the United States.

When the almost penniless Mexican crossed the border, he had little difficulty in finding employment. The railroads were especially active in recruiting workers. Many of the immigrant laborers had received training on the railroads of northern Mexico and deserted for similar, higher paying jobs north of the Rio Grande. One official of the National Railroad in Mexico complained in 1907 that his company had recruited fifteen hundred laborers for work on the northern section of the railroad and that within a year nearly all of them had left for work in Texas.[25] Railroad companies in the United States had agreements with employment agencies along the border to secure workers for their roads in the Southwest. Employment agents rounded up the Mexican workers when they reached the border and loaded them, in groups under a boss or "cabo," on trains which carried them to various points along the line where they were needed.[26] These agents often made large profits from employment fees and from the sale of supplies on credit to the Mexican workers at a cost much higher than prevailing wages. The fees and other charges were later taken out of the workers' wages under an arrangement with the railroads and paid to the employment

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[25] Clark, Mexican Labor in the U.S., 470.

[26] Ibid., 471.

agencies.[27] Many of the workers jumped the train before reaching their destination in order to work on ranches and farms along the way. Often they would work for a railroad a few days and then leave for other employment. In 1908 Victor Clark wrote:

> Whole gangs at a time leave Texas [railroad] sections to pick cotton. One contractor said he lost an entire gang, after paying $12.50 railway fare ahead, before they reached the job to which they had been sent. A railroad official in Dallas ...said that 50 percent left the road to work for farmers as soon as receiving fare for their job.[28]

Thus, the railroads were forced to recruit labor continuously, only to lose it to other employers.

Though many Texas farmers preferred to get their labor by hiring workers away from the railroads, others were forced to engage the services of employment agents along the border to secure laborers as they came across the River. The way in which these agents operated was described by Emelio Flores in testimony before the Commission on Industrial Relations in 1916 as follows:

> There are so-called employment agencies in Laredo and other border cities who get 'orders' from farmers throughout Texas...and it is these agents of the said employment concerns that get these Mexicans just as they cross the Rio Grande and ship them off

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[27] Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1911 (Washington: 1912), 121; U. S. Immigration Commission, Abstracts of Reports, I, p. 684.

[28] Clark, Mexican Labor in the U. S., 472.

> to their destination, many times misrepresenting things to them and causing great hardships to these Mexicans and their families. The employment agencies at the border generally work under an agreed combine with others of the same class in San Antonio, Tex., and the concerns at San Antonio see to it that the 'consignment' goes through to destination without leaving the cars if possible. When they have to be transferred from the I. G. and N. to other railroad stations they are marched straight across the city of San Antonio up Commerce or Houston Street, and it is no uncommon sight to see as many as a hundred or more marching together. These employment agencies are generally paid by the farmer $1 a head when delivered at destination.... When put to work at destination or upon their first pay day they are informed so much had been charged to each and everyone of them for transportation and employment fees, which said amounts are deducted from their earnings.[29]

Another method used by farmers to recruit workers from Mexico was to send a representative to the border to hire them. "It is not unusual," wrote Clark, "for a group of planters in Northwestern Texas or Oklahoma, or a sugar company in Colorado, to send a manager or foremen to the Rio Grande to gather up a part of 100 or more men and their families...."[30]

In addition to the recruitment by American employers of legal immigrants, there developed the practice of hiring those who entered the country in violation of the federal immigration laws. Groups of smugglers called "coyotes" were found all along the border. Smuggling immigrants across the border was so remunerative in some places that automobiles

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[29]U. S. Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington: 1916), 9201.

[30]Clark, Mexican Labor in the U.S., 476.

and trucks were purchased to transport Mexican nationals to points along the border where they were to cross over,[31] and a thriving business developed of providing forged head tax receipts and passports to persons desiring to enter the country.[32] The smugglers operated in the following manner:

> The common method used by these smugglers is to send their agents across the river to intercept any immigrants, and to prevent them from crossing illegally .... These agents play upon the ignorance of the immigrant, inventing all kinds of stories to scare them, and after they are sufficiently frightened a proposition is made to put them across the river and evade the authorities for so much per head, the amount ranging from two to ten dollars a person, according to how much the agent thinks he can get out of them.
>
> When they arrive at the Texas side of the river there is usually another agent to meet them and demand from one to two dollars for the privilege of landing. After they are finally on Texas soil another crook gets them and proceeds to scare them some more by telling them that the immigration commissioners are near by, and that if they will give him from two to five dollars per head he will take them away from the river and secure them transportation to San Antonio or some other inland town. They are then turned over to some...employment agent, who proceeds to fleece them of any more money they may have left....
>
> Most of these people are rounded up by the employment agencies and shipped out of the State, except during the cotton picking season, when it is more profitable to sell them to farmers for picking cotton. Many instances have come under the observation of the Department where farmers who are in need of labor have paid agents as high as ten dollars per head for Mexican laborers, in addition to feeding them and paying transportation to the place of employment, only to have all or part of them desert before going to work, or within a day or two thereafter.[33]

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[31] Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1920 (Washington: 1921), 442.

[32] Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the U.S., 206.

[33] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Sixth Biennial Report, 1919-1920 (Austin, Texas, 1921), 16.

There were a number of reasons why so many Mexican immigrants allowed themselves to be exploited by the smugglers. For one thing, the Immigration Law of 1917, as well as subsequent laws, contained several provisions that many of the Mexicans could not comply with. For example, immigrants had to be able to read English or some other language. Since a large number of the Mexican laborers were illiterate, they could not meet this requirement, and hence, could not enter the country through legal channels. Another factor in illegal immigration was the head tax and visa fees that were prescribed by the law. Whereas it cost eighteen dollars to enter legally, smugglers generally charged half that amount to bring Mexican nationals across the border. Also, the delay and expense of waiting around the ports of entry while being processed forced many immigrants to seek out the smuggler rather than the immigration official. In following official proceedure, immigrants, upon arriving at the border, were often detained several days by the Mexican Migration Office before they were able to get a passport. Then, a few more days might be spent at the American consular office in securing a visa. During this period of delay, the immigrant had to pay for room and board. Finally, they were required to undergo a medical inspection and be bathed, sometimes in gasoline, at the international bridge.[34]

[34] Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the U.S., 204; Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1923 (Washington, 1924), 16.

Another factor which encouraged the illegal entry of Mexican immigrants was the fact that they ran little risk of being apprehended by immigration officials. Prior to the organization of the Border Patrol in 1924, there were approximately seventy-five mounted watchmen guarding the whole Mexican border from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean.[35] The futility of trying to restrain illegal immigration across the southern border was expressed in various reports to the Commissioner of Immigration by the border officials. One inspector in the San Antonio district wrote in 1907:

> The large area of sparsely settled territory adjacent to the southern land boundary of the United States, with inadequate transportation facilities, affords a comparatively easy means of entry for aliens desirous of evading inspection at the hands of immigration officers, and is a particularly difficult section of the country to effectually guard. The international boundary west of El Paso is, of course, merely an imaginary line, and east of that point the Rio Grande, which forms the line between the two countries, is readily fordable at almost any place. It is apparent, therefore, that to properly carry out the restrictions against inadmissable aliens imposed upon the officers of this district is a task of immense proportions. ...It would be idle to state that with the system now in vogue it is impossible for an alien to secure surreptitious entry into the United States by way of the Mexican border....[36]

Apparently, the situation was little improved by 1919 when the inspector in charge at Eagle Pass reported: "On August 18, 1919 the four mounted watchmen assigned to

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[35] U. S. Dept. of Justice, The Immigration Border Patrol, Rev. ed. (Washington: 1952), 4.

[36] Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1907 (Washington: 1908), 145.

this station were furloughed. Since that date the number of officers and employees has been barely sufficient to handle routine business, thereby practically leaving the border unguarded."[37] Although the Border Patrol, after its establishment in 1924, did a much more effective job of guarding the border than did the earlier force, it was still possible for countless immigrants to cross illegally without great difficulty.[38]

Recruitment of Mexican immigrant workers was necessarily a continuing process due to the seasonal nature of Mexican immigration. The proximity of Mexico permitted the immigrant worker to return to his family during the slack periods of employment. "No other immigration," wrote Max Handman in 1926, "has come to us which shifts back and forth between America and the home country as much as does the Mexican immigration."[39] In 1929 it was estimated that as high as ninety-five percent of the Mexican immigrants coming to the United States were of the fluctuating type.[40]

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[37] Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1920, p. 441.

[38] Paul S. Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States: Migration Statistics, University of California Publications in Economics Vol. 6, No. 3 (Berkeley, California: 1929), 252.

[39] Max S. Handman, "The Mexican Immigrant in Texas," Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly, VII (June, 1926), 34-35.

[40] Taylor, Mexican Labor in U.S.: Migration Statistics, 244.

Nevertheless, a large number of immigrants eventually became permanent residents of the United States. After making several trips across the border, it was quite common for workers to return with their families and establish permanent homes north of the border. Especially was this true of immigrants coming to Texas where they found numerous communities made up almost entirely of Mexicans.[41] Like the Irish, Germans, Italians, and other racial groups who migrated to the United States at an earlier date, the Mexicans gravitated toward areas with similar cultural background. Even though the depression of the 1930's brought Mexican immigration to a temporary halt, the almost continuous flow of Mexicans into Texas during the previous thirty years had filled the reservoir of Mexican labor from which workers could be recruited to supply the seasonal labor requirements of Texas agriculture.

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[41] Clark, Mexican Labor in the U. S., 520.

CHAPTER III

THE MIGRATORY LABOR SYSTEM

The employment of Mexican labor in Texas cotton fields began in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As early as 1870 it was reported that farmers from the Georgetown area were recruiting wagon loads of Mexicans in San Antonio to harvest their cotton.[1] By the 1890's Mexicans from South Texas were following the cotton crop across the state on foot, sometimes going as far north and east as the Sabine River, a distance of approximately four hundred miles, and returning to their homes in the southern part of the state after four or five months.[2] After 1900 the demand for cotton pickers rose considerably, with the result that more and more Mexicans joined the migrant stream. The Carrizo Springs Javelin in 1911 carried an article describing the effect that the increased demand for workers had on the labor force:

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[1] Alonzo Bettis Cox, "The Economic History of Texas during the Period of the Reconstruction (1865-74)" (Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Dept. of History, University of Texas, 1914), 47.

[2] Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 102.

> Not for a number of years has there been such a demand for cotton pickers in southwest Texas. Almost every neighborhood is calling for help to take care of the crop. To meet the demand agents have been sent across the border into Mexico to secure help. Today a coach load of Mexican pickers passed through this city /San Antonio/ for the great cotton fields about San Marcos and tomorrow an entire train load will go over into the Brazos bottoms where there is great demand for help....[3]

During this same period Mexicans also migrated into the Corpus Christi area seeking employment. Charles H. Alvord, farm superintendent of the Taft ranch in San Patricio County, testified before the Commission on Industrial Relations in 1916 as to the nature of the migratory force and the recruiting methods used to secure Mexican labor. Alvord informed the Commission that about one-half of the Mexicans employed on the Taft farms came there of their own accord, while the remainder were recruited from the Laredo area. He said:

> At certain seasons of the year they are growing onions near Laredo, and these people work in the onion fields, and after the onions are harvested there is nothing for them to do there until fall, and they come into Laredo; you see they work in the onion fields along this river, the Rio Grande, and ... /around/ Cotulla... and Pearsall ...and when the cotton crop gets ready to harvest they drift over into.../the Corpus Christi area/ and pick cotton. And when the season is over they go back to Laredo again. But our labor supply, most of it, stays right through the season. We have arrangements that we take care of them during the season, and at the end of the season we take them back to Laredo, and put them back where they came from.[4]

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[3] Javelin (Carrizo Springs, Texas), September 2, 1911, quoted in Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 102.

[4] U. S. Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Industrial Relations, X, 9217-9218.

Mexican workers were also found to be migrating into the central and eastern parts of the state at this time where they competed with the Negro laborers who lived in that section. A study made of farm labor in Travis County in 1916 revealed that Mexicans were preferred by the farmers only for seasonal work, while the Negroes were in demand as regular workers.[5] Another study, made by the Children's Bureau in 1924, of the agricultural labor force of Hill County found a number of Mexican migratory families "travelling aimlessly through the County, living in tents and picking up whatever work they could find."[6] The following year in Rockwall County, L. P. Gabbard observed that Mexicans were being used as seasonal laborers on the farms there. "I was informed," he wrote, "that it was only recently that Mexican laborers had appeared in this part of the State. Farther south and west Mexican labor is much more common."[7]

Indeed, farmers in the relatively new cotton areas in the western and southern parts of the state preferred Mexicans to other farm workers. They liked Mexican laborers because

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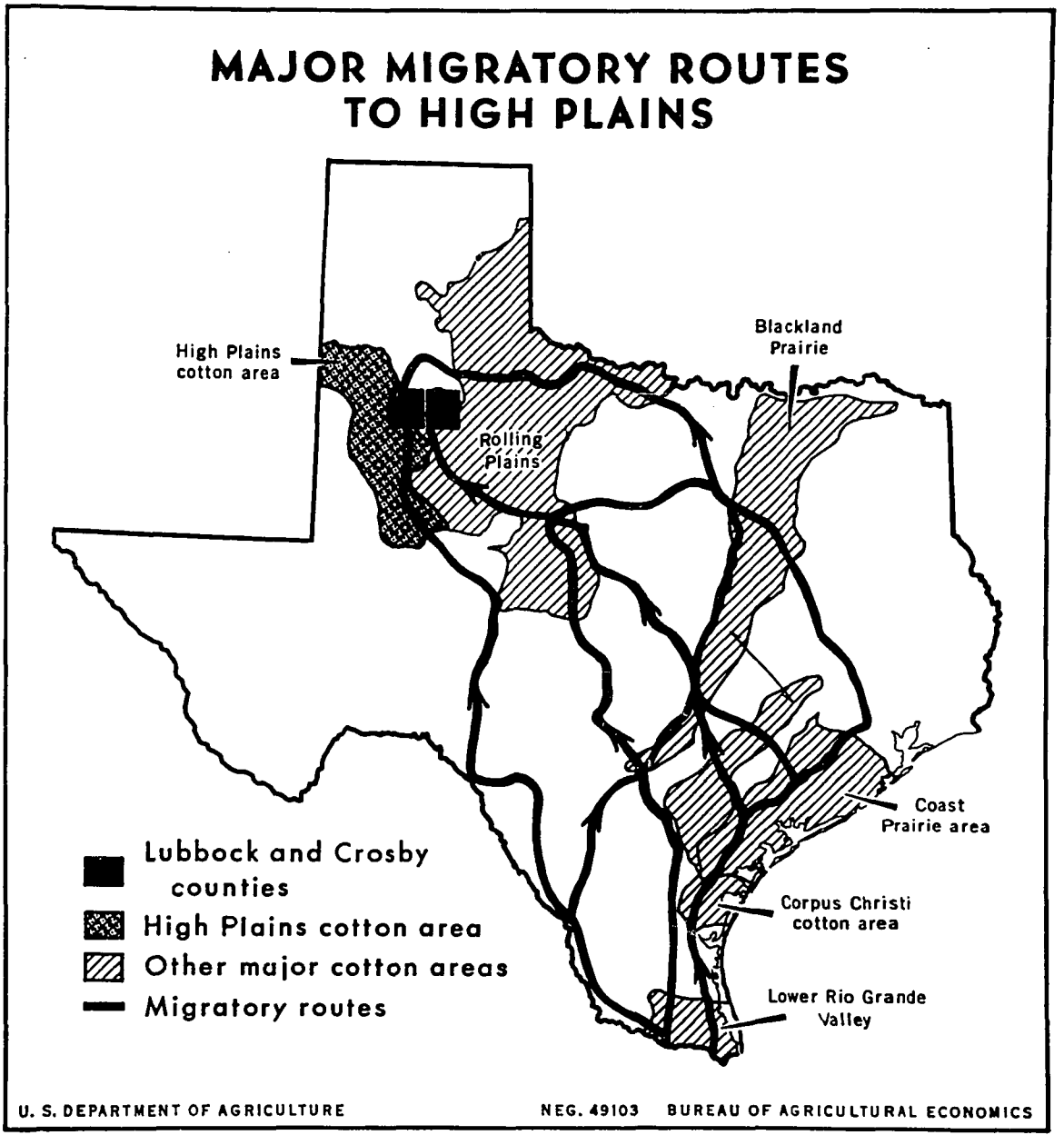
[5] Leonard Watkins, "Farm Labor," in Lewis Haney and George S. Wehrwein, eds., Social and Economic Survey of South Travis County, Texas, Texas University Bulletin No. 65 (Austin, Texas, 1916), 132.

[6] The Welfare of Children in Cotton-Growing Areas of Texas, U. S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 134 (Washington, 1924), 62.

[7] L. P. Gabbard, An Agricultural Economic Survey of Rockwall County, Texas, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 327 (College Station, Texas: 1925), 70.



Source: Joe R. Motheral, Cotton and Manpower, Texas High Plains, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 762 (College Station, Texas, 1953), 2.

they were willing to migrate in groups -- particularly family groups. In 1928 the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that "in asking for cotton pickers farmers invariably indicate a preference for the family unit. This fits in nicely with the conditions of the available supply because the Mexican people, constituting the bulk of seasonal labor must almost invariably move in family units."[8] Mexican families were uniformly large, ranging from three or four members to twenty members.[9] Families often consisted of the man and wife and their younger children, their married children and their families, grandparents and other relatives, and sometimes close friends were also considered members of a particular group. Family ties were very strong among the Mexicans. The family group travelled together, took care of the children of deceased members, and helped one another in finding employment.[10] Except for the very young and the infirm, all members of the family worked. Children were always required to work because of the great need for the income which they could contribute.[11]

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[8] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Tenth Biennial Report, 1927-1928 (Austin, Texas: 1929), 29.

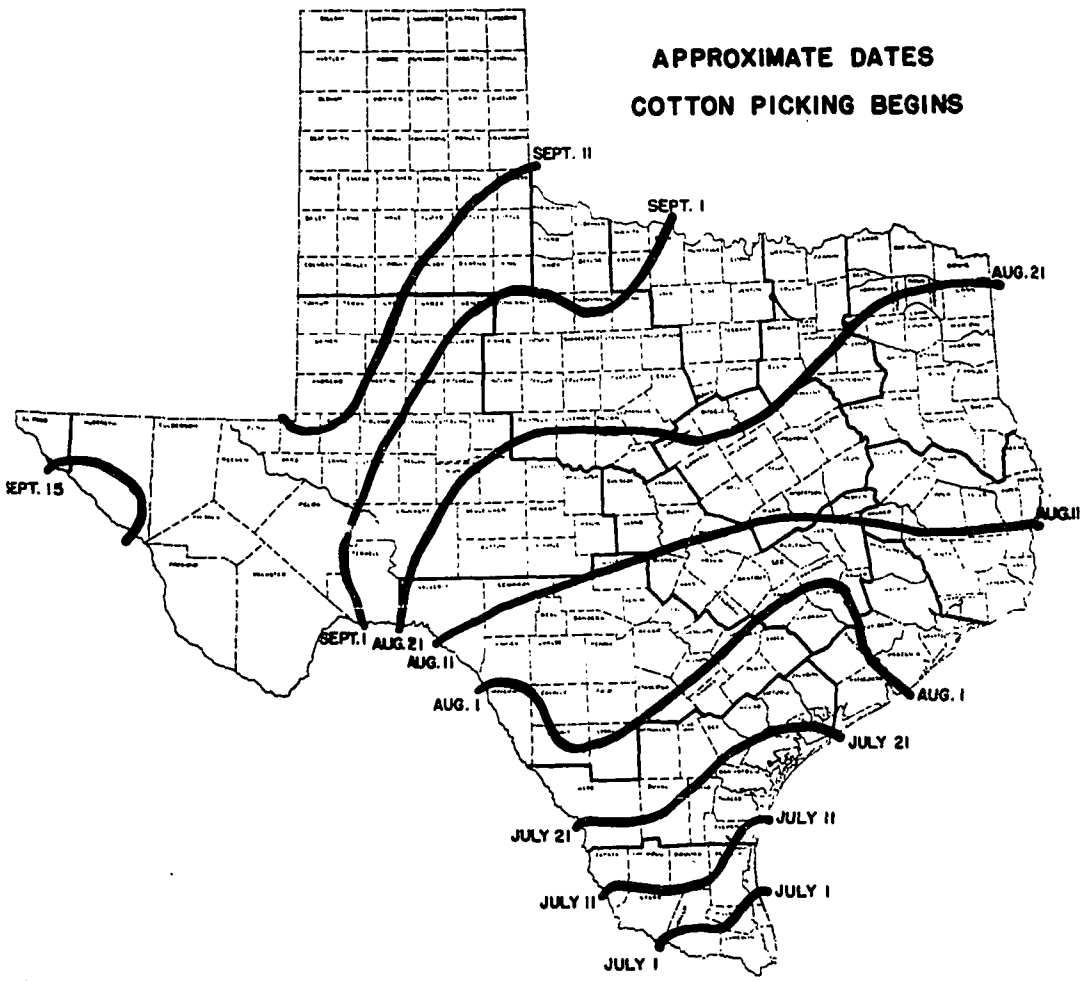
[9] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 11; Carey McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land (Boston: 1942), 234.

[10] Paul S. Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States: Dimmit County, Winter Garden District South Texas, University of California Publications in Economics, VI, No. 5 (Berkeley, California: 1929), 358.

[11] Warburton, Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, 23.

The state-wide migration of Mexican workers was facilitated by improvements in highways and the greater use of automobiles during the 1920's. As the workers travelled greater distances in their search for employment, certain well defined patterns of migration became apparent. The migrants began going into all the major cotton producing areas of the state with the exception of the Upper Rio Grande Valley around El Paso where farmers were dependent upon local labor. Due to variations in rainfall, geographic diversity, and length of the growing season, the cotton crop matured at different times throughout the state. Starting with the cotton harvest in the Lower Rio Grande Valley about the first week of July, and sometimes as early as June, the migrants began moving north along the coast into the Corpus Christi area, arriving there about the middle of July. After the peak had been reached in that region, they continued north into Central Texas in August and were in the Black Waxy region and the Rolling Plains by September. Leaving the latter sections, they reached the High Plains around the first week in October when the harvest season was at its height. The workers, in no great hurry to return home, were able to find employment in the High Plains until late in November or early in December. Then, they departed for the homes they had left in South Texas where work could be found in the vegetable fields and

COTTON PICKING SEASONS IN TEXAS



*Source: Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement Service in Texas, 1948 (Processed), 56.

citrus orchards during the winter and spring months.[12]

Although there were many migrant families who had their own automobiles or trucks and depended upon their own knowledge of crops to find work in the cotton fields throughout the state, the majority worked under the direction of labor contractors.[13] The labor contractor contracted to harvest crops and then turned the work over to others. In addition, he owned a truck and assumed the responsibility of transporting the workers and contacting farmers. Frequently, the contractor, or "jefe," carried only members of his immediate family and relatives; sometimes his crew was composed of groups of families and single men who were friends of the families. In either case, the contractor had an important function in the migratory labor system: since a large part of the Mexican workers could not speak English and most of the farmers could not speak Spanish, he served to bring the two together and arranged the details of employment. During the cotton harvest the contractor weighed the cotton in the field, kept records of the amount of cotton picked by each worker, and transported the cotton to the gin.

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[12] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, pp. 1925-1926. Dates of the cotton harvest seasons in the various areas of the state may be found in a leaflet put out by the Texas Employment Commission, "Information for Owners and Operators of Mechanical Cotton Pickers in Texas."

[13] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1926.

The farmer paid the stipulated wages on the basis of what the cotton weighed at the gin. The contractor then allocated the amount due the workers. At times, the contractor would advance money to the workers so that they could purchase cotton sacks, buy groceries, or secure medical attention.[14] If the owner advanced money to the workers, the contractor was held responsible if they left without completing their employment. During the 1930's the contractor's fees were from five to ten cents from each worker per hundred pounds of cotton picked, and $1.50 for each adult worker for whom transportation was provided, plus $1.00 per bale for supervising the work in addition to an extra amount for weighing the cotton.[15]

The contractor system proved to be especially popular with absentee farm owners. "With the growth of absentee ownership and mass production in Texas," reported the Texas Employment Service, "the contractor gained his place as an indispensable cog in the wheel of production."[16] The absentee landholders found that the contractor system was a vern convenient way of recruiting labor. This was particularly true

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[14] Texas State Employment Service, Annual Report of the Farm Placement Service, 1939 (Austin, Texas, 1940), 17.

[15] Texas State Employment Service, Origins and Problems of Texas Migratory Farm Labor (Austin, Texas, 1940), 55.

[16] Texas State Employment Service, Survey of Farm Placement in Texas, 1936-1937 (Austin, Texas, 1938), 83.

of the Corpus Christi area where many were absentee investors or their representatives could speak no Spanish, and therefore were glad to turn the problem of securing labor over to Mexican contractors.[17]

Labor contractors were also used extensively in the vegetable and fruit industries of South Texas. There the farmers often sold their crops in the field to a buyer who then employed a labor contractor to supply the necessary labor for harvesting the crop. The contractor received a flat rate per unit of measure for transporting the workers, overseeing the work, and hauling the crop to the loading platform or cannery.[18]

Though most of the labor contractors dealt fairly with the workers, there were always some who did not. Seldon Menefee, in questioning farm workers in the Crystal City area, found that many families were hostile toward the contract system. Workers complained that contractors often short-weighed the cotton and when there were grievances, the contractors and farmers tried to shift responsibility, making it difficult for the workers to gain satisfaction.[19] The

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[17] Ibid., 37-38.

[18] Texas State Employment Service, Texas Migratory Farm Labor, 55.

[19] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 33.

Texas Employment Service made the following observations relative to abuses in the 1930's of the contractor system:

> Often the contractors would contract large blocks of acreage and let it out to laborers on an acreage basis. Large growers were known to encourage their contractors to keep a surplus of labor on the property, allowing the workers to become so indebted they could not easily get away. Wages were very low in such cases, 75¢ per day being the prevailing wage. Cotton chopping was usually paid for on an acreage basis, so set that the average worker could not make more than 75¢ per day.
>
> Another not uncommon practice came to the attention of the Service. A so-called contractor would agree to furnish migratory labor to a grower on the understanding that the selection of the gin would be left to the contractor. The 'deal' between the contractor and the ginner then usually amounted to one dollar per able profit to the contractor.
>
> Furthermore, it was found that growers preferred outside contractors and laborers. When explanation for this preference was sought, Service representatives learned that local contractors are too exacting in the amounts they receive for hauling, and they pick up and move their gangs without giving warning. It was said, too, that local labor might become easily discouraged, whereas workers brought in from a distance were more helpless, at the mercy of the contractors as to wages and working conditions.[20]

Paul Taylor, in his survey of Mexican labor in Dimmit County in 1929, discovered both employers and workers were critical of the system. Workers were dissatisfied because contractors tended to bring in outside labor, while employers thought they were inclined to raise wages.[21] However, despite the criticism, the labor contractors served a useful purpose. They helped to organize the labor market by bringing workers

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[20] Texas State Employment Service, Texas Migratory Farm Labor, 45.

[21] Taylor, Mexican Labor in the U.S.: Dimmit County, 353.

and farmers together; they supplied transportation for many workers who lacked the means of transporting themselves; and they attended to many details which would otherwise normally have fallen upon the farmer.

In recruiting labor for the cotton fields, the contractor generally drew his crews from among the great numbers of underemployed and underpaid Mexican workers residing in the slum areas of South Texas towns. Ninety percent of the housing in the "Mexican towns" or "Mexiquitos" was substandard with the majority of dwellings having open-pit privies.[22] Many of the workers owned their own homes and returned to them each year after their work in the cotton fields was completed.

The basic reason for the Mexican families taking their children out of school, boarding up their homes, and making the cycle through Texas each year was that they could not earn enough working in the fields in their locality to sustain them throughout the year. This was due to the low wages paid farm laborers and the failure of the agricultural economy in the vicinity of their homes to provide year round employment.

Various studies have been made of the migratory workers of South Texas wherein it is clearly shown that the

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[22] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor (Washington: 1951), 145.

above factor was of the utmost importance in bringing about the annual migration of Mexican agricultural workers. In 1938 the Works Progress Administration sponsored a study of 300 Mexican workers living in Crystal City. The chief crop in the area is spinach; hence the majority of the Mexican families interviewed reported that they found employment in the spinach fields from late November or early December through the month of March. A number of the families supplemented their spinach earnings with other income derived from working as mechanics, clerks, or as domestics in Crystal City. The amount earned from employment in the fields during the four months of the spinach harvest was not sufficient to tide the families over until the season began the following winter. It was found, for example, that the average cash income of the Crystal City families from working in the spinach fields amounted to only $124 while almost one-half of the families earned less than $100 during the season. It was estimated that the individual laborer earned less than $50 for three or four months work, and at the close of the spinach season there was very little work available in the Crystal City area. Consequently, in order to find employment workers were forced to migrate elsewhere in search of jobs. A majority left to work in the sugar beet fields of other states. Some migrated to the onion fields where they were able to find employment from April to May, while others

chopped cotton in the Corpus Christi area until the cotton harvest got under way. During the summer and fall the Mexican families who remained in Texas picked cotton in various parts of the state.[23]

A study sponsored by the Children's Bureau in 1941 revealed that a lack of remunerative employment opportunities throughout the year was the main reason given by agricultural workers in Hidalgo County for leaving their homes to work in cotton and other crops outside the Valley. The peak period of employment in the Valley at that time came during the winter harvest of vegetables and citrus fruits. Even during periods when the demand for workers was great, the labor requirements were very uneven, varying from week to week and day to day as a result of marketing and weather conditions. The above study pointed out that:

> At the height of the vegetable harvest most workers averaged about 3 days work per week. On days when they had employment, they often were away from home from early morning until late at night, but much of this time was unremunerative. Often workers spent several hours waiting at the packing house while contractors received the orders of the day. Additional time was spent by them riding to the fields, moving from field to field, waiting at the end of the day to be taken home.[24]

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[23] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 13-17.

[24] Warburton, Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, 15.

During the busy period in the Valley when workers were able to find employment, they could still earn barely enough to subsist. For example, the median weekly earnings of the families studied was only $6.90 during the harvest period, while one-third earned less than $5.00.[25] Obviously, it would have been impossible for a family of five or six persons to save anything from such meager earnings which often failed to cover current expenses.

The need for seasonal labor in the Valley declined in the late spring and early summer months after the vegetables and citrus fruits had been harvested. Then, with the opening of cotton in July the demand for labor increased, only to drop again during the early fall months. The slack period in the fall was the result of mechanized preharvest operations in fruits and vegetables. A few families remained in the Valley during the fall slack period, finding some work in clearing cotton fields, helping with irrigation, and other odd jobs, but the majority left their homes to pick cotton in other parts of the state.[26]

Furthermore, a survey of one hundred migratory families conducted in Eagle Pass in 1950 indicated that the same factors that caused families to leave Hidalgo County and the

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 8, 12.

Crystal City area were responsible for the migration of the Eagle Pass families. The majority of the families found employment on the farms in the vicinity of Eagle Pass during the winter and spring months, and when employment was slack near their homes, they migrated elsewhere in search of work.[27]

The amount of employment available to the migratory families in South Texas varied from year to year, depending upon the condition of the crops and the marketing situation. The 1938 season was a bad one for the workers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the Corpus Christi area. There was a decline in the demand for labor around Corpus Christi that year because of the low prices offered for radishes; and, even though the crop was good, farmers preferred to leave it in the field. The same year at Edinburg the bean, squash, and tomato crops were destroyed by an early frost which resulted in a scarcity of jobs for farm workers in that locality. In addition, the low prices that were being paid for citrus fruits made many growers reluctant to harvest their fruit. The canning plants, starting later than usual, also used less labor that year.[28] More recently, a heavy freeze in the Valley in 1949 brought about a great decline in the amount of labor needed in the citrus industry, not only that

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[27] Wueste, "Education of Children of Migratory Parents of Eagle Pass," 11.

[28] Texas State Employment Service, Annual Report of the Farm Placement Service, 1938 (Austin, Texas: 1939), 32-33.

year but also subsequent years.[29] These and similar bad years gave the seasonal farm workers who made their homes in South Texas an additional incentive to migrate in order to find employment.

In early April or May when job opportunities dropped off after the vegetable harvest in South Texas, the Mexican farm workers began to make preparations to go forth into the cotton fields. A migratory existence entailed considerable hardships. Homes were boarded up and camping equipment was loaded on automobiles and trucks. The trucks used to transport the workers were usually of an open type constructed to carry produce instead of human beings, and frequently they carried as many as fifty to sixty workers, crowded in with bedding, food, and other necessary supplies.[30]

Upon arriving in a locality where labor was needed, the workers often were provided with substandard housing -- when provided with any at all. "A typical cotton picker's shack has one room, perhaps 10 by 16 feet in size. It may be divided in the center by a curtain. Often no furniture is provided; each family brings its own dishes and blankets and sleeps on the floor. One may accomodate 50 or more of

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[29] Eastin Nelson and Frederic Myers, Labor Requirements and Labor Resources in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Inter-American Education Occasional Papers VI (Austin, Texas: 1950), 9-10.

[30] Warburton, Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, 13.

both sexes."[31] At times families were not even fortunate enough to have such crude shelter as this. One family from Hidalgo County who traveled to the High Plains with a labor contractor in 1941 "reported that they and others in the crew were forced to camp by the roadside every night until their return in January. The father and the mother and their young children slept and ate in the open without shelter of any description, though it rained a great deal during the trip."[32] Once they reached a place where they were needed, workers usually were confronted with the problem of securing water and wood. The availability of these items varied from place to place. The Crystal City migrants interviewed in 1938 reported that water was furnished almost everywhere, and in North Texas wood was furnished as well.[33] In some localities, however, migrants had difficulty getting wood. One Works Progress Administration supervisor in the Corpus Christi area noted in 1940 that "wood is seldom given and the worker is expressly forbidden to cut down trees. He depends upon waste cotton stalks and other heat giving material which his children can pick for fuel."[34]

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[31] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 34.

[32] Warburton, Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, 13.

[33] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 32.

[34] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1894.

The life of the migratory worker was made harder and more insecure by inclement weather and unusual climatic conditions. For example, in August of 1942 a tropical hurricane swept through the Gulf Coast area, destroying the cotton crop and causing an estimated 30,000 cotton pickers to lose their jobs. Although some of the migrants moved on to the central and northern parts of the state where the cotton remained undamaged, many returned to their homes in the Valley, believing that all the cotton in the state had been destroyed.[35] In 1951 a severe drouth throughout most of the state ruined the cotton crop, which reduced the number of jobs available.[36]

Even when the weather was favorable and crops good, the earnings of migrants in cotton were far below those necessary for a minimum standard of living. In 1938 Crystal City families who worked in cotton averaged only $278 for the season. Figuring 3.7 workers per family, the annual earnings per worker amounted to approximately $75.[37] Only a few of the migratory families of Hidalgo County studied in 1941 by the Children's Bureau earned as much as $500 from work in

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[35] Joe R. Motheral, Cotton and Manpower, Texas High Plains, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 762 (College Station, Texas: 1953), 13-14.

[36] U. S. Employment Service, Labor Market Report for Texas Covering the Period from the 15th of August, 1942 to the 15th of September, 1942 (Mimeographed), 60.

[37] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 29.

cotton, while most families earned considerably less.[38] Therefore, earning little more than was necessary to eke out a living, these migrant families returned to South Texas at the end of the cotton harvest and sought employment again in the vegetable fields and citrus orchards.

In conclusion, the demand for seasonal labor in Texas was met by Mexican workers, residing in the southern part of the state, who, unable to find remunerative employment throughout the year in the vicinity of their homes, migrated to other areas in search of work. The winter months they spent in South Texas working in fruits and vegetables or any other kind of employment available, while in the summer and fall months they picked cotton as it matured in the various cotton regions of the state. In no one crop or area were the Mexican workers able to find employment for more than a few months of the year, and even then work was often limited by inclement weather or time was lost in moving from job to job. Under such conditions, therefore, migration became a way of life for a large segment of the Mexican population of Texas.

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[38] Warburton, Children of Agricultural Laborers in Hidalgo County, 16.

CHAPTER IV

OUT-OF-STATE MIGRATION

As the reservoir of cheap, mobile labor grew in Texas, seasonal farm employers in other states began tapping it to meet their own labor demands. With thousands of workers on the move, making the cycle through Texas each year, it was to be expected that large numbers of them would leave the state in response to promises of higher wages.

As early as 1912, the Salt River Egyptian Cotton Growers Association, an organization of Arizona cotton farmers, placed advertisements in Texas newspapers for cotton pickers. Later, with the great increase in cotton acreage that occurred in Arizona during World War I, labor agents were sent to El Paso and San Antonio to recruit Mexican laborers. In order to attract workers, special trains were run between Arizona and Texas with all expenses paid by the employer. The practice of recruiting Texas-Mexican labor for Arizona farms continued from 1912 until 1928 when unofficial restrictions on Mexican immigration, as well as the development of a new source of labor caused this method of recruitment to be discarded. Beginning in the late twenties

and continuing through the 1930's, the chief source of labor for Arizona farmers was Texas and Oklahoma migrants moving through that state on their way to California.[1]

In addition to the labor recruited in Texas for work in Arizona, large numbers of Mexican workers were sent by train to the Mississippi Delta in 1925 to work in the cotton fields. The recruitment of Texas-Mexican labor by Mississippi growers continued into the 1930's.[2]

The greatest competition for Texas-Mexican labor, however, came from the sugar beet industry. This industry developed in the Rocky Mountain and Midwestern states around the turn of the century. In the beginning, the recruitment of seasonal labor for the beet industry was done by the processors and not by the growers, as is the case in most agricultural industries.[3] The explanation for the predominant role played by the processors in the recruitment of labor for the sugar beet farmers lies in the close relationship between the agricultural and processing sides of the industry. Commenting on this relationship in 1925, the United States

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[1] Malcolm Brown and Orin Cassmore, Migratory Cotton Pickers in Arizona, Works Progress Administration (Washington, 1939), 64-67.

[2] Taylor, Monthly Labor Review, XLVI (March, 1938), 862-863.

[3] U. S. Congress, Senate, Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, U. S. Senate, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess., pursuant to S. Res. 266, Supplementary Hearings Part 2, May 15-22, 1940 (Washington, 1941), 444.

Tariff Commission noted: "The culture of sugar beets and the manufacture of sugar from them are so closely allied as to constitute virtually a single industry even thoug the two operations may not be carried on by the same persons and organizations."[4] Indeed, the very nature of sugar beets dictated the close connection between the two branches of the industry: for one thing, the bulkiness of sugar beets makes it necessary to have a processing plant near to where the beets are grown since it would be uneconomical to rrans-port them long distances. Secondly, sugar beets are highly perishable, which means that they had to be processed quickly to prevent spoilage. Hence, farmers needed a factory close by in order to make a profit from their crops, while pro-cessors required a large supply of beets to guarantee a good season of operation because the factory operated only during the beet season and remained idle the rest of the year, caus-ing overhead costs to be high. As a result of the inter de-pendence of the two branches, the industry became highly in-tegrated.[5] In 1931 when Paul Taylor made a study of the beet industry in northeastern Colorado, he found that one company, the Great Western Sugar Company, owned all thirteen factories in the area and contracted for all the sugar beets produced there; furthermore, the Great Western Sugar Company's

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[4] U. S. Tariff Commission, Costs of Producing Sugar Beets, Part 1, "Mighigan" (Washington: 1925), 3.

[5] Ibid.

influence extended to all aspects of the industry, including the financial and strictly agricultural sides. The Company financed the growers, purchased their crops, and instructed them as to the best methods of producing beets. Moreover, the Company recruited the hand labor for the growers beyond that which was available locally. After bringing the worker and grower together, the factory staff continued to assist in the handling and supervision of the laborers, and in labor disputes between the laborers and growers, the factory intervened to settle the differences. This example of the close relationship between the agricultural and manufacturing sides of the sugar beet industry with the processors assuming the responsibility for the recruitment of agricultural labor was characteristic of the industry as a whole.[6]

During the period from 1900 to 1920, the most important source of sugar beet labor was the European immigrants in the cities of the East, Midwest, and, to some extent, the Rocky Mountain states. The sugar companies sent agents into these cities in search of laborers for the beet fields. In order to attract workers, mass meetings were held and, in addition, advertisements (hand bills) were posted. Most of the recruiting efforts were aimed toward foreigners with large families who lived in the slums. The sugar companies

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[6] Paul S. Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States: Valley of the South Platte, Colorado, University of California Publications in Economics, VI, No. 2 (Berkeley, California: 1929), 115-116.

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of Michigan recruited much of its labor from among the Bulgarian, German-Russian, and Hungarian immigrants residing in the midwestern and eastern cities. Many of the families sent to the beet fields settled down after a time and became tenants and owners, while others lived in company houses and tried to find other employment when the beet season was over.[7] In Colorado, German-Russians from Nebraska and Belgians from Illinois were brought in by the sugar companies for beet work, and by 1909 permanent colonies of these workers had taken root in Colorado.[8]

Although a number of workers who lived in the cities returned each season to work in the beet fields, the sugar companies were forced to recruit some new labor each year. For two decades European immigrants provided an ample supply of labor for the sugar beet industry; but the disruption of European immigration by World War I and the restrictive quota laws of subsequent years caused this source of labor to become inadequate. As a result, the sugar companies of the West and Midwest turned to the cheap Mexican labor of the Southwest to meet their labor needs.

A few Mexican workers had been used very early in the

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[7] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Hearings before the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, House of Representatives, 77th Cong., 3rd Sess., pursuant to H. Res. 113, Part 19, Sept. 23-25, 1941 (Washington: 1941), 7867.

[8] Taylor, Mexican Labor in the U. S.: South Platte, 103.

beet industry. Around 1900 trainloads of Mexicans were brought into the Colorado beet fields, and by 1909 there were 2,600 Mexicans employed in the beet fields of that state.[9] The flow of Mexican labor into the beet fields were accelerated during World War I and for a few years afterward when restrictions on Mexican immigration were temporarily lifted. Sugar beet companies sent agents to Fort Worth, El Paso, and San Antonio to recruit Mexican workers.[10] In 1920 the Great Western Sugar Company was actively recruiting labor in all three of these cities. This company made use of previously established private employment agencies as well as their own employment offices. Of the labor recruited by the Great Western Company approximately ninety percent was family labor.[11]

Most of the Mexican laborers going to the beet fields in the early years went by rail. A labor agent for one of the sugar companies described the transporting of beet workers as follows:

> In moving a train of Mexican laborers a thousand miles, several operations are required besides paying the railroad company for the tickets. One or two

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[9] U. S. Immigration Commission, Abstracts of Reports, I, p. 687. In the same year there were two and one-half times as many German-Russian immigrants working in the Colorado beet fields as there were Mexicans.

[10] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 19, pp. 7868, 7870.

[11] Taylor, Mexican Labor in the U.S.: South Platte, 131-132.

> company agents were placed in charge of these trains as conductors. At each railway division point they check up the number of passengers with the new railroad conductor, and on the basis of their count, payment is made for transportation.
>
> Lunches of bread, meat, cheese, fruit, and coffee are furnished en route. Before the train leaves the shipping point a full supply of food is put on to last through Denver....
>
> The first duty of the company conductor naturally is to deliver all the labor he starts with. Whether that is an arduous task or not depends largely whether labor had been selected on the other end that wants to go through and go to work in good faith. The loss last season between shipping points and Denver was 2 percent of the number shipped.[12]

The recruitment and transportation of Mexican workers to the beet fields was continued during the 1920's, and by the latter part of that decade they had replaced European immigrants as the chief source of labor for the sugar beet industry. The increase in the use of Mexican labor is brought out in statistics compiled by the Tariff Commission. According to the Commission, Mexicans comprised fifty percent of the contract labor employed in the beet fields of Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota during 1926 as compared to thirty-four percent in 1922. In Nebraska, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana the percentage of Mexicans employed rose from sixteen in 1922 to forty-two in 1926.[13] Moreover, a large portion of these Mexican beet workers came from Texas.[14]

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[12] Ibid., 132.

[13] U. S. Tariff Commission, Costs of Producing Sugar Beets, Part 10, "United States" (Washington, 1928), 17.

[14] U. S. Congress, House, Tariff Readjustment - 1929, V, Hearings before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, 70th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, 1929), 3217.

As long as Texas-Mexican labor was supplemented by that of Mexican nationals, Texas farmers were not too disturbed by the flow of workers to other states. However, as restrictions were placed on Mexican immigration in the late 1920's, Texas farmers became alarmed over the loss of part of their labor supply. Typical of the attitude of Texas agricultural interests toward the invasion of their labor market by out-of-state employers was that expressed by one farmer in testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1926: "Whenever the beet growers of the various States of the Union come to south Texas for laborers to harvest their crops, they are taking them away from us, leaving us in an even worse condition than before, when they could find a supply of labor in eastern cities for their beet fields."[15]

In response to pressure from the agricultural interests, the Forty-first Texas Legislature in its first session passed a law in May, 1929 designed to restrict the flow of labor out of the state. The law required persons recruiting labor for out-of-state use to pay an extremely heavy occupation tax. At the request of a Michigan sugar company, however, a federal district court issued an injunction restraining state officials from enforcing the law on the grounds

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[15] U. S. Congress, House, Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico, Hearing before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, 69th Cong., 1st Sess., Jan. 28-Fe. 23, 1926 (Washington, 1926), 45.

that the tax was prohibitive.[16] In order to overcome this objection, the second session of the legislature passed another law which levied a more reasonable tax on agents recruiting labor in Texas. Under the latter law, known as the Emigrant Agency Law, persons who solicited labor to be employed outside the state were required to (1) file an application for a license, (2) pay annually a license fee of $10.00 and an occupational fee of $1,000, and (3) pay to the county in which the agent had an office or recruited a tax based upon the population of that country. The law also stipulated that emigrant agents comply with the provisions of the Employment Agency Law, which called for the purchase of a private employment license and posting of a $5,000 bond.[17]

Although the Emigrant Agency Law made it more costly to secure labor in Texas, employers from other states met the requirements and continued to recruit workers. By August 31, 1930 eight emigrant agency licenses had been issued and between July, 1929, the date the law went into effect, and August, 1930, these agencies had shipped 6,761 workers to other states, mostly for work on railroads.[18]

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[16] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eleventh Biennial Report, 1929-1930 (Austin, Texas, 1930), 45.

[17] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Laws of Texas Relating to Labor (Austin, Texas, 1939), 34-38; Civil Statutes of Texas (1929), Ch. 96, p. 203.

[18] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eleventh Biennial Report, 1929-1930, pp. 46-47.

Few emigrant agent licenses were issued during the 1930's. In 1932 there were four licensed emigrant agencies operating in the state,[19] and in 1938 there were only two. The following year, the number of licensed agencies rose to four and in 1940 six agencies acquired licenses.[20]

Almost all of the workers recruited by the emigrant agencies in the late 1930's were sent to the beet fields.[21] It was during this period, too, that the sugar beet growers assumed a greater responsibility for procuring the labor needed in their fields. In several states growers' associations were formed, which in turn set up committees to deal with the problem of seasonal labor. These committees put recruiting on a more systematic and efficient basis. Typical of the methods used by the committees were those employed by the Beet Growers' Employment Committee, Incorporated, an organization formed in 1938 by six Michigan beet growers associations. Rather than recruit new workers each season, this Committee worked out an arrangement whereby the industry could keep in contact with laborers who had previously been employed in beets. Those workers interested in returning to the beet fields the following season were asked to send

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[19] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Twelfth Biennial Report, 1931-1932, (Austin, Texas, 1932), 23.

[20] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Sixteenth Biennial Report, 1938-1940 (Austin, Texas, 1940), 30.

[21] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 11, pp. 4793-4794.

back cards from Texas noting their addresses. From the cards the Committee compiled a list of potential workers, and those considered unreliable were excluded from the list. Then, at the beginning of the beet season, the reliable families were sent identification cards which they were to present to licensed agents. Along with the identification cards instructions were sent outlining the procedure to be followed in applying for work.[22]

Beginning in 1939, the policy of giving workers physical examinations was begun, although it had been under consideration by health officials in Michigan as early as 1937 when it was discovered that a large proportion of tuberculosis patients in Michigan hospitals were Mexicans. With Michigan law requiring that all cases of tuberculosis be hospitalized at public expense and recognizing that most of the Mexicans in the state were coming from Texas, Michigan officials worked out a plan of examining all workers before they left Texas, whereby the Michigan beet industry contributed part of the funds necessary to put the plan into effect. Accordingly, after securing the approval of the Texas health authorities and the support of the United States Department of Health, examination quarters were set up in San Antonio and in April, 1939 the first examinations were given. All active cases of tuberculosis as well as all persons in the infectious

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[22] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 3, p. 1273.

stages of syphilis or gonorrhea were rejected.[23] Describing the examination process in San Antonio, Carey McWilliams wrote:

> The examination consists of a fluoroscopic examination of the chest; examination for gonorrhea and syphilis; and an examination for chancre and ureteral discharge .... After the men have been examined, the women and children of working age pass through the process. Since there are no women physicians on the staff and the examination is conducted in masse, the women are given a fluoroscopic test. As one of the physicians has observed, with delicacy and tact, 'most of the women are married so we assume there is no venereal infection among them.' Each worker who passes the medical examination is given a certificate which has his photograph attached.[24]

As a result of the examination in 1939, 101 persons were rejected out of the 4,271 workers examined -- 81 of the former had tuberculosis. In 1940 there were 157 workers out of 5,753 examined who were rejected, 121 of them with tuberculosis; and in 1941 of the 7,597 persons examined, 197 out of 201 disqualified were found to be tubercular.[25] These figures show that by examining workers before they left Texas, the State of Michigan saved the expense of taking care of many tubercular persons, in addition to assuring the beet growers of getting workers in good physical condition.

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[23] Ibid., 1317-1318.

[24] McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 261.

[25] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 19, p. 7778. Michigan's policy of giving workers a physical examination was discontinued in 1942.

Those workers who passed the physical examination then proceeded to the office of an agent to make final arrangements for employment in the beet fields. This included the signing of a contract with either an individual farmer or a growers association. The contract stipulated the acreage the person was to work, the way the work was to be done, and the amount of money to be paid per acre. Other provisions included the type of housing which would be furnished the worker and the credit that would be extended to him. The advancement of credit was very important since many families did not have the money necessary to make the long trip north.[26] The credit advanced was later deducted from their earnings.

Once the contract was signed, the worker had to solve the problem of transportation. During the early years of the sugar beet industry, the companies had transported their workers in trains, but after 1930 more and more laborers made the trip in automobiles and trucks.[27] In 1938 it was estimated that approximately one-half of the beet workers who lived in the Crystal City area made the trip to the beet fields in their own car or truck.[28] Those workers who did not have their own automobiles were transported to the beet

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[26] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1846.

[27] Ibid., 1847.

[28] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 21.

fields by truckers.

Transportation costs varied. In statements presented to the House Committee on Interstate Migration in 1940, workers reported paying from nine to fifteen dollars for the trip to the northern beet fields.[29] The Farm Security Administration estimated in 1941 that a one-way trip by train, truck or bus cost from ten to fifteen dollars and that a family of five could make the trip to the mid-western beet fields for approximately 150 dollars, not including the cost of food needed en route.[30] In 1950 a study of migratory families in Eagle Pass revealed that transportation charges to the beet fields averaged twenty to forty dollars per person.[31] In the same year Max Henderson, Executive Secretary of the Michigan Field Crops, Incorporated, estimated that it cost the Texas-Mexican from fifteen to seventeen dollars apiece to make the trip to Michigan by truck.[32]

The transporting of workers by trucks presented a deplorable situation. Between thirty-five and forty-five

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[29] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, pp. 1848-1849.

[30] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 23, p. 9255.

[31] Wueste, "Education of Children of Migratory Parents of Eagle Pass," 33.

[32] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Stenographic Report of Proceedings held at Saginaw, Michigan, September 11, 1950 (Mimeographed), 465.

men, women, and children were loaded on a single vehicle for the 1,600 mile trip to the northern beet fields. Anxious to make as many trips as possible before the opening of the beet season, the truckers tried to get the workers there as rapidly as possible. Therefore, very few stops were made during the long journey. The quick trips made it possible for some truckers to make as many as seven trips during the six weeks transportation period.[33]

Much light was thrown on the nature of the interstate migration in the 1930's by affidavits presented to the House Committee on Interstate Migration. Among the statements of Mexican workers was that of Miguel Alva, San Antonio, which stated in part: "In making trips to Lindwood, Michigan, not over two stops in 24 hours were made...required 3 days and nights to make trip. Never stopped for bowel evacuations unless passengers made so much noise he /driver/ had to stop ....[34] Salome Ravago, San Antonio, reported:

> The trip to Saginaw, Michigan required 5 days and 4 nights. The weather was cold and rain. No top on trucks, for seats; roads were bad, and truck had no brakes. Workers forced driver at point of gun to stop and buy brake fluid, they lending him the money with which to make purchase. After reaching Saginaw they were shifted to Seewin, Michigan, and finally unloaded at St. Louis, Michigan, where they were employed. This truck was double decked and had as passengers 35 adults and 10 children. Some of those on the top deck hung

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[33] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1847.

[34] Ibid., 1848.

their legs down around the necks of those below, causing several fights while en route.

The Michigan Sugar Company was fair in its dealings with workers, but truck drivers cheated them on every turn. No stops were made except for gas and oil. The wife of Adolfo Salamone was very ill en route; thought she was dying, but truck would not stop for medical attention.[35]

Little improvement was made in the interstate traffic of Texas workers either during or after World War II. Regarding the migration of Texas-Mexicans to Wisconsin in 1947, George W. Hill wrote:

> The trucks as they journey from Texas are jammed with as tight a human load as it is possible to get into them. Thirty to forty 'passengers' is not unusual. Once in the trucks it's a non-stop trip until the first unloading station is reached in Wisconsin -- 1,200 miles, thirty-eight to forty-eight hours of continuous riding, stopping like fugitives at an isolated filling station only when an empty gas tank or desperate nature protests. The troquero doesn't like to stop because some of his pay-load may drop out or perchance join up with another truck going elsewhere. Custom has instilled fear into the passengers; they are afraid to stop and be seen away from the truck. They may not have the proper 'identification;' they may lack the authorization to travel on a public highway. Yet, all, or most of all, are American citizens.[36]

Similar conditions prevailing in the migration of workers to Colorado in 1949 were reported:

> Interstate truck transportation is one of the most vicious aspects of the migrant labor situation.... The distressing discovery to the staff was that the

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[35] Ibid., 1849.

[36] George William Hill, Texas-Mexican Migratory Agricultural Workers in Wisconsin, Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Stencil Bulletin No. 6 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1948), 10.

> sight of the trucks had become so common in Colorado the public had apparently become immune to it. People crowded into trucks, in a manner a good stockman would not allow for cattle, did not seem to shock any passerby.[37]

Most of the beet workers in the northern states with almost no money. Therefore, of prime importance to the worker after reaching his destination was the securing of credit from either the beet company or the grower. Credit rarely was in the form of cash but usually consisted of orders on merchants for limited amounts of provisions. In a study made by the United States Children's Bureau in 1920, two-thirds of the families interviewed in the Michigan beet fields reported that they bought all of their supplies on credit.[38] In 1935 the Bureau found that the practice of extending credit to workers was common throughout all of the sugar beet regions. Indeed, seventy-eight percent of the families studied reported that they were living on store credit before the first wage payment was made.[39] In 1950 it was still a common practice for beet workers to receive advances from the sugar companies to cover transportation costs as well as to tide

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[37] Howard E. Thomas and Florence Taylor, Migrant Farm Labor in Colorado: A Study of Migratory Families (New York: 1951), 28.

[38] Child Labor and the Work of Mothers in the Beet Fields of Colorado and Michigan, U. S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 115 (Washington: 1923), 114.

[39] Elizabeth S. Johnson, Welfare of Families of Sugar Beet Laborers, U. S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 247 (Washington: 1939), 69.

them over until they received their first wages. Such sums generally amounted to $100 to $200.[40]

The housing furnished by the sugar beet industry was little better than that provided for the migrant workers in Texas. In Michigan the housing of the migrant laborers was traditionally the responsibility of the sugar companies. From the beginning of the beet industry, the housing was very primitive, consisting mostly of old farmhouses, barns, and portable shacks. In 1920 the Children's Bureau found that although some of the housing was adequate, a great part was badly in need of repair and unsuitable for habitation when the weather was cold. Furthermore, most of the houses were too small to accomodate the large families of the beet workers satisfactorily. It was reported that "many of the beet-field laborers were obliged to sleep with from 3 to 10 persons of both sexes in a small, ill-ventilated room, even when the combined kitchen and living room was also pressed into service as a bedroom."[41] In 1937 and 1938 a survey made by the Michigan Department of Labor and Industry showed little improvement in the housing conditions in the beet fields. Families averaging fifteen to eighteen persons were still found to be living in one or two room shacks with no

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[40] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, Saginaw, 465.

[41] Child Labor and the Work of Mothers in Beet Fields, 118.

sewage facilities and only surface wells available. Such housing conditions were more serious in Michigan than similar housing used by the migrants in Texas because the migrants spent six to seven months in Michigan with the latter part of their stay falling in October and November after winter had set in. Appreciable improvements were made after 1940, yet much of the housing furnished workers remained substandard. In 1950 housing in Michigan was described as follows:

> The chief objections to the housing...were overcrowding, lack of mattresses, leaky roofs, beds in kitchen next to the cooking stoves, inadequate and unsanitary latrines, eating equipment consisting of tin plates which could not be kept free of rust, water at times too far away and at others delivered by the farmers and then irregularly, pumps too close to latrines, structures in tumbledown condition and absence of light facilities. ...Some of the better housing ...were of concrete block construction with water, latrine, bedding and kitchen equipment.[42]

In Colorado the beet growers instead of the sugar companies have customarily provided housing for their labor. Here the housing was also far from satisfactory and resembled that found in the Michigan beet regions. A study made of migratory labor in Colorado in 1949 pointed out that "although there were a few instances of good camps and good houses, the 'average' living quarters were rural slums -- badly overcrowded, dirty, unsanitary, dilapidated, poorly equipped

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[42] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U. S. Senate, 82nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Part 2 (Washington, 1952), 1041.

makeshift quarters."[43]

After the workers had secured credit and shelter, they turned to the task of producing sugar beets. Beet work lasted from six to seven months. During that period there were three major operations, the first of which was the blocking and thinning process. This was done in May and June under great pressure, for the worker had to keep the young plants from becoming overcrowded. To prevent overcrowding he used a short-handled hoe to clear out small plants; then, with only his fingers, he thinned out clusters of beet plants until a strong one remained out of the bunch. The second operation, hoeing or weeding, was done during the summer months and consisted of keeping the soil loose and free of weeds. This work could be carried out at a more leisurely pace and was completed by early August. Then, the third and last operation was the pulling and topping of the beets, which usually occurred in October and early November and required three to five weeks of intensive work. In the latter operation, the beets, after being loosened by a mechanical lifter, were pulled up by hand; the tops were cut off with a long knife; and the roots were tossed in piles.

In the period between the end of hoeing and the beginning of the harvest season, the beet workers were forced

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[43] Thomas, Migrant Farm Labor in Colorado, 4.

to find employment elsewhere or remained idle. Many workers managed to find work in other crops that were grown in the vicinity of the beet fields. For instance, laborers in northwestern Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan found employment in harvesting such crops as tomatoes, cucumbers, and to some extent, fruit, small grain, and meadow crops.[44] In the Arkansas Valley in Colorado, beet workers were able to find supplemental employment in onions, beans, cantaloupes, and other crops.[45]

The hand-labor required to produce sugar beets was "considered one of the most arduous and disagreeable of all agricultural occupations."[46] Especially was this true of the thinning and topping processes which called for almost continuous kneeling or stooping over the rows of beets. Moreover, long hours were customary in the sugar beet industry. Commenting on the work day in 1920 during the thinning and blocking process, the Children's Bureau wrote:

> Work usually starts at 6:00 A.M., though 5:00 or 5:30 was sometimes given as the hour of beginning, and even 4:00 o'clock was reported. The laborers' families usually took the shortest possible time for meals, and worked till 6:00 or 7:00, and sometimes 8:00 P.M. or later. Even when meal time is excluded these hours

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[44] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 23, p. 9249.

[45] Johnson, Welfare of Families of Sugar Beet Laborers, 63.

[46] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 19, p. 7870.

indicate a long working day.[47]

A survey conducted in the Michigan and Ohio beet fields in 1939 also revealed extremely long working hours. According to the study, the "median hours reported for blocking and thinning was 10.8 for both children and adults; for hoeing it was 10.5 for both groups of workers; and for pulling and topping it was 9.3 for the children as compared with 10 for the adults."[48]

Compensation for the long hours and the back-breaking labor required of the sugar beet workers was extremely meager. For example, in 1935 the average beet worker earned little more than $129 dollars for six months labor,[49] while in 1939 the average income was approximately $152.[50] Yet, these low earnings were still more than the worker could earn in the cotton fields of Texas. In 1938 of the Mexican migratory families living in the Crystal City, those who worked in the beet fields earned an average of $400 during the season; whereas those families who stayed in Texas to pick cotton

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[47] Child Labor and the Work of Mothers in Beet Fields, 90.

[48] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 19, p. 7894.

[49] Johnson, Welfare of Families of Sugar Beet Laborers, 63.

[50] U. S. Congress, House, National Defense Migration, Pt. 19, p. 7889.

received only $278 dollars for their labor.[51] In later years the wage differential continued to encourage northward migration. In 1951 the average hourly earnings of hired farm labor (without board) was $.68 in Michigan and Wisconsin while in Texas it was $.58.[52] Thus, it was the difference in wages, more than any other factor, which brought about the annual migration of the Texas-Mexicans to the northern beet and vegetable fields.

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[51] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, xiv.

[52] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Pt. 1, p. 945.

CHAPTER V

ORGANIZING THE LABOR MARKET: 1909-1940

One of the first problems raised by the presence of migrant farm workers in Texas was the organization of the labor market. Cotton pickers, subject often to ill-founded rumors of employment, wandered aimlessly from place to place with no idea as to their destination. At the same time farmers searched the state for pickers. Some called for twice as many as they actually needed just to be sure to have enough workers available at the peak of the season. The almost complete lack of coordination between workers and farmers put both groups at the mercy of labor agents whose primary interest was personal financial gain. Recognizing this deplorable situation, both the State of Texas and the federal government undertook the task of recruiting and directing farm workers in the state, and by the late 1930's considerable progress had been made.

The state agency that first took an interest in this particular problem was the Bureau of Labor Statistics, originally organized in 1909. This agency, almost from its inception, realized the necessity for state action in creating

a more rational labor market whereby workers and employers could contact one another with the least amount of expense and lost time. Although private employment agencies had developed to meet the need of bringing the farmer and worker together, the Bureau discovered that the agencies were inadequate and abusive. Workers were often charged fees when employment was not furnished. In other instances employers and employment agencies entered into agreements whereby workers could find employment only through the agencies, with part of the fees paid to the agencies eventually going to the employers.[1] In order to protect workers from such unscrupulous practices, the Thirty-fourth Texas Legislature in 1915 authorized the Bureau of Labor Statistics to regulate the private employment agencies by requiring them to buy licenses and keep records of their activities. Even though the Bureau was without adequate power to curb the activities of the above agencies, it did bring to the attention of the public the tactics used by them in exploiting both workers and employers. In its sixth biennial report, for 1919-1920, the Bureau noted some practices of the agencies that were considered especially odious:

> Agencies have sprung up in nearly all parts of the State, and curbstone operators or man-catchers are operating in violation of the law. The demand for

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[1] Texas State Employment Service, Origins and Problems of Texas Migratory Farm Labor, 28.

> common or unskilled labor has been so great, and profits so large to the crooked man catchers, that they do not hesitate to engage in the business illegally.
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> These people make it a business to fleece everyone with whom they deal, and conditions have been such that it was made easy for them to do so. They are especially active along the Mexican border, and the ignorance of the Mexican immigrant enables them first to fleece the laborer of whatever money he may have when he lands on Texas soil.
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> It is a common practice with them to sell a farmer a bunch of Mexican laborers one day, and secretly send their agent -- usually a smooth talking Mexican -- and steal them away the next, when they are again sold to some other employer, only to have the same thing repeated time after time. Another common trick practiced is to ship a bunch of men to some employer at a distance, having collected transportation money from the employer, and ship with them as one of the laborers an agent who persuades them to desert before arrival at their destination, when they are sold to another employer.
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> This kind of graft is not confined to unlicensed mancatchers, but is practiced by many licensed agencies as well. The law governing private employment agencies is so vague and indefinite that it is practically impossible to secure sufficient evidence to convict. It is well known to the Department that this kind of graft or robbery is being practiced, but unwillingness on the part of county officials in many parts of the State to act, and the difficulty of keeping up with them with the small labor force in the Department makes it impossible to stop it.[2]

Although the private employment agencies were required by law to make reports to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the reports were not considered reliable. The Bureau charged that "many more workers got jobs through the agencies than were reported and that the fees charged were much higher

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[2] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Sixth Biennial Report, 1919-1920, p. 15-16.

than those given by the agencies."[3] Moreover, it found that the private agencies were too costly. The Bureau estimated that during 1918 and 1919 employers and laborers paid approximately $3,181,885 to private employment agents.[4] This figure was based on the assumption that there were more than four times as many unlicensed agents in the state as there were legal agents.

Still another criticism of the private employment agencies was that they failed to bring about an equitable distribution of labor where it was needed in the state. The Bureau declared:

> The private fee-charging agency is of no benefit in securing uniform distribution of labor. Each agency or man-catcher is acting independently of others, and does not hesitate to rob a district or locality of its labor even though an acute shortage may exist, and ship them into a district where a surplus of labor is on hand. While much has been said of the labor shortage for the past two years /1919 and 1920/, the greatest loss has resulted from an unequal distribution, and not from any real shortage, if some way had been provided for keeping the idle labor in touch with the job.[5]

Concerned with the practices indulged in by the private agencies, the Commissioner of Labor, as early as 1916, recommended that the state should take a more active part in organizing the labor market. He wrote:

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[3] Ibid., 16-17.

[4] Ibid., 19.

[5] Ibid.

> We have made a study of the needs of people patronizing employment agencies, and have reached the conclusion that the State would make no mistake if it established at least five free employment agencies. During the harvest seasons these agencies should be located in whatever section of the State that might be of the greatest advantage to both the farmers and applicants for employment. Thousands of dollars per year would be saved the farmers and other employers and labor protected against impositions. Unemployed labor congests unless intelligently directed. Through a system of State employment agencies communication could be established between labor centers and the unemployed directed to the best advantage.[6]

The same year in which the above recommendation was made, the Bureau got its first experience in directing the migrant labor force of the state. A drouth in 1916 in Brooks and surrounding counties in northwest Texas ruined the crops, causing great hardship in the area; the governor was asked to provide relief for the drouth-stricken farmers. Governor Ferguson turned the problem over to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which began to consider means of finding employment for the farmers in order to tide them through the season. Fortunately, the drouth was confined to only a few counties in the state, and there was opportunity for employment on farms in other parts of Texas. The Bureau enlisted the support of newspapers, legal employment agencies, and the railroads in finding work for the drouth-stricken farmers with the result that temporary jobs were found for many of them. Acknowledging the service that the Bureau of Labor

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[6] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Fourth Biennial Report, 1931-1932 (Austin, Texas, 1932), 26.

Statistics had rendered, the Thirty-fifth Texas Legislature, in 1917, appropriated $1,100 to enable the Bureau to hire special field representatives to continue the work of distributing farm labor.[7]

With this feeble beginning the Bureau continued its efforts to bring about the free direction of seasonal farm workers. In 1920 the Commissioner of Labor recommended that the private employment agencies be abolished and that the charging of fees by individuals or corporations for furnishing employment be made illegal. In place of private employment agencies, the Commissioner proposed that free employment bureaus be established in the areas of the state where labor was needed. According to his plan, the state was to be divided into employment districts and the bureau within each district was "to keep in close touch with labor conditions in the district" and make daily reports to a central labor clearing house to be set up in Austin. The purpose of the proposed system would be to "enable the Department /Bureau of Labor Statistics/ to maintain the equilibrium in the labor supply, and prevent the useless waste in lost time by bringing the laborer in touch with the job as speedily as possible."[8]

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[7] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Twelfth Biennial Report, 1931-1932, p. 26.

[8] Ibid.

Three years later in 1923 the Bureau took steps to organize the labor market along lines similar to those above. Free employment agencies were set up in a number of large cities in various parts of the state under the direction of regular employees of the Bureau. The first of these offices was located in San Antonio in a building furnished by the city. Other offices were opened in Waco, Fort Worth, Dallas, Amarillo, and El Paso and were maintained during those periods when the demand for farm workers was the greatest. The Bureau was assisted by various commercial and farm organizations in its direction of the farm labor force. It operated in the spring, summer, and fall months of 1924. Workers were recruited in the spring for clearing and grubbing land and chopping cotton; and, as the cotton began to open in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, workers were recruited for cotton picking in that area. When the demand for pickers began to decline in the Valley, workers were directed to the central and northern parts of the state as picking jobs became available.[9]

In 1925 the Bureau of Labor Statistics was faced with a problem similar to the one that it had experienced in 1916. A drouth in the central cotton region had ruined the crop, and thousands of workers who normally would have found

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[9] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eighth Biennial Report, 1923-1924 (Austin, Texas, 1924), 10-11.

employment in the area were without jobs. The free employment agencies began directing these workers to jobs in other parts of the state. Austin was made the concentration point in the drouth-stricken area, and from there workers were sent where they were needed. The whole working force on many farms was moved out of the district to pick cotton elsewhere.[10] Some of the workers were sent as far as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas where work was available.[11]

By 1927 a more systematic method of operation had been developed by the Bureau. At the beginning of the season, field representatives were sent into the large cotton growing regions of the state to estimate the number of workers that would be needed to harvest the cotton crop. Estimates were made upon information secured from farmers, county agents, local chambers of commerce, and other interested groups. Thus, the Bureau was able to get some idea of the employment opportunities available throughout the state during the season and to direct laborers accordingly. The Bureau also sent representatives into areas in which cotton picking was well under way in order to direct the farm employees to other sections as soon as the demand for labor

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[10] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Ninth Biennial Report, 1925-1926 (Austin, Texas, 1926), 11-12.

[11] Ibid., 9.

declined in the former areas.[12]

Notwithstanding the valuable service the Bureau of Labor Statistics had rendered to both workers and farmers by maintaining free employment agencies, the decision was made in 1928 to discontinue its operation. This change in policy resulted from the realization by the Bureau that the free employment bureaus were duplicating, to some extent, the work that was being done by the Farm Labor Division of the United States Employment Service, which had offices in a number of cities where the state employment offices were located. "It was decided," reported the Bureau in 1928, "that more economical and practical results could be secured by closing the several State offices and undertaking the work of farm distribution with the Federal Government."[13]

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[12] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Tenth Biennial Report, 1927-1928 (Austin, Texas, 1928), p. 28.

[13] Ibid. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, however, continued its efforts to regulate the activities of private employment agencies. Under a law passed by the Thirty-eighth Texas Legislature in 1923, the Bureau had been given more authority in supervising the agencies than it had previously had. Accordingly, employment agencies were required to purchase a license costing $150 for each county in which an employment office was operated. Each agency also had to post a $5,000 bond. In addition, the private agencies were forbidden to engage in false advertising or to charge a fee unless employment was actually furnished (see Private Employment Agency Law of Texas, issued by the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Austin, Texas [n.d.]). The money paid by the agencies for licenses was used by the Bureau for enforcing the law and in financing its work in farm labor distribution (see Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Twelfth Biennial Report, 1931-1932, p. 22). Though the Bureau, as authorized by the law, managed to check some of the objectionable practices of the private agencies, it was unable to eliminate all of them.

The federal Farm Placement Service had been in operation since 1918. Organized as a division of the United States Employment Service under the Department of Labor, the Farm Placement Service was one of the few divisions of the Employment Service that was not abolished at the end of World War I.[14] The primary purpose of the Service during its first few years of existence was to assist in the recruitment and distribution of workers in the wheat harvest. The central office was located at Kansas City, Missouri, with branch offices in several other states.[15] The first office to be opened in Texas was at Fort Worth in 1919 during which year it was active for a period of forty-five days recruiting labor for the Texas wheat harvest. The office again functioned during the wheat harvest in 1920 and 1921. Subsequently, the Fort Worth office also helped in recruiting labor for cotton picking as well as for the wheat harvest.[16] The effort on the part of the Farm Placement Service to recruit cotton pickers won the enthusiastic approval of Texas

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[14] Darrell H. Smith, The United States Employment Service, Institute for Government Research, Service Monograph of the United States Government No. 28 (Baltimore, 1923), p. 34.

[15] Ruth M. Kellogg, The United States Employment Service (Chicago, 1933), p. 56.

[16] William J. Rogers, "A Study of the Work of the Fort Worth Branch of the Farm Labor Division of the United States Employment Service" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of Economics, Texas Christian University, 1930), pp. 26-28.

cotton growers; according to the assistant manager of the West Texas Chamber of Commerce, "the work performed by the temporary office of the farm labor bureau at Fort Worth saved the cotton growers of Texas $1,000,000 last year." On the other hand, the cost of maintaining the state office that year was less than $1,500.[17]

In 1923 temporary offices were maintained in San Antonio, Dallas, Waco, Amarillo, Wichita Falls, Plainview, Waxahachie, and Corpus Christi, while the Fort Worth office was designated a permanent one.[18] The Farm Placement Service continued to expand its activities in Texas and by 1925 offices were operating in Brownsville, Bowie, Greenville, Houston, Longview, Lubbock, Stamford, and Wills Point, in addition to most of those previously mentioned.[19]

Although the Placement Service gave some assistance in recruiting workers for fruit and vegetable growers of South Texas, its major concern had since become that of directing the labor force during the cotton harvest. Texas was the chief cotton growing state in the nation, and the job of directing harvest labor was developed "to a higher

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[17] U. S. Dept. of Labor, Eleventh Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1923 (Washington, 1923), p. 37.

[18] U. S. Employment Service, Report of the Farm Labor Bureau of the U. S. Employment Service, 1923 (Washington: 1924), p. 1, 3.

[19] U. S. Employment Service, Report of the Farm Labor Division, U. S. Employment Service, 1925 (Washington, 1926), p. 2.

degree of efficiency than in any of the other cotton-growing States."[20] The San Antonio office became the most important point for directing workers during the cotton harvest since it was located near the center of the cotton growing region and was the place of concentration for a great number of the immigrants coming into Texas from Mexico.[21]

The procedure followed by the Farm Placement Service in handling the recruitment and distribution of cotton pickers was essentially the same as that of the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics in the operation of its free employment agencies. One of the first things that the Farm Placement Service did was to determine the labor requirements of the Texas cotton crop at the beginning of each season. Therefore, representatives were sent into all sections of the state to make surveys of the possible labor needs. In addition, information was collected as to the type of workers that the farmers wanted and the nature of the available housing.[22] After securing such information, efforts were made to pass it on to the workers. Posters advertising the number of pickers needed in the different areas were placed

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[20] "Public Employment Services," Monthly Labor Review XXXII (January, 1931), p. 27.

[21] Rogers, "Fort Worth Branch of the Farm Labor Division," 32.

[22] U. S. Employment Service, Summary of Activities of the Farm Labor Division, United States Employment Service, 1929 (Washington, 1930), p. 1.

in post offices, railroad stations, and other conspicuous places.[23] The Mexican consul in San Antonio gave valuable assistance by inducing Spanish-language newspapers to carry stories on the work of the Farm Placement Service and by urging Mexican workers to secure information of job opportunities from its offices.[24]

The Farm Placement Service received the cooperation of many persons and organizations in its efforts to organize the farm labor force in Texas, among which were local chambers of commerce, gin operators, banks, county agents, and farmers. In a number of cities the chambers of commerce would furnish office space and telephone service without charge, while in a few towns automobiles were provided for the Service agents to carry out their work.[25] In 1929 more than one thousand cotton ginners sent out reports at two weeks intervals on the condition of the crop in their respective sections of the state.[26] With such cooperation, as well as that of the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics which assigned five or more agents to work under the supervision of the federal agency,

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[23] U. S. Dept. of Labor, Eighteenth Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1930 (Washington, 1930), p. 56.

[24] Rogers, "Fort Worth Branch of the Farm Labor Division," 44.

[25] Ibid.

[26] U. S. Employment Service, Activities of the Farm Labor Division, 1929, p. 2.

the Farm Placement Service made much progress in bringing order to the migrant farm labor force in the state. Whereas, before the establishment of a placement service workers often were forced to rely upon unfounded rumors or the distorted reports of newspapers in seeking employment, after the formation of the Farm Placement Service, there was a more reliable source of information to turn to. The Service saved the workers much time in moving from job to job and considerable money by the elimination of employment fees. The farmers likewise profited in time and money by the operation of this federal agency.[27]

The magnitude of the achievements of the Farm Placement Service in Texas was made clear in the 1930 report of its director. In that year 369,000 cotton pickers were provided employment in Texas; also, 13,000 cotton choppers and 26,800 fruit and vegetable workers were placed. Furthermore, the cost of this service was relatively small. In 1930 the total operational expenses of the Farm Placement Service throughout the United States were $92,500. Considering that the total number of placements exceeded 700,000, the per capita cost for placement was only thirteen cents.[28]

Although much was accomplished during the 1920's by

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[27] Rogers, "Fort Worth Branch of the Farm Labor Division," 84-85, 101.

[28] Ibid., table preceding page 25.

the Farm Placement Division in bringing about a more rational distribution of the farm labor force in Texas, the greatest advances came after 1935 when the Texas Employment Service was organized and given the responsibility for the recruitment and distribution of farm labor. Federal operation of farm placement offices was discontinued in 1933 when Congress passed the Wagner-Payser Act providing for the reorganization of the United States Employment Service. Under this act the various states were given the responsibility for operating free employment offices, with the federal government matching state and local funds.[29] A national office known as the Farm Placement Service was set up to coordinate the activities of the farm labor divisions of the state employment services "so that collectively they should represent a unified farm labor service for the whole country."[30] The national office sent federal farm placement supervisors to states requiring help in solving their farm labor problems. These supervisors were responsible to both the director of the federal Farm Placement Service and the director of the state

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[29] U. S. Statutes at Large, XLVIII, Part I, pp. 114-115 (1933).

[30] Frank W. Persons, "A Farm Placement Service for Migratory Farm Workers," Employment Service News (August, 1938), p. 9.

employment offices to which they were assigned.[31]

The Texas State Employment Service was created by the Forty-fourth State Legislature in response to a special message from Governor James V. Allred. Ultimately, $36,000 was appropriated, and on September 1, 1935 the Service began operations.[32]

During the first year, 1935, local offices were established in various parts of Texas and began collecting information pertaining to their respective areas -- data on crops, crop outlooks, labor needs, peak seasons, and farmer expectations and attitudes. The following year the Texas Employment Service made a more extensive survey of all parts of the state in order to gain additional information on the farm labor situation. This information was analyzed and used to formulate a policy for farm placement.[33] One of the first policies to be established was that no labor would be sent into an area when an ample local supply was available. Therefore, each request for labor was carefully checked by the Employment Service before it directed additional workers into an area.

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[31] Raymond C. Atkinson, Louise Ordencrantz and Ben Deming, Public Employment Service in the United States (Chicago, 1940), p. 424.

[32] Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, Fourteenth Biennial Report, 1935-1936 (Austin, Texas, 1937), p. 45.

[33] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, pp. 1815-1817.

The employment Service had great difficulty in carrying out its policy of restricting outside labor due to the longstanding practice on the part of many farmers to call for more labor than was actually needed during the harvest period. For instance, in 1936 the San Antonio office received a call from a contractor at La Pryor, 130 miles from San Antonio, urgently requesting one hundred spinach cutters. When the Employment Service investigated the request, it found that there were hundreds of unemployed spinach cutters only a few miles away in Crystal City and Carrizo Springs.[34] Such calls were by no means rare. The same year a call came from the Lower Rio Grande Valley asking for two thousand cotton pickers. Upon investigating this request, the Employment Service discovered a real need for only eighty-five pickers.[35]

Despite these false alarms, in 1936 the Employment Service gained experience for the first time in directing large numbers of migrant farm workers. Following is an example of how the Service operated in the Corpus Christi area:

> According to plan, the Service employees in several counties of the district reported daily to the Farm Placement Supervisor who was stationed at Alice, in Jim Wells County, strategic point through which the main streams of migratory labor must flow from the Lower

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[34] Ibid., 1817.

[35] Texas State Employment Service, Survey of Farm Placement, 1936-1937, p. 45.

> Valley, Laredo, Eagle Pass enroute to the /Corpus Christi/ cotton picking section.
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> On the basis of these reports regarding bona fide openings and conditions, the supervisor directed the movement of workers to localities where labor was needed. As the workers were intercepted, they were given referral cards for presentation at an employment office.... The card carried the name of the group leader or the family head and the number of workers in the group.[36]

In 1937 the Employment Service expanded its activities and an effort was made to place farm workers in the fruit and vegetable industries in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the Winter Garden areas. In January and February 1,724 placements were made in the Winter Garden area, and in March citrus fruit growers in the Rio Grande Valley were supplied with 1,947 workers. Other placements during the year included 10,000 workers in onion harvesting and cotton chopping in the Corpus Christi region during April and May. All in all the total number of placements for the year extended those of the previous year by 344 percent.[37]

By 1938 the Texas Employment Service had worked out a relatively effective method for directing the migratory farm labor force of the state. Several months before the beginning of the cotton picking season in each area a survey was made and pertinent data on crop acreage, yield, and labor supply was gathered and filed so that it would be

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[36] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1818.

[37] Texas State Employment Service, Origins and Problems of Texas Migratory Farm Labor, 58, 63.

easily accessible. After the cotton picking season opened, employees of the Employment Service were stationed at strategic points along the migratory routes to direct workers to available jobs.[38] Although year-round planning was attempted by the Employment Service, most of its work was carried out on a day-to-day basis. "Labor supply and demand and crop conditions," reported the Employment Service in 1941, "will change overnight. On some days there may be surpluses; on other days there may be shortages; on certain days the crop may look fine and due to weather conditions over which we have no control they become almost a complete failure."[39]

As the Texas Employment Service became more efficient, more and more farmers and farm workers took advantage of its services. During 1939 it placed 550,047 farm laborers -- an increase of thirty percent over the previous year.[40] Thus, even though much work still remained to be done in organizing the agricultural labor market more effectively, considerable progress had been made in the twenty-two years since the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics first made an effort to bring some form of organization to the migrant farm labor force of the state.

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[38] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, pp. 1825-1826.

[39] Texas Employment Service, Supplement to Origins and Problems of Texas Migratory Farm Labor (Austin, Texas, 1941), p. 81.

[40] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1826.

CHAPTER VI

THE MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE 1930's

The economic depression of the 1930's greatly aggravated the precarious existence of the migrant farm laborers. Although living conditions had always been bad, additional suffering resulted from the sharp decline in farm wages and farm employment available during these years. Three main factors contributed to the situation. First, there was a great decline in farm income during the ten years from 1929 to 1940 which brought about correspondingly lower farm wages. This was especially true in the early years of the depression. For example, between 1929 and 1932 the index of prices for farm products (1926=100) dropped from 104.9 to 48.2. Moreover, the prices that farmers paid for non-agricultural goods did not drop at the same rate. Indeed, while the index prices of farm products fell 56.7 points, the index prices of non-farm products dropped only 25 points.[1] In addition, many of the fixed costs of the farmers, such as taxes and

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[1] Handbook of Labor Statistics, I, U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin No. 694 (Washington, 1942), 717, 733.

interest rates, remained almost constant.[2] This adverse economic situation in which the farmer found himself affected the wages he was able to pay his hired labor. Texas farmers who had been paying cotton pickers $1.11 per hundred pounds of seed cotton in 1929 paid an average of $.60 per hundred in 1934 and 1935.[3] Meanwhile, farm wage rates fell from $1.95 per day (without board) in July, 1929 to $1.20 in 1935.[4]

The second factor which affected the migrants in the 1930's was a decrease in the demand for hired farm labor. The drop in farm prices caused farmers to conserve their dwindling cash resources; therefore, they dispensed with the services of hired laborers and did their own work in so far as possible. As a result, the farm labor demand was only fifty-two percent of normal in 1932.[5] Also contributing to the decrease in farm jobs available was a sharp drop in the production of cotton in the mid-thirties. In 1934 the amount of cotton produced in Texas was approximately half that

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[2] Farm Tenancy, Report of the President's Committee on National Resources (Washington, 1937), p. 43.

[3] U. S. National Youth Administration of Texas, Cotton Growing in Texas (Austin, Texas, 1939), p. 35.

[4] Motheral, Recent Trends in Land Tenure in Texas, 15; "Farm Wage and Labor Situation on July 1, 1935," Monthly Labor Review, XLI (September, 1935), p. 690.

[5] Motheral, Recent Trends in Land Tenure in Texas, 15.

produced in 1933 (see Table 1) due to the drouth and the reduction of cotton acreage under the Agricultural Adjustment Administration program.[6]

The third major factor adversely affecting migratory farm labor in Texas was the large number of persons who poured into the migrant stream during the depression years. One reason for the increase in migratory workers was the reduced rate of movement of the rural population into industry. "Whereas the normal trend of population is toward a progressively greater absorption of workers into industrial employment, the process was reversed during the early 30's and agriculture shouldered the excess manpower of which industry had no need."[7] Further reversing the trend, many of the unemployed industrial workers left the cities to seek work in agriculture. Added to these were thousands of tenant farmers who had been displaced by the AAA program and mechanization, plus many refugees from the drouth-stricken areas.

Between 1930 and 1940 the number of farm tenants in Texas dropped from 30k,660 to 204,462 -- a loss of 97,198 operators.[8] The AAA contributed to the displacement of many tenants through its crop control program which reduced the amount of acreage in cultivation. In a statement submitted to a Congressional committee in 1940 Mrs. Val Keating,

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[6] Ibid., 8.

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] U. S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Agriculture: Texas, I, p. 4.

Associate Director of the Division of Employment, Works Progress Administration at San Antonio, pointed out:

> The Work Projects Administration social workers state that the displacement of farmers because of the crop control programs varies over the State from negligible in the east Texas pine woods country to 'an average of two out of five sharecroppers and tenants will be displaced' in west Texas. In Central Texas they estimate that '25 percent of the tenants and sharecroppers will be forced to leave the farm if cotton acreage is not increased.' Another from the same section of the State says that of the total referrals...38 percent from Collin County, 43 percent from Cooke County, and 30 percent from Denton County resulted from the crop-control program.[9]

Many of the displaced tenants were forced off the land by the rapid mechanization of agriculture during the 1930's. The greatest shifts in the rate of farm tenancy occurred in the larger agricultural regions of the state where tractors were widely used, namely, the High Plains, the Rolling Plains, the Black Waxy Prairie, the Corpus Christi area, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley.[10] Mechanized methods of farming greatly increased the amount of acreage that could be farmed per operator; hence, the first use of larger power equipment began the trend toward consolidation of smaller farms into larger units with fewer operators. In 1937 Paul Taylor made the following observation of the effects of mechanization on the tenant system in the Black Waxy

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[9] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1886.

[10] Motheral, Recent Trends in Land Tenure in Texas, 16.

Prairie: "A cotton farm of 2,500 acres in Ellis County, with abandoned tenant houses, 3 years ago had 24 tenants of whom 10 white and 1 colored were cultivating on halves (croppers). In 1937 there were 6 tenants, all of whom were white, farming on thirds and fourths, and no croppers."[11] The following year Horace Hamilton noted:

> The displacement of from 3 to 5 families by one tractor is not uncommon. One case was reported where 9 families were displaced by 1 tractor. Assuming that 1 tractor will displace 1 family only, more than 60,000 farm families have been displaced in Texas since 1930. Also, since the number of tractors on Texas farms increased about 50,000 in a 3 year period before April 1, 1938, it may be estimated that more than 10,000 families have been displaced annually from Texas farms since 1935.[12]

In more prosperous times these displaced farm families could have been absorbed by industry, but during the 1930's with thousands of industrial workers unemployed, there was little opportunity for employment in that area of the economy. Consequently, these displaced tenants remained in agriculture to swell the ranks of the migratory farm labor force. Thus, the drop in wages and the increased competition for jobs made the lot of the migratory farm worker even worse during the 1930's than it previously had been and emphasized the need for state and federal action in alleviating the poor conditions prevailing among this segment of the population.

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[11] Taylor, Monthly Labor Review, XLVI (April, 1938), p. 855.

[12] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1954.

Conspicuous during these ten years was the great number of migrant families who were destitute and in need of public assistance. Regardless of their plight, however, very little was done by either the state or federal governments in the way of relief for these people. The relief facilities of the federal government were not accessible to the great majority of the migrants, for in order to qualify for surplus commodities and clothing distributed by the Works Progress Administration, a person was required to have lived in a respective state for at least one year and in the county where application for relief was made for six months.[13] Since the migrants in their search for work rarely stayed in one place for any length of time, few could meet these residence requirements; nor could the workers turn to the state government for help, for it was forbidden by the Texas Constitution to establish a state-wide system of relief.[14] Hence, the full burden of providing relief for migratory laborers fell upon the local communities -- a task that few of them had the desire or the facilities to undertake.

In a report presented in 1940 to the House Committee on Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, officials of the Works Progress Administration testified to the inadequacy

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[13] Ibid., 1884.

[14] Ibid., 1919.

of local relief in all parts of Texas. From the Coastal Plains area a social worker for the W. P. A. wrote: "Very rarely can these people afford medical attention. In my experience and from the stories I have heard from workers, free county-health service is not available."[15] Another social worker in the Waco area pointed out that "if there is illness when the workers are camped near Waco, they may go to the city clinic.../which/ is reluctant to receive any except emergency cases. Should treatment be given for other than extreme cases, migratory workers might be tempted to become residents of Waco."[16] Other W. P. A. workers reported that in most communities in the Fort Worth area migrants who became stranded were given a small amount of food and gasoline to get them out of town or to their destination. Describing the situation in Parker County, a social worker wrote that "the main object of the city officials is to get /the migrants/ out as soon as possible. The chief of police gives them 3 gallons of gasoline, a few groceries, which consist of lunch meat and bread, and when there are children, milk and cake."[17] This relief was not financed by the city, but by a charity organization to which the businessmen of the community contributed, and the distribution of the funds was

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[15] Ibid., 1894.

[16] Ibid., 1900.

[17] Ibid., 1908.

left to the discretion of the chief of police. Obviously, from these sample reports, it is clear that the migratory farm workers received no adequate relief from local authorities.

Another social problem that became more critical during the depression years was the lack of housing for the migrants in various sections of the state. Although housing had always been poor and inadequate, the great increase in the number of migrants at that time made matters worse. Testifying before a senate subcommittee in 1940, William C. Holley of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics said:

> The streams of migrants moving annually from one part of the State to another, following crop-harvesting seasons, are usually thrown upon their own resources for living accomodations, and it is not uncommon to see truck after truck parked along the highways at dusk with their occupants cooking by a campfire and preparing to sleep in the open on the roadside or in the nearby fields.[18]

Conditions were even worse when hundreds of workers moved simultaneously into a town. For example, in October, 1935, prior to the opening of the cotton picking season on the High Plains, a large number of migrant families converged on Lubbock where they found neither housing nor sanitary facilities available. The results were subsequently described by the Texas Employment Service:

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[18] U. S. Congress, Senate, Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, U. S. Senate, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess., pursuant to S. Res. 266, Supplementary Hearings Part I, May 2-14, 1940 (Washington, 1941), p. 279.

> About the time that the great mass reached Lubbock, a cold rain set in. There were hundreds of Mexican families with no means of shelter, camping in open spaces. The situation grew more and more serious as sickness developed, especially among small children. There was no available aid for them from public services, as they were ineligible for relief, and most growers would do nothing for them as they could not go to work until the rain was over.[19]

In order to prevent such crises from recurring, the Texas Employment Service began encouraging those communities that used seasonal labor to provide housing and sanitary facilities for migrants.[20] A few communities responded by establishing work assembly camps. County and city officials in Robstown, Sinton, and El Campo set up camps containing running water and sanitary toilets, whle in northwest Texas "concentration lots" or camping grounds were provided for migrants by the communities of Lamesa, Levelland, Lubbock, and Plainview.[21] In addition to making the migrant's life more comfortable, the camps also benefited the communities which set them up. Whereas workers had a tendency to leave an area before the end of the harvest season when housing was poor; better living conditions had a settling effect on the workers, inducing them to stay in an area until the crops

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[19] Texas State Employment Service, Annual Report, 1936-1937 (Austin, Texas, 1937), p. 40.

[20] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1824.

[21] Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas, 34.

were harvested. The concentration of workers at one point also made it easier for workers and farmers to contact one another.[22]

Even though the work done by the local communities toward providing shelter was a step in the right direction, the greatest progress was made by the United States Farm Security Administration through its migratory labor camp program. This program had its inception in California where an effort was made to provide housing facilities for the stream of migrants entering that state. Later it was expanded to take care of migrants in other sections of the country. In 1938 the Farm Security Administration, with the cooperation of the Texas Employment Service, made a survey of the migrant situation in Texas, and plans were laid for the development of migratory labor camps in various sections of the state.[23] In subsequent years the plans were carried out, and by 1941 camps had been established at Raymondville, Robstown, Sinton, Weslaco, Harlingen, McAllen, Crystal City, Princeton, and Lamesa. These camps provided housing facilities for 1,119 families at an initial cost of $204,901.54 to the federal government.[24]

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[22] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1824.

[23] Ibid., 1825.

[24] U. S. Farm Security Administration, Report of the Administrator, 1941 (Washington, 1942), p. 39.

In the establishment of labor camps the Farm Security Administration did not try to furnish good housing; instead, it concentrated on "offering the barest minimum of decent living facilities."[25] As a result most of the facilities were crude, though they were much better than those to which the migrants previously had been accustomed. Some camps had only rows of wooden platforms over which the workers pitched their tents or one-room shelters constructed of wood or metal.[26] In most locations in the southern part of the state better housing was provided in the form of small cottages or apartments known as "labor homes" located on the outskirts of the labor camps. These could be rented for $5.00 to $8.00 per month. In addition, persons occupying these "labor homes" were given small plots of land for a garden. The purpose of the more substantial houses was to provide homes for workers who were able to find employment for long periods in the locality of the camp.[27] The "labor homes," shelters and tent platforms were centered around "comfort stations" which housed the toilets, showers, and laundry facilities. Each camp also had a community hall which was used for

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[25] U. S. Farm Security Administration, Migrant Farm Labor: the Problem and Some Efforts to Meet It (Washington, 1940), p. 8.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 11.

recreation, governmental activities, and as a nursery.[28]

The camps were run as democratically as possible. Most of the rules and regulations were made by camp councils whose members were elected by the residents in each camp. Major problems were usually referred to the camp manager, who was hired by the federal government, for final decision.[29] Besides the camp council, various committees were formed by the residents. A Good Neighbors Committee was organized by the women in the camps which welcomed new residents and showed them how to use the facilities of the camp. Also, child welfare committees were formed, either by the residents or visiting nurses, in order to give instruction in first aid, sanitation, and child care.[30]

Except for the families living in the "labor homes," no rent was charged for staying in the camp. However, a welfare fund was set up to which each family was asked to contribute ten cents per day. The fund was managed by the camp council and manager and was used to make minor physical improvements as well as to give assistance to those families in the camp who were in dire need. Each family also con-

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[28] Clay L. Cochran, "Hired Farm Labor and the Federal Government" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of Economics, University of North Carolina, 1950), 105-106.

[29] U. S. Farm Security Administration, Report of the Administrator, 1939 (Washington, 1939), 20.

[30] U. S. Farm Security Administration, Migrant Farm Labor, 9.

tributed two hours of work around the camp each week. Under the direction of the manager, the grounds were kept clean, grass planted, and shelters prepared. Families whou could not contribute ten cents to the welfare fund were asked to do two extra hours of work per week.[31]

In addition to providing housing for the migrants, the Farm Security Administration tried to organize a health program for the workers. Frequently, clinics were established to provide medical, dental, and hospital care for the labor camp residents. There were isolation wards for persons with contagious diseases and in come camps children's clinics and nurseries, with a resident nurse in charge.[32] Moreover, wherever possible, efforts were made to encourage the migrant children to go to school. At the Weslaco farm labor camp, for example, an elementary school was constructed by the federal government and maintained and staffed by the local school district.[33]

Without question the above efforts by the federal government did much to improve the lot of the migratory workers in Texas. Indeed, the establishment of the labor

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[31] Ibid.; U. S. Farm Security Administration, Farm Family Labor Camp Program in Texas (Washington, 1940), /folder/.

[32] U. S. Farm Security Administration, Report, 1939, p. 20.

[33] Cochran, "Hired Farm Labor," 128 (footnote).

camps has been described as "the most far-sighted, effective attempt to improve the lot of hired farm" that had ever been made.[34] Nevertheless, the program was far from adequate. Whereas there were approximately 200,000 to 300,000 persons in the migratory farm labor force during the 1930's, the camp facilities provided by the Farm Security Administration only could about 2,000 migrant families.[35]

With no relief coming from the state, and with that provided by local communities and the federal government being inadequate, some of the migrants tried to improve their lot through actions of their own. Consequently, for the first time Texas witnessed the growth of class-conscious unionism among the agricultural workers of the state. Prior to the 1930's, attempts at collective action on the part of farm laborers were "few, sporadic, and local."[36] Typical of the results of the early efforts of workers to strike was the one described in 1916 by the farm superintendent of the Taft ranch. "There was a bunch of Mexicans struck last fall. We were paying...60 cents a hundred for picking cotton, and

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[34] Ibid., 119.

[35] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5 p. 1825. This estimate of the size of the migratory labor force was made in 1938 by the Texas Employment Service.

[36] Stuart Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin No. 836 (Washington, 1945), 257, 261.

they wanted 75, and they said if we didn't pay they would go where they could get it, and my man told them to go, and they went."[37]

In 1912 an effort on the part of Mexican workers to strike during the onion harvest in Dimmit County was unsuccessful. According to the Carrizo Springs Javelin, "the onion men simply sent out more Mexicans, and now the former clippers are in the soup, no money, no job, and no strike fund in the treasury."[38] Five years later the editor of the Javelin, commented on the possibility of another strike among the onion workers:

> With the beginning of onion planting, there are a few Mexicans, mostly the ones who live in the county, begin urging a hold-up price.... /The editor of the/ Javelin would feel everlastingly disgraced were he to even countenance a scheme to defraud a peon of his wages, or to beat him down to less than it is worth, but the interest of the farmer should also be considered, and what the labor is actually worth to him.... Under such conditions, if a farmer is paying his transplanting force what the work is worth, and some copper fronted gentleman from the south tries to do a little I. W. W. propaganda among the working force, a pick handle would probably make a good lever to roll out the offender, or at any rate soften his views.[39]

The first organization of Mexican agricultural workers

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[37] U. S. Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Industrial Relations, X, 9218.

[38] Javelin (Carrizo Springs, Texas), April 27, 1912, quoted in Taylor, Mexican Labor in the U.S.: Dimmit County, 351.

[39] Javelin (Carrizo Springs, Texas), November 29, 1917, quoted in Ibid., 351-352.

in Texas was the Mexican Protective Association, formed in 1911.[40] The organization included citizens of both Texas and Mexico, and its function was "to come out for its members in the courts, where outrages are committed.../against/ them, such as cold blooded murders, lynchings, and so forth, or the taking of their homes or crops in direct violation of the law."[41] Although the Association was relatively successful during the first two years of its existence, its influence began to decline in 1913 due to the loss of a number of its court cases. The following year the effectiveness of the organization was further impaired by a decline in the cotton market which resulted in loss of income for most of its members and subsequent withdrawal. Finally, the Mexican Protective Association was weakened still more by a struggle between the conservative element which cautioned moderation and the radicals who advocated violence in achieving the goals of the organization.[42]

The Catholic Workers Union of Crystal City was the first union of agricultural workers in Texas to be organized in the 1930's. The Union was sponsored by the Catholic Church to alleviate the poor working conditions in the spinach industry in the area. On November 7, 1930, a meeting

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[40] Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 261.

[41] U. S. Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Industrial Relations, X, 9200.

[42] Ibid., 9200-9201.

was called by Rev. Charles Taylor, M. M. I., Pastor of the Sacred Heart Chruch in Crystal City. Out of this assembly grew the Catholic Workers Union with Taylor as its president. Four hundred and fifty Mexican workers attended the meeting at which a list of demands was drawn up to be presented to the growers and processors. Some of the demands were: (1) that no labor be brought in from outside the area, unless absolutely necessary, because of the already congested labor market; (2) that employers pay a living wage; (3) that wages be announced at the beginning of a job; (4) that employers pay directly to the workers instead of indirectly through contractors; and (5) that no children under twelve years of age be employed. Within a few days after the demands were made known, twenty-five growers and processors agreed to meet most of them, but not the one requesting a living wage.[43] About two months later Rev. Taylor wrote:

> As a general result there have been comparatively few laborers brought in from the outside, though many have come in of their own accord. The Mexican schools here report, for the first time in history, an increased instead of diminished attendance since the spinach harvest commenced. And, in general, there has been more than the usual good feeling and cooperation among all classes in the community.[44]

This success was only temporary, however, for shortly afterward the Catholic Workers Union ceased to exist.

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[43] Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 271-272.

[44] Ibid., 272.

A major effort on the part of farm workers in the state to organize occurred in 1933 when an independent union known as the Asociacion de Jornaleros was formed in Laredo. The membership of the Asociacion was very heterogenous, including hat makers, painters, carpenters, general construction workers, and miners, as well as agricultural workers. In 1935 the Asociacion took over the direction of a strike of approximately 1,200 onion workers in the Laredo area. The strike was called to protest against the low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions then prevailing in the onion fields. Growers, for example, were paying seventy-five cents for a ten hour day, or from six to seven and one-half cents per hour. Moreover, work was very uncertain, sometimes amounting to only two or three hours a day; therefore, the workers included among their demands a minimum wage of $1.25 per day and payment by the farmers of the cost of transportation to and from work. In order to dramatize the strike, they held mass demonstrations in Laredo and pickets were placed along the roads leading to the fields. Although the strike was carried out with little violence, fifty-six workers were arrested by the Texas Rangers and charged with blocking the highways. At the request of the Chamber of Commerce in Laredo, John R. Steelman, Conciliator in the Department of Labor, was sent to bring about an agreement between the farmers and the union. Mr. Steelman was successful in getting

two growers to agree to the union demand for a minimum wage of $1.25 per day, but this agreement was repudiated shortly after he left, and the growers reverted to the old rates. As a result of this unsuccessful strike, the Asociacion lost large numbers of its members as well as much of its effectiveness.[45]

In 1936, with the aid and encouragement of the National Committee of Agricultural Workers, the Asociacion de Jornaleros took on new life. Meetings were called at which plans for affiliating the Asociacion with the American Federation of Labor were considered. Shortly afterward, a charter was secured from the A. F. of L. and the Asociacion became the Agricultural Workers (Federal) Labor Union No. 20212. The newly affiliated union immediately tried to organize similar unions among agricultural workers in other parts of the state.[46]

In 1937 delegates from a number of industrial unions in the state attended a conference in Corpus Christi which was endorsed by the State Federation of Labor. At the conference the Texas Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee was established, the purpose of which was to organize labor unions among the farm workers around Corpus Christi, Brownsville, and San Antonio. Any union formed would be affiliated

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[45] Ibid., 273-275.

[46] Ibid., 275.

with the A. F. of L. With some financial support from local unions of carpenters, plumbers, and oil workers, labor organizers sent out by the Organizing Committee were successful in inducing farm laborers in the Corpus Christi area to charter a local union.

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley local farm labor unions likewise were formed in several cities. Delegates from these various local unions in the Valley met before the opening of the cotton picking season and agreed to ask for a standard rate of $1.00 per hundredweight -- as long as farmers were getting twelve cents per pound for their cotton. In response the Tri-County Vegetable Producers Association met and agreed to pay only fifty cents per hundred pounds for the first picking, sixty cents for the second, and seventy cents for the third. Consequently, during late June and July, local strikes occurred throughout the Valley. In some cases strike-breakers were brought in. For example, Negro pickers were transported from Waco into the Weslaco area, and trouble almost broke out when they were threatened by the local strikers. The result was that although the unions were successful in compelling employers in some localities to meet their wage demands, the majority of growers were able to get their cotton picked at rates far below $1.00 per hundredweight.[47]

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[47] Ibid., 276.

In the summer of 1937, as a result of an intensive organizing campaign on the part of the C..I. O., the local unions that had been established by the Texas Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee became a part of the C. I. O.'s United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America. In addition to rechartering the existing local unions, this organization chartered new unions in a number of the Lower Rio Grande towns. In some communities Mexican fraternal organizations gave the unions support. Nevertheless, the local unions, which had an estimated 5,000 dues paying members, were shortlived; for after winning a few minor strikes in the late summer and fall, they disappeared the latter part of the year.[48]

Along with the organization of field workers, efforts were also made during the 1930's to organize the more skilled and better paid workers in the packing sheds in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In January, 1937, the A. F. of L. organized the Fruit and Vegetable Workers Union Local No. 20363, which tried to standardize wage rates in various sheds. The union was active for fourteen months before it ceased to function. Also in 1937, the C. I. O., in its attempt to organize the shed workers, established the Crate Makers Union Local No. 110 of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. This union tried to establish

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[48] Ibid., 277.

uniform crate-making rates for companies throughout the Valley, but it too met with little success and rapidly declined. Therefore, by 1938 union activity in Texas agriculture had practically come to an end.[49]

In summary, the depression years were extremely trying times for the migratory farm workers in Texas. Plagued with extremely low wages and increased competition for jobs, they not only received little assistance from the state and federal governments, but failed in their efforts to improve conditions through concerted action of their own.

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[49] Ibid., 277-278.

CHAPTER VII

THE EMERGENCY FARM LABOR PROGRAM

The surplus that had characterized the farm labor market in the 1930's disappeared during the early forties. With World War II came increased economic activity. Agriculture found itself at a competitive disadvantage with industry. Indeed, industry with its higher wages and more attractive working conditions drew into its ranks large numbers of farm workers. In addition, the Selective Service Act, passed in 1940, took still more workers away from the farms. Between April, 1940 and January 1, 1942, an estimated 280,000 persons left the farms for the armed services.[1]

Although no totally accurate data could be compiled, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics reported in March, 1943 a loss of 2.8 million workers from agriculture since 1939.[2] In February 1943 Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard estimated that approximately 200,000 men had left agriculture

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[1] Wayne D. Rasmussen, A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47, U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Monograph No. 13 (Washington, 1941), 14.

[2] Ibid., 20-21.

during the previous year alone. Forty percent of the number entered the armed services, while the other sixty percent went into war industries.[3] Somewhat higher estimates were made by various farm organizations which declared that over 1,500,000 persons had left the farms in 1942.[4] According to August Andresen, Congressman from Minnesota, the number reached 3,600,000 by March 1, 1943.[5] In Texas it was estimated that there were approximately 200,000 fewer farm workers in the state in 1943 than there had been in 1941.[6]

As the number of workers available for agricultural employment declined during the early 1940's, the federal government took a more active interest in the farm labor situation. As a result, in November, 1942 Congress passed a law providing for the deferment from military service of farm workers "regularly engaged in an agricultural occupation or endeavor essential to the war effort...."[7] Furthermore,

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[3] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Program, 1943, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 78th Cong., 1st Sess., on the appropriation for the Farm Labor Program, Calendar year 1943, Feb. 17, 18, March 1, 4, 1943 (Washington, 1943), 3, 10.

[4] Ibid., 88.

[5] Ibid., 94.

[6] Caesar Hohn, "The Farm Labor Situation in Texas," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Texas Agricultural Workers Association, January 11-12, 1944, Fort Worth, Texas (Mimeographed), 64.

[7] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVI, Part 1, p. 1019 (1942).

the Farm Placement Service of the United States Employment Service was expanded in order to provide a more efficient farm labor placement program. The Department of Agriculture also became concerned with the growing shortage of agricultural labor in various parts of the country. During 1940 and 1941 committees were formed at national and local levels to keep the Secretary of Agriculture informed of the situation, and a special effort was made to secure statistical data on the supply and demand for farm labor throughout the country.[8]

On June 22, 1942 the War Manpower Commission, in order to alleviate acute agricultural labor shortages in certain areas, issued directives designed to coordinate the work of the Employment Service and the Department of Agriculture. While the Employment Service retained the job of recruiting and placing farm workers, the Farm Security Administration, within the Department of Agriculture, was assigned the task of providing transportation for the recruited workers to points where they were needed, as well as making arrangements for adequate housing and providing health and welfare facilities for them.[9] This cooperation between

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[8] Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 6-20.

[9] Ibid., 25. On August 4, 1942, the Farm Security Administration was also assigned the task of supervising the importation and contracting of Mexican agricultural workers. See chapter IX for discussion of the Mexican contract labor program.

the two agencies continued until January, 1943 when the War Manpower Commission relieved the Employment Service of its farm labor recruitment functions and delegated those duties to the Department of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, by August 20, 1942 the Farm Security Administration had worked out definite policies for the transporting and employment of farm workers. Among the requirements were adequate housing and health and sanitary facilities. In regard to farm wages, state wage boards appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture were to determine the prevailing wage (in no event was it to be less than thirty cents) in areas into which workers were to be transported, and upon the approval of the Secretary these wage rates were to be paid the workers. Furthermore, workers were guaranteed employment for seventy-five percent of their contract period, or in lieu of employment were to receive a subsistence allowance of $3.00 per day.[10]

The above program alarmed a number of farm organizations. They were especially hostile toward the policies followed by the Farm Security Administration in guaranteeing "certain standards with respect to wages, working conditions, and periods of employment."[11] Moreover, employers in areas

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[10] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 113-116.

[11] W. W. Wilcox, The Farmer in the Second World War (Ames, Iowa, 1947), 90.

from which the Employment Service recruited labor for other parts of the country objected to the withdrawal of their surplus labor. In a joint statement before the Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations on March 1, 1943, the National Grange, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives expressed their dissatisfaction with the farm labor program as it existed:

> We are greatly concerned over what we consider the misdirected efforts of agencies of Government to fasten upon farmers and farm workers far-reaching bureaucratic controls and restrictions. Under the guise of the war effort, a social revolution is being perpetrated upon the American people. We are convinced that unless these policies are immediately abandoned, we face within the foreseeable future a disastrous shortage of food for our armed forces, our civilian population, and our allies. Already serious loss of food and fiber has resulted from the present administration of farm labor....[12]

These organizations strongly urged "that all bureaucratic, unworkable regulations and controls, including fixing of minimum wages and regulating maximum hours and conditions of employment of agricultural workers be eliminated...."[13]

Three days after the issuance of the above statement, the American Farm Bureau Federation presented the subcommittee with specific recommendations as to the type of farm labor program that the farmers favored. These recommendations formed the basis for Public Law 45 (78th Congress, 2nd Session) passed April 29, 1943.[14]

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[12] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 88.

[13] Ibid., 89.

[14] Ibid., 133-135.

The emergency farm labor program, in effect from 1943 to 1947, was based upon Public Law 45, which provided that the responsibility for recruiting, transporting, and placing of farm labor be charged to the Extension Service in each of the states. Under the Act not less than $9,000,000 nor more than $13,050,000 was to be apportioned among the agricultural extension services of the land-grant colleges on the basis of need. The funds were to be used by the extension services for (1) the recruitment and placement of workers; (2) the transportation, subsistence, health, medical, and burial services for workers and their families; (3) maintaining and operating farm labor supply centers; (4) advancing money to workers owed by employers who had signed contracts agreeing to reimburse the extension services; and (5) to pay employees of the extension service and for administrative expenditures and for the payment of other individuals or agencies for giving assistance. On the other hand, the Law placed certain restrictions on the use that could be made of the funds. No part of the money allocated was to be spent in transporting workers from a county unless the consent of the county agent had been obtained in writing. This applied only to agricultural workers who had lived in a county for one year or more. Also, no part of the funds appropriated was to be "used directly or indirectly to fix, regulate, or impose minimum wages or housing standards, or to regulate hours of work, or to impose or enforce collective bargaining require-

ments or union membership" on any agricultural worker except those imported from foreign countries and then only when it was necessary to meet the requirements laid down by the government of those countries.[15]

With the passage of Public Law 45 the responsibility for the routing and placement of migratory farm labor in Texas fell upon the Farm Labor Office of the Extension Service at College Station. Since the Extension Service lacked adequate machinery for handling the task at the time, an agreement was made with the United States Employment Service to assist in the direction and control of the migrant labor force as well as to aid the county agents in the recruitment and placement of labor within the counties.[16]

The first step taken by the Extension Service in organizing a farm labor program was to summon one county agent and one county home demonstration agent from each of the twelve extension districts in the state to attend a two day discussion of the problem involved. After this meeting, six bi-district meetings were held at which time the ideas and recommendations of the earlier discussion were presented to the county agents for their consideration. Out of these meetings a program evolved for organizing the farm labor

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[15] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVII, Part I, pp. 70-72 (1943).

[16] Hohn, "The Farm Labor Situation in Texas," 64.

force. The plan was based on the assumption that each county had a labor problem of its own which needed special attention; therefore, since each of the county agents was familiar with the conditions in his respective county, he was made responsible for the labor program in his county and was authorized to develop a program which would best suit that county. To facilitate the work which they were to do, the county agents were provided funds for clerical help and other expenses, but no definite instructions were given them as to how the work was to be done. In carrying out their responsibility, many of the county agents organized labor councils composed of ministers, city and county officers, representatives of service organizations, and other persons in their counties who were interested in securing adequate labor to produce and harvest the crops.[17]

The Farm Labor Office organized a Farm Labor Advisory Committee to assist the county agents in their efforts. The committee was made up of representatives of both the farmers and the migrant groups. The latter group included crew leaders as well as the workers. The function of the committee was to discuss mutual problems, air grievances, and make suggestions for the improvement of the farm labor program.[18]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

At the end of 1943 when the above machinery had been set up, the Extension Service terminated its agreement with the United States Employment Service, and the Farm Labor Office assumed full responsibility for the farm placement program in Texas. With Ceasar Hohn as Farm Labor Supervisor the Office continued to function until 1948.[19] During these years, the Texas Extension Service spent $2,230,298.20 in carrying out its farm labor supply program.[20]

The Farm Labor Office dealt not only with the placement of Mexican migratory workers, but also made an effort to make maximum use of the Negro farm laborers in the state. The Negro state farm labor assistant, working through the Negro county agents, established Negro farm labor advisory committees. For counties which had large Negro populations but no Negro county agent, Negro farm labor field men were hired. In the recruitment of colored workers the cooperation of newspapers, boy scouts, 4-H clubs, and other interested groups was sought. The county agents and farm labor field men worked through Negro crew leaders who located workers and transported them to points where they were needed. Colored workers who had rarely gone beyond the boundaries of

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[19] Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, Extension Service, Farm Labor Program in Texas, 1943-47 (College Station, Texas, 1947), 15.

[20] U. S. Extension Service, Extension Farm Labor Program, 1943-1947, No. 1, Vol. I (Washington, 1947), 86.

their home counties were for the first time taken into sections where they had never been before. As a result of this program of the Farm Labor Office, Negro workers were supplied for the Southeast Texas rice harvest, the cotton harvest in South and West Texas, and the harvest of fruits and vegetables in East Texas.[21]

In addition to its work with the Negroes and Mexican farm workers in the state, the Farm Labor Office called upon the army to provide prisoners of war to work on Texas farms. Prisoners were used in the production of corn, peanuts, grain sorghum, vegetables, small grains, rice, and cotton.[22]

In order to give direction and guidance to the migratory farm labor force, the Farm Labor Office found it necessary to ascertain the labor needs within the state. Therefore, Extension Service personnel in the various counties made weekly reports to the state office on labor requirements, surplus labor available, and other pertinent data. Whenever necessary, these reports were submitted more often. The information, when it reached the state office, was correlated and sent to the personnel in the counties and made available to the general public.[23]

To direct labor crews to areas where they were needed,

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[21] Texas Extension Service, Farm Labor Program in Texas, 22.

[22] Ibid., 4-5, 26.

[23] Ibid., 9.

migratory labor assistants were stationed at strategic points along the migratory routes. The assistants worked with the county agents in their efforts to keep the workers informed of crop and labor situations within the state. For example, stations were maintained at Riviera and Encino where workers coming up from the Lower Rio Grande Valley were contacted and informed of crop conditions and job opportunities farther north.[24]

When the emergency farm labor program was first organized, the Farm Labor Office had difficulty in gaining the confidence of the migrants. In 1944, for instance, many migratory workers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley refused to accept the advice given them by county agents and migratory field assistants. Instead, they relied upon letters and telegrams from farmers for whom they had previously worked with the result that many left the Valley before the completion of the cotton harvest there and arrived in the Corpus Christi area before work was available.[25]

Another obstacle encountered in the placement of the

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[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] Pauline R. Kibbe, Latin Americans in Texas (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1946), 174-175. Mrs. Kibbe became Executive Secretary to the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas in 1943. She participated in more than twenty county, district, and statewide meetings where the farm labor problem was discussed. In addition, she visited many of the farm labor reception centers established in Texas.

Mexican workers was the change wrought in the labor crews by certain war restrictions. Earlier, the migrants had traveled mostly in family groups in privately owned automobiles. The war, however, brought about shortages of cars, tires, and gasoline which forced the workers to travel in trucks owned by the crew chiefs. Consequently, the size of the crews increased considerably, sometimes reaching as many as sixty persons. This enlargement of work crews worked a hardship on the small farmers who did not need so much labor.[26]

Inadequate housing and sanitary facilities in the cotton growing areas was another problem that confronted the Farm Labor Office. Housing on the farms was seldom adequate, particularly in West Texas. Barns and chicken coops were all that were available for some of the migrants while others were forced to camp under bridges or out in the open. Only a very few farmers provided suitable shelter and sanitary facilities for the workers.[27] The migratory farm labor camps built by the Farm Security Administration in the late 1930's helped alleviate the situation somewhat, but there were only ten of them, one of which (at Crystal City) was used as a Japanese internment camp. These camps, which were under the supervision of the War Food Administration during the war,

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[26] Ibid., 176.

[27] Ibid., 179.

relieved many farmers in the vicinities where the camps were located of the responsibility of furnishing housing for the workers.

The lack of sanitary facilities worked as great a hardship on the migratory laborers as did the lack of adequate housing. Pauline Kibbe described the conditions that prevailed in West Texas during the 1944 cotton season as follows:

> Lubbock had made no provision whatever for taking care of this influx of people, which occurs regularly every fall, and every weekend during each fall. There was no place where they /migrants/ might par their trucks, take a bath, change their clothes, even go to the toilet.
>
> Conditions in towns throughout the section of the State were, in 1944, more or less the same as in Lubbock. In some places they were even worse. In Lamesa it was stated...that toilet facilities in the City Hall, which the migrants could use most conveniently, were locked up at noon on Saturdays, and filling station facilities were used except where the owners prohibited it because of the objections of customers. As a result, the migrants were forced to disregard the lack of toilet facilities, and an epidemic of dysentery, which originated among them, spread through the entire town of Lamesa and into the schools.
>
> As a natural consequence, the laborers came into the nearest town on Saturday, after picking cotton all week, and without having had access to bathing facilities. Their appearance and hygienic condition was as unattractive as would be those of any other group going through a similar experience. There being no facilities available to them in the towns, they remained in a state of uncleanliness, and were refused entrance into or service in public places of business and amusement, such as cafes, barbershops, and in some instances theatres.[28]

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[28] Ibid., 177-178.

Furthermore, law enforcement officers in a few areas refused to allow migrants to stop in certain communities. Big Spring, for instance, during the cotton season placed a constable on the highway leading into the town whose duty was to stop trucks carrying migrants and tell them not to stop in the town or they would be arrested. Angered by such treatment, the majority of the migrants passed through Big Spring and Howard County, leaving the farmers there with an inadequate supply of labor. It was a common occurrence for Mexican workers to avoid areas in which widespread discrimination was practiced and to go where they were accorded better treatment.[29]

Recognizing the need for settling the above problems, the Extension Service called a meeting to be held at College Station on November 28, 1944. The meeting was attended by farmers, workers, ginners, agents of the state and federal government, and representatives of the Catholic Church and of Latin-American civic and fraternal organizations. At this and similar meetings held in December of that year at Sinton, Haskell, Lubbock, Lamesa, and other towns in the state the Farm Labor Office acquired a better understanding of the farm labor situation.[30] At the same time the need

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[29] Ibid., 178-179; Lewis Nordyke, "Texas Cleans Up A Mess," Saturday Evening Post, CCXIX (July 27, 1946), 64.

[30] Kibbe, Latin Americans in Texas, 175-176.

for an educational program to improve relations between farmers and Mexican workers also became apparent. Concerning the need for an educational program, the Extension Service reported:

> The recognition of the importance of the laborer to the agricultural economy was something new. Little or nothing had been done about providing decent housing and living conditions for the workers so that he and his family might be worthwhile citizens. Little or nothing had ever been done to train the farm worker in better techniques so that he might become a better and more valuable worker. In not demanding training for the workers, the farmer had damaged the efficiency of his farm plant; in not supplying decent living conditions, he had driven the good workers away from the farm.[31]

In January, 1945 the Farm Labor Office began its educational campaign. The goal of the program was to bring about an understanding between the farmer and the worker "so that automatic placement of workers where they were needed most would result year in and year out without government direction and aid...."[32] In pursuit of this goal Spanish-speaking migratory field assistants contacted workers in South Texas and informed them of their responsibilities. The field assistants told the workers how important the harvest of the crops was to the war effort; explained the functions of the Farm Labor Office; and pointed out that by accepting the advice and guidance of the county agents and

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[31] Texas Extension Service, Farm Labor Program in Texas, 4.

[32] Ibid.

migratory field assistants they would be able to get more work and make more money. The need for putting in as many hours of work per week as possible (at least five full days a week) was emphasized. In addition, they were told of the improved living conditions that they could expect to find in certain areas and were urged to make full use of the facilities available. An example of the literature put out by the Farm Labor Office was a leaflet printed in both English and Spanish entitled "The Task of the Agricultural Worker in War," in which the migrants were told:

> Last year (1944) there weren't nearly enough workers to get crops harvested quickly, and the government says there will be many thousands less agricultural laborers this year. That means all men, women, boys, and girls should go when and where they are needed most. Sometimes, though, that may mean staying at home. Your own neighborhood or county has first claim on you when crops are in the field to be gathered. That's one of your duties as a citizen.
>
> All of us must keep our agreements and whenever possible stay with a job until we have finished it. The farmer should keep his promise about pay and work to be done; and the worker must carry out his part of the bargain, too. Becoming tired of a contract or finding a better job doesn't justify breaking an agreement when work has been started. Living up to a contract is not only honorable; it's good business, and will help all workers to get better opportunities and more advantages as time goes on.
>
> Better working conditions, better treatment and more consideration for workers on farms are our aims. The farm labor program of the A & M College Extension Service is working every day to be of greater help to laborers on the road. Its main purpose is the more efficient use and placement of farm labor to help win the war and feed the starving people of Europe. This Service congratulates you on your fine job in harvesting last

> year's crops, and on your spirit of co-operation in your job. That job, though, still remains to be done this year; and your responsibility increases until Victory is finally won.[33]

While the migratory field assistants were informing the workers of their responsibilities and telling them about the farm labor program, county agents in all the cotton growing sections of the state held meetings to impress upon farmers, local public officials, and other interested persons the importance of better treatment for the migrants. They stressed the need for better housing for farm workers, the importance of building reception centers for them, as well as the need for recreational and religious facilities and a more considerate treatment of migrants by law enforcement officers and business interests.[34]

In order to encourage the construction of reception centers for migrant farm workers, the Farm Labor Office agreed to pay $300 of the total cost of each center. It also agreed to provide personnel to serve as camp managers and supervisors of the property during the peak period. The camp managers would also act as placement officers. Before receiving aid from the Extension Service, the reception centers had to meet certain qualifications: (1) they had to have adequate sanitary facilities such as toilets and showers; (2) water was to be furnished; (3) ample parking space was

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[33] Quoted in Kibbe, Latin Americans in Texas, 188.

[34] Ibid., 187.

to be made available; and (4) fuel for cooking purposes was to be provided.[35] Most of the reception centers that were established were renovated buildings such as fair ground structures, abandoned school houses and the like into which partitions and sanitary facilities had been installed. Some had dirt floors and leaky roofs, and a few had no heat, but they provided a place where migrants could spend the night, cook, bathe, and get accurate crop information before moving on. Most important, the workers knew they were welcome in the communities where reception centers were to be found.[36]

By 1947 fifty-six communities had built reception centers for migrant workers.[37] The Extension Service built only one shelter. This was at Brady where three main highways intersect and from where workers could be guided to the cotton fields in the Rolling and High Plains.[38] A total of $9,868.86 was expended by the Extension Service in the construction of reception centers.[39]

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[35] Ibid., 183.

[36] Nordyke, Saturday Evening Post, CCXIX (July 27, 1946), 63.

[37] Texas Extension Service, Farm Labor Program in Texas, 10.

[38] Nordyke, Saturday Evening Post, CCXIX (July 27, 1946), 63.

[39] U. S. Extension Service, Extension Farm Labor Program, No. 1, Vol. I, p. 88.

In addition to the aid given to communities for the establishment of reception centers, the Farm Labor Office provided limited funds for emergency hospitalization for injured workers. To be eligible for free medical attention a worker had to be at a reception center and on his way to a job to which he had been referred by a county agent; or he had to be working on a job which a county agent had referred him to. Treatment was given only in emergency cases or when the worker had no money for medical care. All cases had to be approved by a county agent.[40]

The Texas Extension Service not only concerned itself with the intra-state migration of agricultural workers but also supervised the movement of Texas Mexicans to other states. In 1943 and 1944 the main function of the Extension Service in connection with migration out of the state was the certification of need for workers applying for rationed gasoline and tires. However, in 1945 it assumed a more important role in the direction of workers to other states. In March of that year a conference was held which was attended by representatives of the sugar beet companies operating east of the Rocky Mountains, agents of extension services of the states concerned, and officials of the Office of Defense Transportation and the Office of Price Administration. At this conference plans for facilitating the

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[40] Kibbe, Latin Americans in Texas, 183.

movement of Texas-Mexicans was worked out. The program operated somewhat as follows: (1) the Texas State Extension Service held conferences with licensed recruitment agents and discussed the problems involved; (2) county agents consulted with recruitors and identified all persons recruited; (3) the Extension Service gave its recommendations as to the amount of tires and gasoline needed for the trucks which transported the workers; (4) the Office of Defense Transportation then certified a need for the items; and (5) the Office of Price Administration issued the needed gasoline and tire rations. This program, while not perfect, did help to get workers to the sugar beet fields.[41]

On February 1, 1946 a conference was held at St. Louis, Missouri at which time the 1945 program for out of state migration was discussed and a new procedure drawn up based upon the previous year's experience. The new procedures were carried in Extension Farm Labor Circular No. 23, as revised, and distributed to all Extension Service personnel. Along with actual recruitment procedures, it stressed the responsibility of the states using Texas-Mexican labor for emphasizing to the farmer the need for better housing for the workers, for informing workers of health and medical facilities available, and for seeing that arrangements were

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[41] Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 87-88.

made to provide them with shopping and recreational facilities. Furthermore, the extension services in the various states were to develop an educational and training program, designed to bring about a better understanding between the workers and employers as well as to make more efficient workers. For its part, the Texas Extension Service was to advance its educational program during the winter months while the migrants were in Texas. The program was to include such topics as health, sanitation, personal conduct and behavior, savings, contract obligations, and the protection and care of employers' property.[42]

At the end of 1946 another meeting was held at College Station regarding the migration of Texas migratory farm workers to the sugar beet areas. At that time the conduct of the past year's program was discussed and approved as satisfactory procedure for the 1947 program.[43]

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[42] U. S. Extension Service, "Outline of Plan to Facilitate Movement of Migratory Workers Recruited in Texas for Employment in Sugar Beet and Related Crops in the North Central and Plains States in 1946," EFL Circular No. 23 (Revised February 13, 1946), 1-3.

[43] "Report on Farm Labor meeting regarding Migration of Latin-American Workers from Texas to Sugar Beet and related areas in Plains and Central States, College Station, Texas, Dec. 5 and 6, 1946," in U. S. Extension Service, Extension Farm Labor Program, No. 2, Vol. I.

In 1947 the Texas Extension Service, in cooperation with the U. S. Extension Service, again assigned field men to act as liason agents between the farm workers and employers in other states. At the request of the sugar beet companies and extension services in the respective states, field men had been sent into Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming in 1946. The primary function of the field men was to facilitate the orderly operation of the out of state migration program. It was in the settling of minor misunderstandings between the workers and the employers that these agents were most useful.[44]

The close of 1947 brought an end to the emergency farm labor program. On January 1, 1948 the recruitment and placement of farm labor was again made the responsibility of the United States Employment Service. The economic status of the migratory farm worker in Texas had improved considerably during the years of emergency. Given impetus by the diminishing supply of workers, average farm wages in Texas rose 328 percent between 1939 and 1945;[45] and cotton picking rates increased 255 percent - from $.55 per hundred pounds in 1939 to $1.95 per hundred in 1945.[46] Moreover, during

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[44] Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 88-89.

[45] Wilcox, Farmer in the Second World War, 96.

[46] "Wartime Wages, Income and Wage Regulation in Agriculture," Monthly Labor Review, LXIII (July, 1946), 42.

the five years in which the emergency farm labor program was in operation, the Farm Labor Office succeeded in bringing about a better organization of the farm labor market in the state as well as promoting understanding between the farmer and the migrant worker.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WETBACK INVASION

With the end of World War II the supply of Texas farm labor was augmented by Mexican aliens or wetbacks.[1] Wetbacks first began coming into the United States in considerable numbers during the War, but it was in the postwar years that the wetback traffic reached its peak. Between 1944 and 1950 the number of deportations and voluntary departures across the southern border increased from 29,000 to 565,000.[2] These were only the ones apprehended. Many thousands of others entered and left without ever being caught. Although the exact number of wetbacks entering the United States each year has been virtually impossible to determine, it has been surmised that for every illegal alien apprehended there was one who was not. If this is true, then the total number of wetbacks who crossed the border in 1950 was well over one million.[3]

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[1] The word "wetback" originally referred to any Mexican national who entered the United States by swimming or wading across the Rio Grande. The term now is commonly applied to any Mexican crossing into the United States illegally.

[2] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 69.

[3] New York Times, March 25, 1951, p. 41.

The entry of wetbacks has not been uniform along the border. Indeed, along the Texas border most of the traffic has been in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, even though large numbers of wetbacks have been attracted to areas farther up the River, particularly the Eagle Pass and El Paso regions. The San Antonio District of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which includes the Lower Rio Grande Valley, reported an increase in the number of illegal aliens apprehended in that district from 43,000 in 1945 to 215,000 in 1950.[4] Furthermore, in a study made of wetbacks in the Valley it was estimated that in July, 1950 there were over 100,000 employed in three counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy. Based upon this estimate, then, wetbacks made up one-third of the population of these counties at that time.[5]

The basic reason for this great influx of wetbacks into the United States was the same that had brought the Mexican worker across the border in earlier years -- the opportunity for work at higher wages than were available in Mexico. During the economic depression of the 1930's, when farm wage rates in the United States were extremely low and there were far more workers than jobs available, very few

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Lyle Saunders and Olen E. Leonard, The Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Inter-American Education, Occasional Papers VII (Austin, Texas, 1951), 83.

Mexican laborers entered this country. However, as noted, the wetback traffic began to show a marked increase when the United States entered World War II. The war drew thousands of native workers from agriculture into industry and the armed services with the result that farm wages rose and jobs became more plentiful. After the war the expansion of irrigation and the bringing under cultivation of new land in the Southwest further increased the need for unskilled labor. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley alone cotton acreage expanded from less than 250,000 acres in 1945 to over 600,000 acres in 1949.[6]

In response to the greater demand for labor in the Southwest came workers from Mexico. Aside from the few workers who came to the United States in search of adventure and "to see the world", there were two major reasons why so many Mexicans crossed the border to seek employment. One was the increasing pressure of population on Mexican resources. During the 1940's the population of Mexico rose approximately thirty percent -- from 19.7 million to 26.3 million by 1950.[7] On the other hand, the Mexican economy, which is basically agrarian, failed to expand as rapidly as the population. The result was widespread "underemployment", along with unemploy-

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[6] Nelson, Labor Requirements in the Rio Grande Valley, 9.

[7] United Nations Statistical Office, Demographic Yearbook, 1954 (New York, 1954), 114-115.

ment.[8]

Coupled with the lack of employment opportunities in Mexico was the fact that beginning with World War II, that country suffered from acute inflation. Although the money wages paid agricultural laborers rose slightly, real wages in agriculture dropped an estimated twenty-two percent.[9] The value of the peso, which had stood at 20.62 United States cents prior to July 21, 1948, declined rapidly until by the first half of 1949, it was valued at 11.56 cents. Therefore, even with Mexican farm wages along the border area rising from 5.36 pesos per day in December, 1947 to 5.98 pesos in October, 1949, in terms of United States currency these wages dropped by approximately one-third, or from $1.10 to $.69.[10] In the interior of Mexico wages were even lower (see Table 4). Therefore, with the dollar at such a favorable rate of exchange, the Mexican worker was naturally eager to cross the border to work, even for wages as low as twenty-five cents an hour, for such a sum was still more than he could earn in Mexico.

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[8] United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, Economic Survey of Latin America, 1949 (New York, 1951), 482-484.

[9] Sanford A. Mosk, Industrial Revolution in Mexico (Berkeley, California, 1950), 285.

[10] John A. Hopkins, Mexican Farm Wages and Farm Labor Productivity, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Foreign Agriculture Report No. 46 (Washington, 1950), 2-3.

TABLE 4

FARM WAGES PER DAY, WITHOUT BOARD, FOR UNSKILLED MEN, SELECTED MONTHS, AVERAGES, 1947-49 MEXICO*

Year and Month	Value of Peso	U.S. Border areas	Central mesa	Coastal areas
	Dollars	Pesos	Pesos	Pesos
1947:				
December	...	5.36	3.02	4.92
1948:				
April	...	5.22	3.04	5.12
July	...	5.78	2.81	5.41
October	...	5.91	3.07	5.40
1949:				
January	...	5.89	3.16	5.73
April	...	6.06	3.04	5.70
July	...	5.96	3.15	5.90
October	...	5.98	3.33	6.10
		Dollars	Dollars	Dollars
1947:				
December	.2061	1.10	0.62	1.01
1948:				
April	.2061	1.08	.63	1.06
July	.2061	1.19	.58	1.12
October	.1444	.85	.44	.78
1949:				
January	.1453	.86	.46	.83
April	.1430	.87	.43	.83
July	.1156	.69	.36	.68
October	.1156	.69	.38	.71

*Simple averages of reports from U. S. Consulates in the respective areas. Source: John A. Hopkins, Mexican Farm Wages and Farm Labor Productivity, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Foreign Agriculture Report No. 46 (Washington, 1950), 2.

The traffic of Mexican workers across the border was encouraged by Texas farmers who were willing, in fact eager, to hire illegal aliens. The attitude of the Lower Rio Grande Valley farmers toward wetback labor was expressed at the Brownsville hearings of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in 1950. A number of farmers and farm representatives offered the opinion that the economy of the Valley had been built upon the "stoop" labor from Mexico, and if production were to be maintained, that source of labor must remain open to the farmers. Two arguments were advanced to justify the use of wetback labor in the Valley: first, that freight charges and water rates for irrigation paid by Valley farmers were higher than in other sections of the country, making it necessary to import cheap labor from Mexico in order to compete with farmers outside the Valley; second, that the domestic farm labor force was unreliable, forcing the Valley farmers to depend upon workers from Mexico to do the work.[11]

Concerning the unreliability of native workers in the Valley, one employer opined that these workers, most of whom were recent immigrants from Mexico, had raised their standard of living and would no longer do the back-breaking labor required of agricultural laborers in the Valley at any price.[12]

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[11] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Stenographic Report of Proceedings held at Brownsville, Texas, August 1, 1950 (Mimeographed), 13-14, 30.

[12] Ibid., 21-22.

Yet, another farm spokesman gave low wages as the reason for domestic workers rejecting employment in the area. He admitted that whereas farmers could not get domestic labor to work for forty cents an hour, they would probably work for seventy-five cents an hour.[13] Another would not go so far as to say that native laborers would not do "stoop" labor in the Valley, but he expressed the opinion that the workers would do only part of the work required of them and then move on to more lucrative jobs elsewhere in the state or nation. He stated:

> Here is the way they generally work -- and I think these people here who are cotton farmers will verify what I am going to say: We can employ them many times to pick the cream over. Then, you can't get them to touch the field again. From here, they move on to the next area, and that is the way they become migratory. It is not because they have to leave here. You can't prevail upon them to stay. They just will not stay. They move right on. That has been brought about through a system of labor contracting. We always have these labor contractors who make up their parties in advance. They start leaving the Valley just as soon as the first picking is finished. If we had to depend on these people, we would never get our cotton picked, and the alien is our only course. We would gladly employ these local people if they would stay with us.[14]

A slightly different explanation of the annual migration of the Texas-Mexicans from the Valley was given by Glen White, President of the Rio Grande Valley Farm Bureau Federation, who testified that the heads of the Mexican families "like

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[13] Ibid., 170.

[14] Ibid., 363.

to take their youngsters and the family and go off on something of a skylark; they like to go on picnics; they like to group together in contract work, and the families all load on the trucks and go to Corpus Christi, which is usually the first stop, and then go on up into Oklahoma, and up in there."[15]

Aside from economic reasons, Valley farmers ascribed to themselves humanitarian motives in hiring Mexican aliens and denounced those people who were "selfish enough to be jealous of a dollar that they resent those poor people coming over here to make a living and send something back to people who have never had a full day's meal in their lives."[16] It was pointed out to the President's Commission that the Rio Grande Valley was actually a training ground for Mexican labor. Mexican nationals, coming into the Valley with little knowledge of modern agricultural methods, were trained by the farmers until they were competent workers.[17] Furthermore, much was done to improve the lot of the wetback while he was in this country. One woman from Raymondville testified that the ladies in her community had organized a Junior Service League which operated a child welfare clinic, provided a library for the Mexican families, and distributed food to

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[15] Ibid., 18.

[16] Ibid., 24.

[17] Ibid., 14-15.

the needy. Sixty women in this organization each devoted one hundred hours a year to render these services.[18] In addition, one employer stated that the farmers provided medical care, housing, firewood, lights, and water for the workers; therefore, even though wages might have been low, the Mexican aliens were still able to send a large part of their earnings home.[19]

Firmly convinced that they were entitled to cheap alien labor, Valley farmers, along with other users of wetback labor, brought considerable pressure to bear on the Immigration officials not to enforce the immigration laws of this country. In 1950 the Director of the El Paso Immigration District stated:

> Over the years, from the time I came on the job as District Director in March, 1926, nearly every year at cotton-chopping or cotton-picking time, the farmers send a complaint to the Secretary of Labor -- we were in the Labor Department at that time -- or to the Commissioner of Immigration, I am certain for no other purpose than to cause an investigation that would result in one of two things: Either I get word from some higher official to go easy until cotton-chopping time was over, or cotton-picking time was over, or the men who were doing the work would be so upset by the investigation that they would go easy on their own.[20]

Another official of the Immigration and Naturalization service described the pressure group in the following

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[18] Ibid., 25-26.

[19] Ibid., 31.

[20] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Stenographic Report of Proceedings held at El Paso, Texas, August 5, 1950 (Mimeographed), 300.

manner:

> The pressure group is truck farmers and ranchers all over the country that have plenty of money, they are able to make a trip to Washington and to apply that pressure. The man that wants to apply it (immigration law) is the little man. He is the man who gets out there and does the work. He is the one that the wetbacks are taking the job away from. He doesn't have money to go to Washington. He can write a letter to his Representative or Congressman. On the other hand, your farmer or rancher goes up there, and he can call him by his first name. So I think that is the reason that the pressure group, even though it is a minority group, is so effective.[21]

One instance of this pressure was strikingly illustrated in the so-called "El Paso incident" of 1948. In October of that year, thousands of Mexican workers had congregated at Juarez, across the border from El Paso, in anticipation of being contracted for work in the sugar beet and cotton fields of the West and Southwest. The contracting, however, was held up due to a dispute that arose between Mexican officials in Juarez and American authorities in El Paso over the prevailing wage to be paid for cotton picking. The delay worked a great hardship on the Mexican workers, most of whom were without money, food, or lodgings. Consequently, a number of them began to sift across the border in search of employment. The Border Patrol, under pressure from farmers and politicians, abandoned all pretense of trying to prevent the workers from entering, and as the word

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[21] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 75.

spread, Mexican nationals streamed across the River. Once on this side the aliens were processed by the Border Patrol as to name, age, and home address and then paroled to farmers and recruiting agents who moved them out to the fields. When the need had been supplied, the immigration officers again turned to apprehending wetbacks and returning them to Mexico.[22]

Along with the pressure applied by employers of wetbacks, immigration officials faced other obstacles in their efforts to enforce the immigration laws regarding the apprehension of illegal aliens. They were hindered by a shortage of border patrolmen; by their inability to prosecute all aliens apprehended; by the lack of legislation which would permit patrolmen to enter upon private property to search for aliens; and by the practice of legalizing wetbacks which was begun in 1947. In 1951 there were less than nine hundred border patrolmen responsible for guarding the 1,600 miles of boundary between the United States and Mexico. In 1953 the San Antonio District had some 350 border patrolmen. Of these, 157 patroled the McAllen sector, which goes as far north as Kingsville and Falfurias. J. W. Holland, Director

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[22] Ibid., 52; Hart Stilwell, "The Wetback Tide," Common Ground, IX (Summer, 1949), 3-5; Art Liebson, "The Wetback Invasion," in George I. Sanchez and Lyle Saunders, "Wetbacks," a Preliminary Report to the Advisory Committee, Study of Spanish-speaking People (Mimeographed), 13-15.

of the San Antonio District, pointed out at the time that the number would have held back the 2,700 aliens apprehended in 1943, but that they were hardly sufficient in 1953.[23]

In regard to the prosecution of apprehended wetbacks, under the immigration laws of the United States an illegal alien was guilty of a misdemeanor for the first offense, and the second offense carried a fine of $1,000 and two years in prison. Due to the great number of wetbacks, however, legal action was brought against only a few of them, most of whom were picked up repeatedly for illegal entry. Immigration authorities at McAllen, for example, reported that in 1949 only twenty-five wetbacks out of every ten thousand apprehended were prosecuted.[24] The few wetbacks who were singled out for prosecution remained in jail for several weeks waiting

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[23] San Antonio Light, July 12, 1953, p. 1. In 1954 the Border Patrol made a concentrated effort to push the wetbacks back into Mexico. "Operation wetback," as the drive was called, began in California the latter part of June where the Border Patrol utilized not only its regular force but investigators and every other type of officer as well. After the California drive was completed, part of the force was transferred to Texas where it joined with immigration officers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley for a similar drive early in July. The result was that the number of illegal aliens in the Valley was drastically reduced (see U.S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies, and Manpower of the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. on H. R. 3822, March 16, 17, 21, and 22, 1955 (Washington, 1955), 88.).

[24] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 76.

trial, and those who came before a federal judge usually were given suspended sentences on condition that they not come back to the United States for five years hence.

In their search for illegal aliens the authority of immigration officers to enter onto private property was not always clear. Although they had to have a search warrant before searching private property, they could enter without a warrant if they knew that there was an alien on the property who might escape. The situation was further complicated in March, 1948 when the Supreme Court ruled that it was not a punishable offense to conceal or harbor an illegal alien. The court based its decision upon the fact that the Immigration Law of 1917 made no provision for punishing persons guilty of such an act.[25]

The practice of legalizing illegal aliens from Mexico tended to accelerate the wetback traffic and hampered the enforcement of the immigration laws.[26] The attitude of immigration officials toward the legalization of wetbacks was expressed by the Director of the El Paso Immigration District in 1950 before the President's Commission on Migratory Labor:

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[25] United States v. Evans, 333 U. S. 483 (1948).

[26] The legalization of wetbacks is discussed in Chapter IX.

> It is a crime for a Mexican or any other alien to enter the United States illegally; it is a crime for anyone else to assist him or to encourage him to come. And yet, I think our government and its agencies are more to be condemned than either the alien or the farmer who encourages him to come, because we, every time we contract 'wetback' aliens unlawfully in the country, we are encouraging more to come in violation of the law.... Everybody interested is wrong in permitting that 'wetback' system to continue, and if the Commission doesn't do anything else, I would rather see them just throw the line open and let the aliens come through and let them have all they want than to encourage them to come in violation of the law. One thing or the other; they either ought to rescind the law or enforce it.[27]

Thus, desired by the farmer and aided by the relatively lax enforcement of the immigration laws, the Mexican national was encouraged to enter the United States illegally in search of employment. In their study of the wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Lyle Saunders and Olen Leonard found the majority of wetbacks whom they interviewed to be between the ages of sixteen and thirty, with twenty and twenty-four the most common ages. Most of the aliens were married or had been married previously. The married men were somewhat older than the single workers, but most of them fell within the above age bracket. The number of female wetbacks was small compared to the number of males, and most of the females were young children or women accompanying their husbands. Although most of the aliens interviewed had been farm operators or agricultural laborers in Mexico,

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[27] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, El Paso, 292-293.

considerable numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers from other occupations were found working on Valley farms.[28]

Of the wetbacks interviewed, Leonard and Saunders found that even though more workers came from the border state of Nuevo Leon than any other one state, the majority or sixty-five percent of the number studied came from the interior of Mexico. Nearly one-third of those coming from the interior came from the two states of Guanajuato and San Luis Potosi, while large numbers came from Jalisco, Michoacan, Zacatecas, and Durango.[29]

Most of the wetbacks learned of the opportunities for work in the United States through the "grapevine." A few had been to the United States in previous years and had some idea of what conditions were like on this side of the border. Only a small number of workers interviewed by Saunders and Leonard had heard of employment available in the United States "through formal channels of communication."[30]

Some of the workers who crossed the border had originally been drawn from the interior to work on the farms in northern Mexico. The Mexican side of the Rio Grande Valley experienced a great economic expansion during the 1940's.

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[28] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 26.

[29] Ibid., 28-32.

[30] Ibid., 36.

Cotton production in the Matamoros area alone increased from 46,000 bales in 1939 to 302,259 bales in 1949.[31] To supply the additional labor required for their expanded agriculture, Mexican farmers encouraged the seasonal migration of workers from the interior, where labor was plentiful and farm wages lower than in the north. Usually more laborers came north than were needed. In 1950, for example, a Mexican official estimated that while 25,000 Mexican workers were needed on the farms in the Matamoros area, approximately 60,000 workers came from the interior seeking employment.[32] The surplus workers, hearing of job opportunities in the United States, tended to drift across the border in search of employment. In other instances, workers deserted their jobs in Mexico for the higher wages available in the United States.

In their study Saunders and Leonard found that the majority of the wetbacks interviewed had come to the border by bus or train. Many arrived at the border penniless, having spent all of their money for transportation. Most of them made the trip with friends or relatives, but many came alone. Those travelling alone gave as the reason the fact that they would be freer to move in search of employment.

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[31] Nelson, Labor Requirements in the Rio Grande Valley, 18.

[32] Ibid., 19.

A large number of aliens travelled in family groups which included husband, wife, and children, and sometimes other relatives such as uncles and nephews. The family groups tried to find employment for all one farm, and usually remained together even when all could not get jobs. Such groups had a tendency to collect various items as dishes, cooking utensils, and bedding which encumbered them and made them more difficult to deport when apprehended by the Border Patrol.[33]

Upon their arrival at the Mexican border towns, the workers congregated in the plazas and the sections around the railroad in order to obtain information on the availability of jobs in the United States and the best means of getting them. At this point the worker often came into contact with a smuggler, labor contractor, or an agent of an employer who was ready to give him advice on the best way of entering the United States and securing employment. The worker, often in desperate need of money was easy prey for such persons.[34]

The smugglers were familiar with the habits of both Mexican and American officials. They knew of the best places and the most opportune time to cross the border. For their services they charged the workers all the traffic would bear --

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[33] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 36-38.

[34] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 76-77.

from ten pesos to as much as seventy pesos.[35] Workers who were without money to pay the smugglers were often taken across the border where they were "sold" to trucker-contractors who were in turn compensated by the employers for delivering the wetback to his farm.[36]

Often groups of workers were guided by a person who had been to the United States previously and knew the way. In many cases the guide would be in touch with a farmer in this country or another person from whom he learned of places where employment was available. Some workers wrote to a friend or employer and arranged to be met at some designated spot along the border. Then there were others who had been apprehended and deported numerous times and who had become quite expert at finding their way around.[37]

Along the Texas border the crossing of the Rio Grande was usually accomplished by wading or swimming, depending upon the amount of water in the River. Some crossed on rafts, boats, or anything that floated, such as boards or paper bags filled with air. The crossing was at times very hazardous. This was especially true when the River was high, and even when the River was low there were many deep holes

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[35] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, El Paso, 241.

[36] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 77.

[37] Ibid.

into which a person could fall. Periodically, Valley newspapers reported on wetbacks who had been found dead in the River. Many of the bodies were never identified and the cause of death was not always determined. It is commonly believed that many returning wetbacks were killed as they crossed the River and robbed of the money that they had earned in the United States.[38]

Once in the United States the wetbacks generally took the first jobs they could find. Most of them approached farmers wherever they found them and asked for employment. At times, they were contracted by farmers who travelled the roads near the border until they found alien workers looking for jobs. Labor contractors, usually Texas-Mexicans, also recruited wetbacks. These individuals often contracted with cotton farmers to harvest their cotton at a stipulated amount per hundredweight. The contractor then recruited wetbacks, transported them to the fields, weighed the cotton, kept count of the amount picked by each worker, and hauled the cotton to the gin. For these services the contractor usually deducted fifty cents per hundredweight from the amount paid by the farmer. What was left went to the workers. In 1950 many Valley farmers refused to use the contract method of getting their cotton picked. Instead, they recruited wetbacks

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[38] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 38-39.

themselves and hauled the picked cotton to the gin. The resulting savings, according to Saunders and Leonard, did not go to the worker in the form of higher wages but to the farmer in the form of greater profits.[39]

Once the wetback had been hired, various methods were used to keep him on the job. Since aliens were subject to immediate deportation if they were apprehended by the Border Patrol, they were told that if they left their jobs, they would be turned over to the officials; or if they went to town or walked down the road, they would be picked up and deported. Another device used by some farmers was to withhold all or part of the wetback's pay until his services were no longer required. In addition, there were farmers who deliberately got the alien into debt by inducing him to buy on credit at their stores or commissaries in order to keep the worker on the job. Some employers also resorted to the practice of withholding part of the worker's wages as a so-called "deposit." The purpose of the "deposit" was to assure the return of the worker in the event he was picked up and sent back to Mexico. In regard to this practice, the President's Commission reported:

> Members of this Commission personally interviewed wetback workers apprehended by immigration officers in

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[39] Ibid., 51-52.

> the Lower Rio Grande Valley. These workers had been paid for the cotton they had picked during the preceding 2 or 3 weeks. However, their employers had withheld $10 to $15 from their pay. Such sums, we discovered, are known as 'deposits.' To redeem this deposit, the wetback was required to reenter illegally and to reappear on the farm employer's premises within 10 days.[40]

On the whole, wetbacks remained in the Lower Rio Grande Valley for relatively short periods of time. Only a very small percentage of the wetbacks interviewed by Saunders and Leonard had been in the United States for more than a year. Some, however, had lived in this country from ten to twenty years. Concerning the latter aliens, they wrote:

> It is quite probable that a process similar to the 'passing' of Negroes into the white groups occurs in the Valley and in other areas where the wetback can live among native Spanish-speaking residents. A wetback newly arrived from Mexico is, of course, quite conspicuous. One who has managed to avoid being caught begins after a time to blend into the human landscape. He learns new social habits and takes on new linguistic ways. His clothing and his mannerisms change subtly. The longer he stays, the harder he is to detect visually, and the greater are his chances of escaping apprehension.[41]

Such persons were the exception rather than the rule, for most wetbacks preferred to live in Mexico and come to the United States only for seasonal employment.

While employed in the United States, the conditions under which the wetbacks lived were generally deplorable. Many farm employers provided no housing for their workers with the result that wetbacks often slept in the open, under

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[40] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 77-78.

[41] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 34.

wagons, or in trucks. It was reported that "the living standards which Mexican nationals are willing to tolerate... have made it unnecessary for Valley farmers to provide housing, sanitary facilities and other non-wage perquisites adequate to retain a permanent resident farm population familiar with or educated to normal American standards."[42] In describing the housing provided wetbacks in the Valley, Saunders and Leonard reported:

> A certain minimum of housing and services are provided the wetback hired to do agricultural work.... Shelter of a sort is usually furnished the worker, although in harvest seasons when the number of wetbacks is large, many of them live in the open.
>
> Shelters vary in quality from one farm to another, but generally provide nothing beyond the bare minimum. The most common type is a single room shack, seldom larger than 8'x10' or 10'x12'. The better ones are constructed of eight or ten inch planks nailed on to a 2x4 frame. The rare new or nearly new ones may be painted. Most are old, weatherbeaten, dark, and draughty. There may or may not be a plank floor; in most cases there is not. Most of the shacks have a single door and a single window, both unscreened. Some have no windows. There is rarely much furniture. Cooking is done over an open fire kindled in a tub, bucket, or pan which has been filled with ashes.
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> Clothes are hung on nails driven into the walls. The floor serves as chair, table, and bed. Some of the larger growers who use wetbacks the entire year provide somewhat better living quarters, but even the 'better' furnishing seldom include more than a small, portable kerosene stove; a few orange crates nailed to the wall to serve as shelves; a table; a chair or two; and, perhaps, a battered iron cot, without mattress.[43]

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[42] Nelson, Labor Requirements in the Rio Grande Valley, 23.

[43] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 52-53.

The President's Commission had the following to say about the living conditions of the wetbacks:

> Members of this Commission personally inspected wetback camps in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in the El Paso Valley, and in the Imperial Valley. Where the wetback makes up the major proportion of the seasonal and migratory work force, virtually no housing, sanitary facilities, or other conditions of civilized living are supplied. Where the wetback concentration is proportionately less, housing conditions tend to improve but even so, remain far below the level of decency. A witness testifying at Brownsville did not overstate the squalor of the housing and living conditions that are much too common in the Lower Rio Grande Valley when he said, 'I have seen, with my own eyes, people living in these shacks and sheds, getting their water to use, drink, and cook with, out of irrigation ditches, no type of sanitary facilties, bathing or toilet facilities of any kind within sight; living in shacks that I wouldn't put a horse in.'[44]

Living under such poor conditions, the wetbacks presented a serious health problem. Then, too, by entering illegally they underwent no physical examination and, therefore, could have been carriers of contagious diseases. Once they were in the United States, they rarely received medical attention due to either a lack of money to pay for a doctor's services, or fear of being apprehended. Furthermore, the public health services which were available to residents were closed to the illegal alien.[45]

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[44] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 85.

[45] Ibid., 84.

The conditions under which the wetbacks worked were as bad as their living conditions. Their work day was long -- ranging from eight to twelve hours. Moreover, they were in no position to bargain with employers in an effort to secure better working conditions. Instead, they had to accept whatever terms the employer offered; for if they protested, the employer could threaten to report them to the immigration authorities. Therefore, what the wetback received was largely "determined by the employer's conscience and the opinions of similarly situated friends and neighbors."[46] For the wetback who refused to accept the conditions set by an employer there was an alternative to remain unemployed or to face deportation.

The wages paid wetbacks along the border were extremely low. In the El Paso area in 1948 farmers were paying $1.50 per hundred for cotton picking.[47] In 1950 the prevailing wage in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was reported at $.25 an hour. For cotton picking Valley farmers were paying $1.25 per hundred pounds, and in some instances it was reported that farmers near the River were paying as little as $.50 and $.75 per hundred.[48]

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[46] Saunders, The Wetback in the Rio Grande Valley, 43-44.

[47] Leibson, Wetbacks, 10.

[48] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, Brownsville, 202, 244-245.

The effect that the widespread use of alien labor had on general farm wages in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was revealed in the study made by Eastin Nelson and Frederic Meyers. They wrote:

> Agricultural wages in the Valley are undeniably lower than elsewhere in Texas. For example, at a time (1947) when daily wages for chopping cotton in the Valley were about $2.25, in the Northeast Sandy Lands of Texas they were $3.00, in the Corpus Christi and Coast Prairie areas they were $4.00, in the Rolling Plains $5.00, and in the High Plains $5.25. For regular farm work on cotton farms, when the typical daily rate in the Valley was $2.50, in these other areas of Texas they were from $3.50 to $5.00. When tractor drivers earned $3.00 per day in the Valley, they earned from $4.00 to $6.00 elsewhere in Texas. Rates for picking cotton ranged from $.25 to $.50 per hundred higher outside the Valley than in it.[49]

In 1950 most of the cotton in the Valley was picked at the rate of $1.25 per hundredweight while the state-wide average for that year as reported by the United States Department of Agriculture was $2.45 per hundredweight. From these figures, the President's Commission concluded that "the Lower Rio Grande Valley cotton growers got their cotton picked for approximately one-half the wages paid by the average cotton grower of Texas."[50] In 1954 Rocco Siciliano, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Manpower, pointed out that cotton picking rates ranged from $1.25 to $2.00 per hundredweight in the Valley, whereas the rates for

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[49] Nelson, Labor Requirements in the Rio Grande Valley, 23.

[50] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 78-79.

cotton pulling, a simpler operation which is traditionally performed at a lower rate than cotton picking, were from $1.50 to $3.00 in northern Texas where wetback penetration was much smaller. The Valley cotton farmer, then, enjoyed "a subsidy of about $1.50 per 100 pounds compared with the farmers in other portion of Texas and in Arkansas and Mississippi, who pay $3 or more per 100 pounds."[51]

With the widespread use of wetback labor depressing wages in the border areas, domestic agricultural workers in South Texas were forced to decide between remaining and working for wetback wages, thereby lowering their standard of living; or leaving for other parts of the state and nation where wages were higher and working conditions better. Faced with these two alternatives, more and more Texas-Mexicans chose the latter and entered the migratory labor stream.

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[51] U. S. Congress, Senate, To Control Illegal Migration, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Naturalization of the Committee on the Judiciary, U. S. Senate, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., on S. 3660 and S. 3661, July 12-14, 1954 (Washington, 1954), 36.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONTRACTING OF MEXICAN NATIONALS

The mass migration of thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants into the United States not only alarmed the United States immigration officials but also caused some concern among Mexican officials who were disturbed by the exploitation of Mexican citizens. Authorities in both countries, therefore, tried to find some solution to the problem. In January and February, 1947, meetings by officials of the two countries were held in Mexico City to consider what action could be taken. As a result of these discussions, Mexico requested that the wetbacks in the United States be placed under contract. Aside from humanitarian reasons, the Mexican government had a practical reason for this request. With the United States government urging that it be allowed to contract more Mexican nationals, Mexico felt that it would be better to allow the contracting of the workers who were already in the United States, since Mexican employers were reluctant to see still more of their labor taken away.

This suggestion met with the approval of the United States officials, for farm employers in this country favored

the legalizing of the wetbacks over the contracting of workers from the interior of Mexico since they could save in transportation costs as well as be assured of experienced workers.[1] Accordingly, an agreement was reached on February 4, 1947 and subsequently signed on March 10 whereby Mexicans illegally in the United States could have their status legalized. Although an agreement signed the following year discontinued the policy of legalizing wetbacks, the practice was renewed under subsequent agreements signed in 1949, 1950, 1951, and 1952.

The 1947 agreement stipulated that wetbacks be returned to Mexican border ports where they could then be selected for re-entry into the United States for employment under the protection of contracts which would be drawn up by the two governments.[2] This provision for the return of the illegal alien to the border before he could be contracted was included to mollify the Immigration and Naturalization Service which felt that the legalizing of wetbacks jeopardized the enforcement of the immigration laws.[3] Furthermore, to reduce the flow of wetbacks into the United States, Mexico

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[1] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 52.

[2] Mexican Agricultural Workers; Legal Employment of Certain Workers who Entered the United States Illegally, U. S. Dept. of State, Treaties and other International Acts Series, No. 1857 (Washington, 1949), 2.

[3] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 53.

suggested that the United States consider legislation that would penalize employers found using illegal labor, while at the same time Mexico would take steps to restrict the migration of workers from the interior to the border areas.[4]

The work contract was to be endorsed by an official of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to show that the farmer had observed the immigration laws of the United States and had official authority to contract Mexican workers for agricultural employment. Those farmers who continued to use wetback labor would not be given permission to contract workers. It was also agreed that the farmer was to pay the cost of transporting the worker from the port of entry to the place of employment and back, which was in keeping with Article 29 of the Mexican Labor Law.[5]

A supplementary agreement was likewise signed on March 10, 1947, dealing specifically with the contracting of wetbacks in Texas. Under this agreement approximately 55,000 wetbacks in Texas became legal contract workers.[6] The Mexican delegation emphasized in the agreement that its action in allowing the legalization of wetbacks in Texas did not mean that Mexico had abandoned its policy of refusing states

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[4] Mexican Agricultural Workers, Treaties and Other International Acts Series, No. 1857, p. 3.

[5] Ibid. For the Mexican Labor Law see Labor Legislation of Mexico, U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin No. 569 (Washington, 1932), 14.

[6] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 39.

which discriminated against persons of Mexican nationality permission to contract Mexican workers. The delegation pointed out that Mexico felt justified in allowing Texas to contract wetbacks because that state seemed "to be on the road to a favorable solution, in view of the repeated proofs of friendship and good will which the Honorable Beauford Jester, Governor of said State /in 1947/, has shown toward Mexico."[7]

The signing of the 1947 agreement permitted Texas farm employers to use Mexican nationals legally for the first time, whereas other states had been allowed to contract Mexican labor since 1942. Indeed, the policy of employing Mexican agricultural workers under contract had its origin during World War II. From the beginning of the defense effort, domestic workers were drawn more and more from agriculture into the armed forces and into more lucrative and attractive jobs in industry. As they watched their labor supply dwindle, agricultural interests began demanding that foreign labor be imported for work on American farms. During 1941 and the early part of 1942, growers in Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, and California asked that the restrictions on Mexican immigration be lifted to permit workers from that country to

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[7] Mexican Agricultural Workers; Legal Employment of Certain Workers who Entered the State of Texas Illegally, U. S. Dept. of State, Treaties and Other International Acts Series, No. 1858, (Washington, 1949), 2.

come into those states temporarily to meet the seasonal labor requirements. Their request was denied in 1941, but in 1942 the federal government recognized the need for additional farm labor, and consequently brought the matter before the Mexican government.[8] After extended negotiations, Mexico finally agreed to permit the contracting of Mexican nationals for employment in the United States, provided they were protected against exploitation. The conditions under which Mexican workers could come into the United States were embodied in an agreement which was signed by representatives of the two countries on August 4, 1942. The general provisions of the agreement stipulated that Mexicans employed in the United States were not to engage in military activities, were not to be subjected to any form of discrimination, nor were they to be used to displace domestic workers or to lower wage rates in the United States. In addition, the workers were to be furnished transportation and subsistence to and from Mexico.[9]

Under the 1942 agreement the workers were contracted directly by the United States government which in turn subcontracted them to the employers. Responsibility for seeing that the employer abided by the terms of the contract rested

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[8] Wayne D. Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 200-201.

[9] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVI, Part 2, p. 1766 (1942).

with the federal government. Wages and working conditions were carefully regulated in the work contract. The braceros (legally contracted Mexican workers) were to receive the prevailing wage in the area in which they were employed, provided that their earnings were not less than thirty cents an hour.[10] Workers were also protected against unemployment caused by conditions beyond their control such as inclement weather and poor organization of work on the part of the farmer. Employers were required to pay the workers a subsistence allowance amounting to three dollars per day for each day that the workers were unemployed during seventy-five percent of the contract period, excluding Sundays, and provide subsistence equal to that furnished domestic farm laborers the remaining twenty-five percent of the contract period.[11]

[10] Ibid. In March, 1946 the minimum wage was increased to 37 cents per hour and each worker was guaranteed $33.60 for two weeks work. If the worker was willing and able to work and did not make $33.60 during a two week period, the difference was to be made up by the employer. Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 211.

[11] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVI, Part 2, p. 1767-1768. This provision in the contract was modified and clarified in subsequent amendments. In April, 1943 an amendment was added making it clear that laborers were to receive food and lodgings for 25 percent of the contract period when they were unemployed, yet willing and able to work. In May, 1944 the contract was again amended so as to require the employer to furnish the worker subsistence free of charge for each day, exclusive of Sunday, on which the worker was ready to work, but not furnished employment for more than four hours. The contract was further amended in 1945, specifying that the cash payment owed to workers as a result of the failure of employers to supply employment during 75 percent of the contract period be made at the end of each payroll period instead

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Another clause in the contract stipulated that workers were to "enjoy as regards occupational diseases and accidents the same guarantees enjoyed by other agricultural workers under United States legislation."[12] Also, the workers could not be forced to purchase their supplies from commissaries, but were free to purchase goods wherever they desired. Finally, the contract specified that housing conditions, sanitary and medical services provided for the workers be equal to those enjoyed by domestic workers in the same vicinity.[13]

The 1942 agreement designated the Farm Security Administration as the agency to administer the bracero program because of the good record that agency had in giving assistance to persons of Mexican extraction in the United States. However, with the passage of Public Law 45 (78th Congress, 1st Session in 1943) the direction of the program was placed under the War Food Administration, apparently without international consultation, and money was appropriated for the operation of the program. The Office of Labor was established

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[11] (continued) of at the end of the contract period as had been the practice. In addition, the worker was to receive subsistence, without cost, each day, except Sundays, on which he was not furnished employment. Part of the cost was assumed by the United States government up until January 1, 1944, at which time the employers were forced to assume the entire expense. Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 207-209.

[12] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVI, Part 2, p. 1767. The Mexican government was soon to learn that this clause had little meaning, since with few exceptions, agricultural workers in the United States had no such protection.

[13] Ibid.

within the War Food Administration to manage the program. Among its duties were the recruiting and contracting of workers in Mexico, transporting them to and from places of employment in the United States, providing subsistence and emergency medical treatment for workers en route, clearing and entrance of workers into the United States, and reporting workers who violated their contracts and became subject to deportation. The Office of Labor also provided health and medical services for the workers and in some instances made arrangements for the housing and feeding of them. Where the employer furnished housing, the Office had to see that the shelter met the standards set by the Mexican government.[14]

From the beginning of the emergency farm labor supply program in 1942 until its termination in 1947, some 219,546 Mexican workers entered the United States for temporary agricultural employment. Although these workers were employed in twenty-four states, the majority worked in California, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.[15] Under the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program no Mexican contract labor was used in Texas. Mexico reserved the right in the international agreements, as previously noted, to determine which states would be eligible to contract braceros; therefore, due to alleged widespread discrimination in Texas against persons of Mexican

[14] Robert C. Jones, Mexican War Workers in the United States (Washington, 1945), 2-4, 18.

[15] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 38-40.

descent, Mexico had refused to permit its citizens to be contracted for work in that state. When the Texas state government promised to make an effort to alleviate the situation, Mexico agreed, in the summer of 1943, to allow Mexican labor to be sent from other states to Texas, but still refused to permit the direct recruitment of workers from Mexico. This concession was of little benefit to Texas farmers since Mexican laborers would not consent to leave high wage states in order to go to Texas where the wages were generally lower.[16]

The basic statutory authority for the war-time program was the ninth proviso to Section 3 of the 1917 Immigration Law, which gave the Commissioner of Immigration, upon the approval of the United States Attorney General, authority to "issue rules and prescribe conditions, including the exaction of such bonds as may be necessary, to control and regulate the admission and return of otherwise inadmissable aliens applying for temporary admission."[17] This law was supplemented in 1943 by Public Law 45 (78th Congress, 1st Session) and subsequent amendments which authorized the expenditure of federal funds for the recruitment, transportation, placement, and supervision of foreign workers.[18] In April, 1947, Congress

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[16] Rasmussen, Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 224.

[17] U. S. Statutes at Large, XXXIX, Part I, p. 878 (1917).

[18] U. S. Statutes at Large, LVII, Part I, pp. 70-73 (1943).

passed Public Law 40 (80th Congress, 1st Session) which provided for the liquidation of the emergency farm labor supply program and the repatriation by December 31, 1947 of all foreign workers who had come to the United States under the program.[19]

With the end of the importation of foreign labor in sight, various agricultural interests urged that Mexican workers be allowed to continue coming into the United States for seasonal work in agriculture, and they recommended that the federal government continue negotiations with Mexico for that purpose. As a result, another series of international agreements were signed with Mexico in 1948, 1949, 1951, 1952, and 1954, regulating the recruitment and employment of Mexican nationals in this country.

The agreement signed in 1949 was the first under which Texas farmers were allowed to recruit workers directly from Mexico. Even so, not all Texas farmers were eligible to use braceros, for Mexico still retained the right to deny workers employment in areas where discrimination against Mexicans existed. Consequently, in 1949 and following years a number of communities were placed on Mexico's "blacklist" and employers in those areas were unable to contract Mexican nationals. Also ineligible to contract workers under the

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[19] U. S. Statutes at Large, LXI, Part I, pp. 55-56 (1947).

post-war agreements were those employers who (1) knowingly hired wetbacks, (2) failed to provide adequate housing, sanitary facilities or drinking water for workers, and (3) were unwilling to pay the workers a living wage.[20]

Texas employers who were eligible to use braceros had to meet several conditions before they were allowed to contract the workers they needed. First, they had to have a certificate from the United States Employment Service declaring that domestic labor was not available at the prevailing wage in the area for which braceros were requested and that the use of foreign labor would not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of native workers. Secondly, the employers had to get a permit from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service to bring the workers into the country.[21] Finally, they had to agree to indemnify the United States against any loss that it might suffer as a result of the failure of the employer to live up to his contract.[22]

In addition to the provisions contained in federal legislation and in the international agreements, the employer

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[20] Mexican Agricultural Workers; Agreement between the United States of America and Mexico Replacing Agreement of August 1, 1949, U. S. Dept. of State, Treaties and Other International Acts Series, No. 2331 (Washington, 1952), 34, 38.

[21] Ibid., 37.

[22] U. S. Statutes at Large, LXV, Part I, p. 120 (1951).

was also bound by an inter-governmentally negotiated work contract which further defined the conditions under which Mexican nationals were to be employed. Among the general provisions were:[23]

(1) Transportation. The employer was made responsible for paying the cost of transporting the workers from the reception centers along the border to the place of employment and back to the reception centers when the contract was terminated. This included the cost of food, lodgings, and other necessary expenses that might be incurred on the trip. Workers could either be transported in common carriers or other adequate facilities. If trucks or similar vehicles were used, the workers were to be provided with fixed seats, be protected against inclement weather, and be covered by insurance in case of an accident en route.

(2) Guarantee of employment. The employer had to guarantee workers employment for at least seventy-five percent of the contract period.[24] If the worker failed to receive employment during this period, he was to receive the same pay for those unemployed days that he would have received had he worked.

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[23] These provisions are contained in the Standard Work Contract, as amended, which is found in U. S. Dept. of Labor, Information Concerning Entry of Mexican Agricultural Workers into the United States (Washington, 1952), 11-14.

[24] Contracts could not be made for a period of more than six months nor less than six weeks.

(3) Wages. The wages paid by the employer were to be the prevailing wage rate received by domestic workers in the area for the same kind of work, provided that the rates were no lower than the rate specified in the contract (usually fifty cents an hour). Where wage rates were higher for such specialized tasks as driving a tractor or other farm machinery, the employer was required to pay the worker the higher rates. Farmers employing workers on a piece rate basis were to pay the worker during the first 48 hours of employment at the rate of two dollars for eight hours of work, or at the prevailing piece rate, whichever was higher. After the first forty-eight hours, the worker was to be paid on a straight piece rate basis. The purpose of this provision was to protect the worker while he was getting adapted to the job. The employer was to pay the workers at least every two weeks, including any subsistence payments for which the worker might be eligible. For each payment made, the employer was to furnish data in Spanish and English showing the total earnings for the period, rate of pay, hours worked, days for which subsistence was paid, and a list of all deductions.

(4) Housing. The employer was required to furnish the worker, without cost, hygienic lodgings not inferior to that provided for domestic workers in the area, and adequate for the climatic conditions in the area. When necessary, the workers were to be supplied with blankets, mattresses, and

cots or beds. Over-crowding was to be avoided and adequate sanitary facilities were to be provided. A supply of water was to be furnished without cost to the worker within reasonable distance from his lodgings and place of work. If fuel for heating was necessary, the employer was to supply sufficient amounts to heat the workers' quarters.

(5) Food. The employer was to furnish restaurant facilities for the workers or to provide them with cooking and eating utensils, cooking facilities, and fuel ready to be used. If the employer chose to provide restaurant facilities, the workers were to receive meals on the same terms as domestic agricultural workers. Three meals were to be furnished the workers at cost, but not to exceed $1.75 per day. Workers were not obligated to utilize the facilities furnished by the employer. They were to decide whether or not to eat at the employer's restaurant within one week after their arrival. Should the workers decide to prepare their own food, the employer then had to supply the necessary equipment. On those work days which the worker was willing and able to work and employment was not furnished for more than four hours, the employer was required to provide the worker free subsistence for the day, in addition to the wages for the hours worked. Subsistence was defined as three meals a day, or where the worker prepared his own meals, the employer was to pay the worker an amount stipulated in the contract.

(6) Protection from immoral and illegal influences. The employer was required to take reasonable precautions to prevent persons engaged in illegal and immoral activities from frequenting the places where workers were employed.

(7) Insurance. The employer was required to furnish insurance or an indemnity bond insuring the workers against death, injury, or disease brought about as a result of employment. Benefits were not to be less than those provided for in the schedule contained in the work contract. Moreover, medical and hospital expenses were to be paid by the employer for injury or disease connected with employment. If the worker was unable to work due to injuries or disease incurred on the job, but was not hospitalized, the employer had to furnish him subsistence for a period not to exceed six weeks.

(8) Records. Accurate records on each worker were to be kept by the employer. Records were to be kept of the rate of pay, the hours of employment each day, amounts paid for subsistence, and any other information that the Secretary of Labor specified. These records were to be accessible for inspection by authorized officials at reasonable times.

(9) Government inspection. The employer had to allow representatives of the United States Department of Labor and the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as Mexican consuls to inspect the places where workers were housed and employed.

(10) Notification of death, illness, accident. The employer was responsible for notifying the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Mexican Consul for the area of the death of any Mexican worker. In cases of serious accident or illness, the Employment Service and Mexican Consul were to be notified. It was also the duty of the employer to inform the Department of Labor, and Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Mexican Consul if a Mexican worker left his job.

In the international agreements, procedures were outlined to insure the compliance with the terms of the work contracts by both the employer and the worker. The United States Secretary of Labor and the appropriate Mexican consuls were designated as the officials responsible for the enforcement of the contracts. The Secretary of Labor delegated his authority to the Employment Service, which in turn employed compliance officers to investigate complaints of violations of the contracts. Upon learning of a violation, either reported by the employer, the worker, the Mexican consul, or discovered personally, the compliance officer proceeded to investigate the alleged misdeed. In a case where the complaint was made by the Mexican consul or the worker, if the compliance officer found that the charge was unfounded, he reported his findings to the Mexican consul, who, if not satisfied with the report could ask for a joint investigation

of the case. On the other hand, if the compliance officer found that the contract had been violated by one of the parties and believed that the situation could be remedied, he could ask the party accused of the violation to take steps to abide by the contract. When the guilty party failed to take such action, the compliance officer then notified the Mexican consul, who could either accept the findings of the United States official or request that a joint investigation be made of the alleged violation.

Should the Mexican consul accept the findings of the compliance officer to the effect that the contract had been violated, or if a joint investigation produced such evidence, the following action could be taken against the party who had violated the contract: (1) In the case of an employer violating the contract, the Secretary of Labor was authorized to terminate the work contract and the employer was held responsible for all obligations under it, including the payment of wages for three-fourths of the contract period; (2) if a worker violated the contract, the employer, within five days after the decision was handed down, could terminate the contract and his only responsibility was to return the worker to the reception center at the border.[25]

[25] U. S. Dept. of Labor, Information Concerning Entry of Mexican Workers, 7-8.

Arrangements were also made in the International Agreements for the appeal of cases of alleged violation of the work contract. In those instances in which the compliance officer and the Mexican consul could not reach an agreement, all facts were to be sent to Washington where the Secretary of Labor and the representative of the Mexican government would review the findings and render a decision. Either party who was dissatisfied with the rulings of the compliance officer, or the decision of the compliance officer and the Mexican consul when there was a joint investigation, could have his case reviewed by the Secretary of Labor and the Mexican representative in Washington for a final decision.[26] Studying this system for the enforcement of the contracts and the adjustment of complaints, the President's Commission on Migratory Labor reported that it was cumbersome and far from satisfactory. According to the Commission, it was especially inadequate for the worker who was in a strange country and suffered from a language handicap, making it difficult for him to contact the appropriate authorities so that he could voice his complaints. Consequently, little use was made of the conciliation process. Instead, if workers became dissatisfied with their employment, they deserted their contracts and became illegal aliens.[27]

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[26] Ibid., 8.

[27] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 50-51.

In addition to seeing that both parties complied with the terms of the work contracts, the federal government assumed other duties in connection with the post-war foreign labor program in 1951 when the 82nd Congress passed Public Law 78. Under this measure the United States Secretary of Labor was made responsible for all aspects of the Mexican farm labor program, except those relating to public health and immigration policy.[28] He was authorized to recruit workers in Mexico in a manner acceptable to the two countries; to construct and operate reception centers in the United States to take care of workers entering and leaving this country; and to provide transportation for the workers between recruitment points in Mexico and the reception centers in the United States. The Secretary of Labor was also given the responsibility to provide for subsistence, emergency medical care, and burial expenses for workers who died at or while being transported to, the reception centers; to assist the workers and employers in signing contracts; and to guarantee that employers would abide by the terms of the contract in

[28] At the recruiting points in Mexico, workers were examined by officials of the United States Public Health Service to determine if they met the mental and health requirements for admission to the United States. Immigration authorities also checked the workers to find out if they were admissable under the Immigration laws. If it were considered necessary, the above officials could conduct additional investigations at the reception centers. U. S. Dept. of Labor, Information Concerning Entry of Mexican Workers, 2.

regard to wages and transportation. To defray the cost of these operations the employer was required to pay the United States government an amount not to exceed $15.00 per worker.[29]

Even with the government assuming the responsibility and most of the tasks connected with the Mexican farm labor program, Texas farmers and their spokesmen still were dissatified with the program. Indeed, very little about the program escaped their criticism. For one thing, they claimed that the minimum wage was too high, particularly the piece rate wage. They argued that the provision calling for the payment of minimum hourly rates during the first forty-eight hours of employment or the prevailing piece rate, whichever was higher, worked a hardship on the employer since the workers made little effort to do much work during this period, preferring to earn the hourly wage.[30]

Employers also objected to paying the cost of transporting the workers from the interior of Mexico to reception centers at the border, maintaining that the farmer should pay only for transporting the braceros from the reception centers

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[29] U. S. Statutes at Large, LXV, Part I, p. 119. Prior to the passage of Public Law 78, employers had been responsible for transporting workers from centers to the place of employment.

[30] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Investigations, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Farm Labor of the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess., Dec. 18, 1950 at Midland, Tex. (Washington, 1951), 216-217.

to the place of employment and return.[31] They further criticized the requirement that employers provide occupational insurance for the workers, especially since the Mexican government insisted on the employer paying for the treatment of any injury or disease "occurring or discovered while the laborer is in this country, even though it may be from his own misconduct or as a result of pre-existing disease which the laborer was afflicted with at the time of his entry into the United States."[32]

The affidavits which the employers were required to sign, pledging that they were not at the time hiring wetbacks nor would they do so in the future, brought forth more criticism. According to the employers, such affidavits were unfair because Mexico was likely to abrogate the international agreements at any time in which case farmers would be forced to hire wetbacks in order to save their crops.[33] On the subject of the availability of Mexican workers, one spokesman for West Texas farmers charged that the Mexican government, under pressure from Mexican employers who wanted to keep a surplus labor on hand in order to maintain low wages at home,

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[31] U. S. Congress, Senate, Extension of the Mexican Farm Labor Program, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, U. S. Senate, 83rd Cong., 1st Sess., on S. Bill 1207, March 23 and 24, 1953 (Washington, 1953), 42-44.

[32] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Investigations, 159-160.

[33] Ibid., 217.

cut off the supply of workers at irregular intervals, making it hard, if not impossible, for the American farmer to get sufficient labor at the time when it was most needed. He charged that "in order to obtain desirable laborers, it is necessary that a bribe be given to the Mexican official in charge of the Mexican side of the border." Furthermore, he claimed that Mexican consuls, receiving complaints from Mexican workers who were returning to Mexico, said nothing to the United States Employment Service or the employer at the time but waited until the date for contracting or re-contracting before he would present the complaints to the employer. The result was that if the employer was unable to meet the consul's objections, he was not allowed to contract workers for the season, and this was discovered at the time when he needed workers the most.[34]

Another complaint centered on the fact that the braceros were offered much more than domestic workers were getting, which caused dissatisfaction among the native workers. It was not the custom, for example, to supply domestic workers with bedding, tableware, eating utensils, and cooking gear. Moreover, the provision requiring employers to provide employment for three-fourths of the contract period was not in keeping with the custom of Texas. "Whether right or wrong," one employer complained, "this provision violates

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[34] Ibid., 159-161.

the general practice in this area; and no such condition is guaranteed the farm laborer who is an American citizen. Both our farmers and our American farm laborers resent regulations requiring more favorable treatment for foreigners than is customarily granted to our own citizens on the same job."[35] The dissatisfaction of domestic workers was also given as a reason for the employers' objections to the requirement that they furnish subsistence when no more than four hours of employment was offered the *bracero* for a day.[36] In addition, the farmers charged that the Mexican government forced them to furnish cotton sacks to the laborers, although it was customary for cotton pickers to pay for the sacks that they used.[37]

Most of the employers' criticism of the international agreements centered on the amount of red tape involved in the program. As one employer testified before the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, "It is an immense amount of correspondence and office work to maintain records of wages, furloughs, returns, re-contracting and other phases connected with the system as it now operates."[38] It was felt, too, that

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[35] *Ibid.*, 234.

[36] *Ibid.*, 217.

[37] *Ibid.*, 160.

[38] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Report of Proceedings, Brownsville*, 84.

more red tape than was necessary was involved in getting workers.[39]

Most of the users of Mexican nationals felt that their interests had not been taken into consideration in the negotiation of the agreements. "Such agreements," declared one employer, "are subject to constant change without prior notice to the employers.... The officials who negotiate the agreements are burdened with many duties and do not have the necessary intimate knowledge of conditions that prevail in the areas affected."[40] Another voiced his opinion more strongly:

> The farmers of America disclaim any credit for the many shortcomings contained in the terms and provisions of the agreement and individual contract agreed to by and between Mexico and our Government. No farmer had anything to do with their writing even though the farmers requested a voice. It has been proven that our swivel-chair theorists went down to Mexico City and played a very poor hand of poker.[41]

Commenting on the charge that United States officials were out-negotiated in dealing with Mexican authorities, the President's Commission on Migratory Labor wrote:

> The Mexican and United States representatives do not approach negotiations with equal freedom for bargaining. Mexico, by law, prescribes minimum standards in several respects for her nationals leaving for employment

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[39] Ibid., 81-82.

[40] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Investigations, 218.

[41] Ibid., 236.

> abroad whereas we, by law, prescribe virtually no minimum standards for domestic agricultural workers. Herein lies the basic difficulty in the International Agreement with Mexico. If we had legislative standards for farm workers equal to those we have for industrial labor, most of the obstacles confronted in its negotiation and administration would vanish.
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> The inherent conflicts in this situation are quite apparent. If the Department of State negotiates with respect to the general interests of the Nation and of amicable international relations, it can scarcely be expected that the private interests of farm employers will, at the same time, be fully satisfied. Conversely, if the State Department, in these negotiations, were to represent farm employer interests exclusively, the general interests of the Nation and of amicable international relations might well be neglected or jeopardized.[42]

The employers believed that the agreement would have been more satisfactory for the farmers had they been able to deal directly with the Mexican officials. A representative of the fruit and vegetable industry of Texas suggested to the President's Commission that the "fruit and vegetable interests should be allowed the opportunity to participate in any negotiations as to labor agreements before they are bound by one such as the so-called International Agreement that is now in effect."[43]

What the employers wanted was a simplified process for recruiting and contracting workers. A white card passport similar to the ones used along the Canadian border was suggested as a possible solution. Under this plan, each worker would be issued a passport and would be able to enter the

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[42] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 50-51.

[43] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report on Proceedings, Brownsville, 77.

country when needed and return to Mexico when there was no more work available. As one employer put it, "There is no need for elaborate procedures in the recruitment of Mexican farm workers because they have been entering the country for temporary work for many years. They know where and when they are needed. The main need is that their entry be recorded in a regular way by the immigration authorities and that the numbers be controlled."[44]

Texas farmers were not alone in voicing dissatisfaction with the bracero program. Persons speaking in behalf of the domestic farm labor force were also critical of the program although for different reasons. These spokesmen were not opposed to the importation of Mexican workers as such. "We are not opposed at any time.../to/ the farmers.../bringing/ in aliens when there is a shortage of help," declared A. F. Cadenas, International Representative of the A. F. of L. at San Antonio. "Naturally, we have to have our crops picked, and we are not opposed to that."[45] The same point of view was expressed in a publication sponsored by the Texas State Federation of Labor and the American G. I. Forum of Texas. The authors wrote: "We agree, that where a genuine labor shortage does exist, braceros may be used rather than

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[44] U. S. Congress, House, Farm Labor Investigations, 218.

[45] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, Brownsville, 109.

lose the crop."[46] What these supporters of the American farm laborer were opposed to was the use of braceros to the detriment of the domestic farm laborers of the state.

These critics admitted that the interests of domestic workers were theoretically protected under the international agreements and by federal legislation. Public Law 78, for example, specifically stated:

> No workers recruited under this title shall be available for employment in any area unless the Secretary of Labor has determined and certified that (1) sufficient domestic workers who are able, willing, and qualified are not available at the time and place needed to perform the work for which such workers are to be employed; (2) the employment of such workers will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers similarly employed, and (3) reasonable efforts have been made to attract domestic workers for such employment at wages and standard hours of work comparable to those offered to foreign workers.[47]

Although these provisions were supposed to safeguard the position of domestic farm labor, spokesmen for the workers pointed out that in reality Public Law 78 offered no real protection at all since enforcement of the law was extremely lax, particularly in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Contrary to the law, Mexican workers were being imported when there ample farm laborers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley "who were very 'able' and completely 'qualified,' but who could not

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[46] Ed Idar, Jr. and Andrew C. McLelland, What Price Wetbacks? (Austin, Texas, n.d.), 54.

[47] U. S. Statutes at Large, LXV, Part I, p. 120.

possibly afford to be 'willing' to work for the twenty-five cents an hour offered to them."[48]

Moreover, the labor spokesmen claimed that the use of contract labor had adversely affected the wages of domestic workers throughout the state. This point was substantiated by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor. In studying the relationship between wage changes and the presence of large numbers of alien workers the Commission found that during World War II, California, using sixty-three percent of the imported Mexican workers, raised its cotton wages 136 percent; whereas Texas, with no contract labor, raised its wages 236 percent. On the other hand, in the post-war period California got eight percent of the Mexican contract workers and raised its cotton wages fifteen percent; while Texas had forty-six percent of the braceros and lowered its wages eleven percent. From these figures the Commission concluded that the use of foreign labor did have a detrimental effect upon the domestic labor force.[49]

According to those persons concerned with the welfare of the domestic workers, what was needed was better enforcement of the law concerning the actual existence of a shortage of domestic labor. First, a more accurate method was needed

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[48] Idar, What Price Wetbacks?, 50.

[49] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 56-59.

for determining if domestic labor was available to do the work. Under the *bracero* program, the prevailing wage that was certified by the Secretary of Labor was set by employers before the opening of the season and was usually lower than the rate which farmers actually paid after the season got underway. As a result of this lower prevailing wage, few domestic workers would accept employment; and the Secretary of Labor felt justified in certifying that domestic labor was not available to do the work. It was argued that this method of determining the prevailing wage was unfair and that workers should be given some voice in its determination.[50]

Furthermore, it was urged that the Secretary of Labor should make certain that domestic farm workers had been offered the same conditions of employment and wages that *braceros* received before certifying a need for Mexican labor. "If the offer concerns wages only, then the wage should be increased a reasonable amount to compensate for the additional guarantee in the *bracero* contract."[51]

Labor spokesmen suggested that the employers' assertion of an existing labor shortage should be scrutinized more carefully by the federal government before admitting foreign workers. It was pointed out that:

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[50] Idar, *What Price Wetbacks*, 50-51.

[51] *Ibid.*, 55.

> We...must learn not to become infected with the panic that grips the farmer the moment his product is ready to harvest. When his cotton is open, it is almost impossible for him to have too many pickers available. He would like to have it picked immediately, and, since he pays for picking by the hundredweight, it costs no more to pick it with one thousand workers than it does with twenty. Until his harvest is out of the field, he is apt to consider that he has a blor shortage, regardless of the number of hands already in the fields. The same holds true in crops other than cotton. Whatever the product, to the farmer it represents a season's labor and investment. Naturally, he wants it harvested before it is damaged by weather, pests or time, but seldom does he stop to consider the problems his haste creates.... His 'critical labor shortage' does not necessarily mean that there are not enough laborers to harvest his crop but may only mean that there are not enough to harvest it as cheaply or as quickly as he would like.[52]

Notwithstanding the criticism of the bracero program by both farmers and farm labor spokesmen, Mexican agricultural workers were contracted in large numbers for work in Texas following World War II. In 1949 Texas employers contracted 42,218 Mexican nationals;[53] 52,713 in 1951;[54] 54,279 in 1952;[55] 62,854 in 1953;[56] and in 1954 the number rose to 158,704.[57]

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[52] Idar, What Price Wetbacks?, 54.

[53] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 54-55.

[54] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate, 82nd Cong., 2nd Sess., on migratory labor, Part I, Feb. 5- March 28, 1952 (Washington, 1952), 357.

[55] U. S. Congress, Senate, Extension of the Mexican Farm Labor Program, 8.

[56] U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., on H. J. Res. 355, Feb. 3-11, 1954 (Washington, 1954), 232.

[57] U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, 37.

CHAPTER X

POSTWAR RECRUITMENT AND DIRECTION OF MIGRANT LABOR

As the number of Mexican nationals entering Texas increased in the years following the end of World War II, the number of Texas-Mexicans leaving the state for seasonal employment in other sections of the country also rose. Indeed, the volume of out-of-state migration was much higher in the postwar period than it had been in the 1930's or during World War II. An estimated 5,000 to 8,000 persons left Texas in 1939 to work in other states,[1] while during the war the largest recorded number was in 1945 when 22,460 persons were sent out of the state by licensed agents.[2] In 1949 the combined number of workers sent out of the state by the Texas Employment Commission and licensed agents jumped to 71,353.[3] The workers went to almost every part of the country and even as far as the Pacific Northwest.

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[1] U. S. Congress, House, Interstate Migration, Pt. 5, p. 1830.

[2] U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, 40.

[3] Ibid.

TABLE 5

MIGRATORY WORKERS SENT OUT OF TEXAS, BY STATES OF DESTINATION, 1954*

State	By TEC+	By Agents#	Total
Arizona	1,303	317	1,620
Arkansas	383	3	386
Colorado	3,959	7,344	11,303
Florida	24	0	24
Idaho	4,019	594	4,613
Illinois	1,337	22	1,359
Indiana	1,082	0	1,082
Iowa	40	231	271
Kansas	268	0	268
Louisiana	141	0	141
Michigan	1,075	7,085	8,160
Minnesota	550	5,608	6,158
Mississippi	95	0	95
Missouri	326	0	326
Montana	23	1,072	1,095
Nebraska	12	860	872
North Carolina	0	22	22
North Dakota	0	1,990	1,990
Ohio	289	2,376	2,665
Oregon	294	0	294
South Dakota	0	362	362
Utah	118	212	330
Washington	1,133	308	1,441
Wisconsin	1,111	2,406	3,517
Wyoming	0	1,022	1,022
Total workers	17,582	31,834	49,416
Total people	24,263	36,244	60,416
Free wheelers, estimated	...	...	7,000
Total people in migration	...	...	67,507

+Texas Employment Commission.

#Agents licensed by Texas Commissioner of Labor.

*Source: Texas Employment Commission, Annual Agricultural and Food Processing Report (ES-225), in U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies, and Manpower of the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. on H. R. 3822, March 16-22, 1955 (Washington, 1955), 171.

The reason for the great seasonal migration of Texas-Mexicans out of the state in the postwar years was basically the same as that which had caused the migration in earlier years -- opportunities for more remunerative employment. For instance, cotton pickers were drawn to Arkansas, Mississippi, and Missouri, where cotton picking rates ranged from fifty cents to one dollar per hundredweight higher than rates in Texas.[4] Added to such disparity in wage rates was the increased competition of wetbacks and Mexican contract laborers in the postwar years.

The competition from Mexican nationals was especially disturbing in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the source of a large part of the migratory labor force of the state. In 1950 it was estimated that approximately 100,000 wetbacks were in the Valley, and that wages for common labor was from fifteen to twenty-five cents per hour. The President's Commission on Migratory Labor that year concluded that "in the Lower Rio Grande Valley the wetback proportion is so high that the wages paid them largely determine the wages paid to everyone there."[5] The same conclusion was borne out earlier in 1949 in a study of 262 migrant families in Colorado in which three out of every four of the heads of families gave

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[4] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1949 (Processed), 27.

[5] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 80.

the presence of the wetback as a factor in their coming to Colorado.[6] Furthermore, a Texas-Mexican in Arizona, whose home was in Weslaco, Texas, gave the following testimony before the President's Commission:

> Q. Why don't you stay around Weslaco and work down there?
> A. Well, I don't stay there because I can't make any money over there in that town.
> Q. What is the reason you can't make any money there?
> A. Well, because there is a lot of laborers in that town and they can't get any work....
> . . . . . .
> Q. I wanted to ask Mr. F___ about these Mexican Nationals in Texas. You say that you couldn't make any money there and wages were too low, there weren't any jobs because there was an abundance of other workers?
> A. Yes.
>
> Q. Were those other workers Mexican Nationals that came across the river?
> A. Yes, sir; they crossed the river, and they worked for 3 or 4 days, dollar a day, two dollars and a half, and that is the reason we can't get jobs.[7]

Even when the number of wetbacks was appreciably reduced by "Operation Wetback" in the summer of 1954, the situation was little improved due to the contracting of Mexican nationals. For example, Valley farmers who had contracted only 3,000 braceros in the entire year of 1953 contracted 50,000 during one thirty day period in 1954 after the intensive wetback drive.[8] Though theoretically braceros were paid the prevailing wage in the area in which they were employed

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[6] Thomas, Migrant Farm Labor in Colorado, 17.

[7] Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 82.

[8] U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, 3.

and in no case less than fifty cents an hour, actually many farmers paid thirty-five to forty cents an hour.[9] Therefore, with cheap foreign labor readily accessible to the Valley farmers, Texas-Mexicans living in the area were unable to make a satisfactory living and moved northward in search of employment. Some stayed within the coundaries of Texas, while others were attracted by higher wages in other states.

Along with the increased competition of laborers from Mexico migration was encouraged by the demand on the part of out-of-state employers for Texas-Mexican labor. Farmers in other states found the Texas-Mexican worker highly desirable, a fact illustrated by the following testimony given by an employer to the President's Commission at Saginaw, Michigan:

> He is a skilled worker, sir. He is most sought after by Michigan farmers, especially on those crops that require close picking, like stringbeans and cucumbers. He is an industrious worker. There are, of course, exceptions, but generally he is well sought after.[10]

Out-of-state employers acquired Texas-Mexican workers in various ways. Recruitment by some employers was haphazard. Instead of actively recruiting laborers, they waited for

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[9] Ibid., 217.

[10] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, Saginaw, 274. In contrast, employers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley told the Commission that Texas-Mexicans were no longer reliable and would not do the "stoop" labor required in agriculture.

workers to come to them. On the other hand, the migration of a minority of workers was likewise unorganized. Such workers, often referred to as "free wheelers" or "self starters," left Texas on their own initiative in search of employment. Without definite job committments, many had hopes of securing jobs in areas about which they had heard over the radio or through the "grapevine" or had read in the newspapers. Still others left Texas with hopes of getting work from former employers.[11] In 1949 an estimated 12,000 "free wheelers" went out of Texas in search of employment,[12] and between twenty-five and forty-five percent of the Texas-Mexicans entering Michigan in that year were of this type.[13]

Aside from the "free wheelers," the migration of Texas-Mexicans in the postwar years was relatively well planned. Most out-of-state employers made definite job arrangements with the workers from year to year. As early as 1946, a study of migratory labor in Indiana showed that eighty-eight percent of the Texas Mexicans employed in that state had job commitments before leaving Texas.[14] The

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[11] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Pt. 2, p. 999.

[12] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement, 1949, p. 8.

[13] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Pt. 2, p. 1000.

[14] A. M. Rowe and J. B. Kohlmeyer, Migrant Farm Labor in Indiana, Purdue University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 543 (Lafayette, Indiana, 1949), 18.

recruitment of migratory workers was further facilitated by the organization of farm associations. Although some farm labor associations had been organized during the 1930's, the number increased greatly during World War II when they were established to aid in the importation of alien contract labor. Through the formation of associations farmers solved some of the administrative problems involved in contracting alien workers, and at the same time were able to meet the contractual obligation of guaranteeing the workers minimum employment. In addition to being useful in contracting foreign workers, the associations proved to be practicable during the emergency period in the recruitment of domestic workers. At the end of the war, a few of the associations were deactivated, but the majority continued to function as labor procuring agencies for their members. Moreover, in the postwar years, a number of new associations were formed and some of those that had been disbanded earlier were reactivated.[15]

The employers' farm labor associations made possible a more efficient recruitment and use of the migrant farm labor force. Since many different types of farmers belonged to the organizations, the peak labor requirements of the members occurred at varying times, and by shifting workers from crop to crop and area to area, the same workers were used to meet a number of peak needs. As a result, farmers

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[15] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Pt. 2, pp. 1001-1002.

were assured a more reliable supply of labor and workers were offered more continuous employment. In addition, many associations employed managers and fieldmen who assisted in settling differences that arose between employers and the workers.[16]

One of the largest of the farm employers' recruiting organizations was Michigan Field Crops, Incorporated. Organized during World War II, in 1950 Michigan Field Crops had a membership consisting of 8,767 beet growers, 6,800 pickle growers, and about 3,300 other growers of crops of lesser importance.[17] That year the corporation recruited 5,300 workers in Texas, or approximately sixty percent of the Texas-Mexicans used in Michigan in 1950.[18] The recruitment of Texas-Mexicans by Michigan Field Crops was highly organized. Starting well in advance of the season in Michigan, usually as early as February, Texas-Mexican employees of the organization began lining up prospective employees in Texas. The agents talked over the terms of the contract with workers who were interested. Then, once the worker had decided to sign up, he went to the nearest office of the Michigan Field Crops and signed a contract, which was written in both English

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[16] Ibid., 1002-1003.

[17] U. S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Report of Proceedings, Saginaw, 148.

[18] Ibid., 28, 152.

and Spanish generally guaranteeing the worker free housing and specifying the basic minimum wage terms. When the contract was signed, the worker was advanced money, if necessary, to enable him to make the trip to Michigan. Such advances were made on the basis of one cent per mile from the worker's home to the place of employment in Michigan. With the average transportation cost amounting to fifteen or seventeen dollars per person.[19]

Once the workers were in Michigan, they were distributed among the members of the association in the following manner as described by Max Henderson, Executive Secretary of the organization, in 1950:

> About two weeks before they are through with the spring work in sugar beets the corporation has a meeting with all of the various employing groups that are in it and arrangements are made for the re-recruiting of these people in sugar beets by the next employing crop. They send their field men into the sugar factory district or territory and work with the sugar beet field men to interview these workers and make contractural arrangements again with them to go on to pickles, or whatever the crop might be. Their transportation is paid by the next employer....[20]

In addition to using their own employment agents, farmers in other states also relied on the public employment services to secure Texas workers. Under Public Law 30 (73rd Congress, 1st Session), passed in 1933, Congress stipulated that the United States Employment Service was to maintain "a system of clearing labor between the several states."[21]

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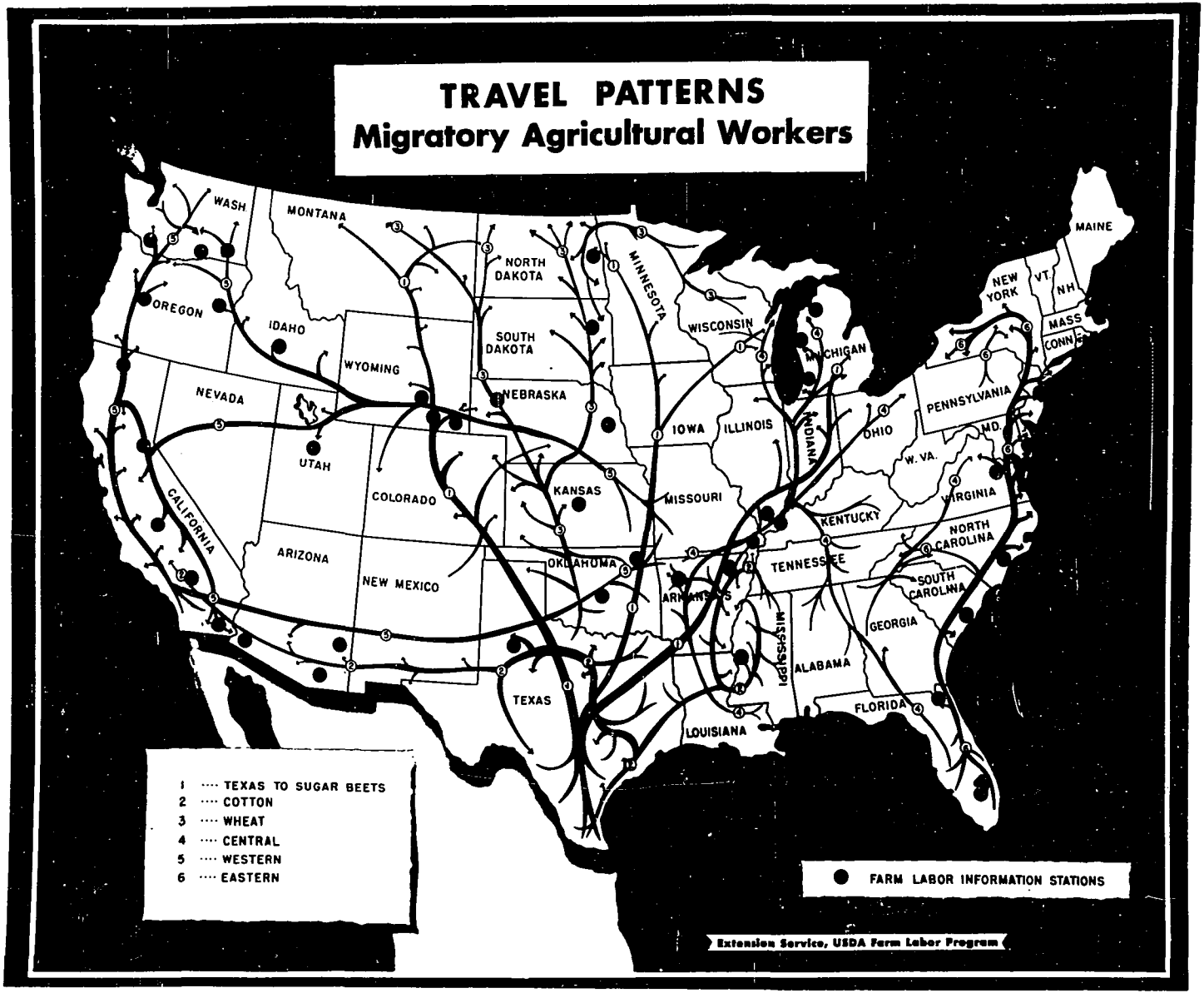
[19] Ibid., 185-186. [20] Ibid., 188.

[21] U. S. Statutes at Large, XLVIII, Part I, p. 114 (1933).



Source: U. S. Extension Service, Extension Farm Labor Program, 1943-1947, No. 2, Vol. I (Washington, 1947), 66.

Accordingly, the Employment Service arranged a system of clearance whereby states in which there was a labor shortage could request workers from states that had a surplus of labor. If workers could not be found within a local office area to meet the labor needs, the state office searched the local offices throughout the state. Then, if the required labor was still unobtainable, the appropriate regional office was notified which canvassed the states in its region and if unfound there, adjoining regions were notified. As a last resort, the facilities of the national office were called into action.[22]

To facilitate the exchange of farm labor between the states, the United States Farm Placement Service often arranged interstate preseason conferences which were attended by representatives of the various state employment services and the United States Farm Placement Service, and in some instances, farm employers. The purpose of the preseason conferences was to ascertain the needs of the individual states for migratory farm labor for the approaching year. Such meetings usually resulted in informal understandings in which state employment services agreed "to assist farm employers in States of labor demand to recruit migratory labor in the States of labor supply, or otherwise pledge themselves to

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[22] U. S. Federal Security Agency, Labor Recruitment for Agriculture; Farm Placement Service, 1948 (Washington, 1949), 5-6.

cooperate in facilitating interstate exchange of labor."[23] A typical meeting was one held in Oklahoma City in March, 1950 at which representatives from twenty states estimated that they would need approximately 65,000 workers from Texas that year. Also, Alabama, Arkansas, Missouri, Louisiana, Mississippi, Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky, and Texas agreed to exchange information concerning crop outlook as well as labor supply and demand in the respective states.[24]

Although the direction of workers out of the state was an important function of the Farm Placement Service of the Texas Employment Commission, its basic responsibility was the recruitment and placement of farm workers within Texas. When the responsibility of recruiting farm labor was returned to the Commission in 1948, certain administrative machinery and operational procedures were worked out. First, Texas was divided into twelve administrative districts, with a district director in charge of each who was responsible to the Head of the Farm Placement Service. Within each district there were local offices which were in charge of farm placement in their respective areas. The number of persons assigned to a local office was dependent upon the size of the area and the nature of the farm problems in it. The larger

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[23] U. S. Congress, Senate, Migratory Labor, Pt. 2, p. 1008.

[24] Ibid.

TABLE 6

MIGRATORY WORKERS LEAVING TEXAS FOR AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT IN OTHER STATES 1939-1954*

Year	Recruited by licensed employers	Recruited through Texas Employment Commission
1939	4,315	...
1940	6,624	...
1941	10,480	...
1942	16,000	...
1943	18,708	...
1944	20,202	...
1945	22,460	...
1946	32,966	...
1947	53,369	...
1948	39,801	20,000
1949	49,353	22,000
1950	49,960	16,000
1951	39,997	22,000
1952	37,420	14,041
1953	34,682	16,232
1954	36,244	24,263

*Source: U. S. Congress, House, Mexican Farm Labor Program, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies, and Manpower of the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. on H.R. 3822, March 16-22, 1955 (Washington, 1955), 40.

offices had a farm labor head plus additional full time personnel, while some of the smaller offices had only one person on a part-time basis to deal with farm placement. In addition to the local personnel, the staff was supplemented during peak labor periods by the "Farm Crew," which consisted of individuals who normally held the position of farm placement interviewers. The "Farm Crew" was transferred from office

to office as they were needed.[25]

In planning the farm labor program for the state the Farm Placement Service was assisted by an Advisory Committee. In 1949 the committee consisted of fifteen Farm Labor Consultants, including four farmers, one rancher, one officer of a state cattle breeders' association, one dairyman and milk producer, one officer of a state canners' association, and four officers in state farm organizations.[26] No workers were represented.

Aside from establishing a system for general farm placement, the Employment Commission was faced with the problem of devising specific techniques for the direction of workers during the cotton harvest. Hence, to direct workers to sections of the state where they were needed cotton control offices were organized in various localities. In 1948 there were three such offices located at San Antonio, Fort Worth, and Abilene.[27] By 1950 the number had been reduced to two --one at San Antonio and the other at Lubbock.[28] The cotton control offices were open only during the harvest

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[25] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement, 1949, p. 1.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement Service in Texas, 1948 (Processed), 46.

[28] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1950 (Processed), 14.

period in the areas in which they were located. The chief purpose of the offices was to give direction to the migrant labor force moving into areas under their respective jurisdiction. In order to do this, specific information on the farm labor situation within the areas was necessary. Therefore, to provide the necessary information every local office in cotton producing areas sent a daily telegraphic report to the appropriate control office, reporting on wages, crop conditions, harvest progress, workers needed, or the number of surplus workers. Information thus received was analyzed by the control office and disseminated to each local office in its area, as well as to district offices outside its area, and the state office, in the form of a daily Farm Labor Bulletin. In addition to the daily bulletin, each control office issued a weekly bulletin which summarized the conditions in each office area including the number of bales ginned, total acreage, percentage harvested, number of unfilled openings, and the wages offered.[29]

Working closely with the control offices were the directional stations located at strategic points along the migratory routes. Two of the most important stations were at Encino and Riviera which were in operation during July and August at quarantine stations maintained by the United States Department of Agriculture. These were major contact

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[29] Ibid. Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1951 (Processed), 18.

points since they were located on the two main highways leading north out of the Lower Rio Grande Valley where traffic was stopped for fruit and plant inspection.[30] From these two stations large numbers of migrants were sent to areas where they were needed. Illustrative of how labor was directed during the cotton harvest is the following account given by the Farm Placement Service:

> Office 'X' reports by wire to the control office that a shortage of 500 workers exists for cotton pickers while on the same day Office 'Y' reports a surplus of 200. The control office acting immediately following receipt of the wires, telephones office 'Y' to direct the 200 workers to Office 'X'. To supply the additional workers needed for Office 'X', the control office telephones directional stations maintained at road blocks on the two major highways leading out of the Rio Grande Valley to direct uncommittee crew leaders up to 300 total as come through the stations. Thus, surpluses and shortages are reported and action is taken to relieve the situation all within the same day.[31]

In its direction of cotton pickers the Texas Farm Placement Service relied heavily upon the cooperation of the migrant crew leaders. Indeed, one of the chief projects undertaken by the Placement Service upon reassuming the function of recruiting farm labor in 1948 was to establish a close working relationship with the crew leaders. Representatives of the Placement Service were assigned to directional stations where they talked with the migrants and tried to

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[30] Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement Service in Texas, 1948, p. 45.

[31] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1949, pp. 24-25.

win their confidence. At the stations crew leaders were given cards which were to be turned over to the employer in the area into which the workers were sent. The card instructed the employer to direct the crew leader to the nearest Farm Placement office when employment was over. In this manner the Service managed to keep in touch with the workers and acquired greater directional control over the cotton picking crews.[32]

A more permanent control over the migrant labor force was attempted through the compilation of as complete an inventory as possible of the migrant crew leaders operating in the state. Farm Placement personnel were provided with a form known as the "Crew Information Memo" on which was entered such information as the name and address of the crew leader, the size of his crew, where he was contacted, date, and his truck license number. If unable to obtain all of the above information, the Farm Placement employee was urged to record the crew leader's license number. The number was then sent to the State Highway Department which supplied the name of the county in which the license was issued. Entering the information on a form, it was sent to the local placement office which had jurisdiction over the county. The local office then checked the number with the County tax collector

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[32] Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement Service in Texas, 1948, pp. 45-46.

to determine the owner of the vehicle and his address. In this way the Farm Placement Service compiled an extensive and fairly detailed list of crew leaders in the state.[33]

When the crew leaders returned to their homes in South Texas, they were contacted by employees of the Farm Placement Service who tried to impress upon them that their crews could earn more money by following the direction of the Placement Service. The result of such contacts was that more and more crew leaders came to rely upon the Texas Employment Commission for guidance.[34]

Notwithstanding the progress made in organizing the migratory farm labor force in the postwar years, the Farm Placement Service was still faced with several problems. One problem was private recruiters who called for workers before they were actually needed. Such action often resulted in a loss to the farmer as well as to the workers. For example, in 1948 workers who had followed the cotton harvest from the Lower Rio Grande Valley into the central and northern parts of the state received word early in September from employers in the High Plains asking them to come to that area at once. Many of the workers left the fields in which they were working and went to the High Plains only to discover that although the cotton was open, the yield was low and there was not suf-

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[33] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1949, pp. 23-24.

[34] Ibid.

ficient work available to occupy all of the workers who had been attracted to the region. The Texas Employment Commission reported that many of the workers, "arriving too soon and seeing the poor cotton crop, either continued on into New Mexico or Arizona or turned back and went into Arkansas where there was a tremendous crop."[35]

Irresponsible recruiting on the part of out-of-state employers also complicated the work of the Farm Placement Service. In 1949 the Texas Employment Commission estimated that approximately 30,000 to 40,000 workers could safely be sent out of the state that year, and if any more left, there would be an inadequate supply of labor to harvest Texas crops. Accordingly, the Commission sent 22,000 workers to other

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[35] Texas Employment Commission, Farm Placement Service in Texas, 1948, p. 31. The recruiting practices of cotton farmers on the High Plains were shown in a study of 324 farm operators in Lubbock and Crosby counties made in 1951. The number of these farmers who made use of the services of the Farm Placement Service was small. Only seven percent of the farmers interviewed reported that they had received assistance from the Placement Service. Furthermore, only four percent of all their crews had been placed by the agency. It was found that approximately three-fourths of the crews hired were employed as a result of direct negotiations between employer and the worker. Eighteen percent of the crews returned to work for farmers with whom they had made arrangements for the workers to come from year to year was most common among the operators of large farms. Over one-fourth of the larger growers interviewed had such arrangements, while only one-eighth of the operators of medium sized farms arranged for the workers to return the following year. The farmers reported that thirty-eight percent of the crews hired came on their own initiative (see Moteral, Cotton and Manpower, Texas High Plains, 24-25).

states. Contrary to the Commission's plans, however, licensed agents recruited 49,353 workers in Texas and an additional 12,000 or more "free wheelers" left the state that year. Thus, with the largest cotton crop in Texas history to be harvested and with 83,353 workers out of the state, the Employment Commission was faced with a grave problem. Later, the Farm Placement Service reported:

> Had it not been for the partial failure of the cotton crops in Arkansas and Mississippi and the intensive efforts on the part of some Western and Midwestern state employment services to get crews back to Texas, we would have faced a most dangerous shortage of workers during the cotton harvest. Even so, it was necessary for Texas farmers to contract some 35,000 Mexican Nationals and move them over the State to harvest the crop in certain extreme shortage areas.[36]

Another problem confronting the Farm Placement Service in the recruitment and placement of migratory farm workers was inadequate housing facilities. Workers often refused to go into or remain for any length of time in areas which lacked adequate housing. The situation was alleviated to some extent by the establishment of farm labor camps and reception centers; nevertheless, housing remained substandard or non-existent in some areas and continued to present one of the chief farm labor placement handicaps.[37]

In summary, the postwar years witnessed a great in -

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[36] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1949, pp. 6-8.

[37] Texas Employment Commission, Texas Farm Placement Service, 1950, p. 15.

crease in the volume of migrant farm laborers leaving Texas for employment in other states. The interstate movement of workers was accelerated by the increased competition of wetbacks and braceros as well as more intensive organizing and recruiting on the part of out-of-state employers. In addition, the United States Employment Service through a system of interstate clearance facilitated the movement of workers from Texas to other states. At the same time, the Farm Placement Service of the Texas Employment Commission was developing more efficient techniques for recruiting and directing migrant workers within the state.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

A combination of factors contributed to the growth of the migratory farm labor system in Texas. One was the mechanization of the preharvest operations in cotton production which allowed farmers to plant and cultivate more cotton than they were able to harvest with the resident labor force. The demand for seasonal labor was further increased by the development of the fruit and vegetable industries of South Texas with their high peak labor requirements. To supply the demand for seasonal labor, growers turned to the reservoir of cheap, underemployed Mexican labor that had grown up in the southern part of the state after 1900.

Indeed, the existence of this pool of Mexican labor has been essential for the continuation in its present form of the migratory farm labor system in Texas. Should this labor pool dry up or should the Mexican workers find more remunerative year round employment in the vicinity of their homes, the migratory labor system could not exist. Thus far, this source of labor has remained adequate largely because it has been constantly replenished by immigrants from Mexico.

Beginning around 1900, there has been, except for the years during the 1930's, an uninterrupted flow of workers from Mexico, both legal and illegal, into Texas. This immigration has met little opposition from the federal government and in some cases has been encouraged by it. During World War I, for example, as the demand for common laborers increased in the Southwest, the head tax and literacy requirements of the immigration laws, along with the provisions of the contract labor law applying to Mexican nationals, were waived to allow Mexican workers to come into the United States for temporary employment in agriculture.

Additional encouragement was given to Mexican immigration in the 1920's when workers from the Western Hemisphere were excluded from the quota system imposed upon immigrants from Europe. Again during World War II, the United States adopted the policy of permitting workers from Mexico to enter the country for temporary farm employment. Although the Mexican government refused to allow Texas farmers to contract Mexican workers during the war, they were able to do so after the emergency period. In addition to facilitating the legal entry of Mexican laborers, the federal government made little effort to prevent the illegal entry of Mexican nationals. The result of the almost continuous flow of Mexican immigrants into the southern part of Texas since 1900 has been to decrease the employment available to the Texas-Mexicans residing in that area, which has forced the

native workers to move northward in search of employment.

Unlike many groups in our society, migratory farm workers have been unable to protect their interests by appealing to the state or federal governments for assistance. Whereas the manufacturing interests, when faced with competition from abroad, have induced the federal government to place tariffs on goods coming from other countries, the Texas-Mexicans, whose living standards are kept low by competition with cheap labor from Mexico, have received little consideration and protection. Moreover, farm labor has not shared in the great social reforms of the past half century. Except for the efforts to organize the labor market, the migratory farm labor camps built by the Farm Security Administration in the latter 1930's, and the recent limited social security coverage extended to farm workers, little has been done to improve the lot of the migrant worker. Even the provision in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1949 forbidding farmers to hire children under the age of fourteen while school is in session, works a temporary hardship on many migrant families since they depend heavily on the work of the children to increase the family's earnings.

A partial explanation for the failure of the state and federal governments to protect the Texas migrants lies in the fact the latter are unorganized and inarticulate due to language and educational handicaps. Consequently, they

are politically impotent, for no politician need worry about losing his job because of failure to assist this group, nor is there much chance of a politician being rewarded for doing something about the welfare of the migrants.

Although there is widespread indifference toward the plight of the migratory worker on the part of the general public, there is evidence that some groups and individuals are becoming more concerned over the situation. The report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, for example, received wide publicity and made clear the need for action on the migratory problem. In 1951 the findings and recommendations of this Commission were examined by the Subcommittee on Labor-Management Relations of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare and a bill to establish a federal committee on migratory labor was reported out. The bill, however, failed to come before the Senate.

In addition to the belated federal recognition of the migratory labor problem, various civic and religious organizations have taken an interest in the Texas migrants. One of these is the Catholic Church whose Bishop's Committee for Spanish-Speaking People has been studying the problem and making recommendations for its solution. The Texas G. I. Forum and the League of United Latin American Citizens, both organizations of Texas-Mexican citizens, have also championed the cause of the migrants and agitated for public action to improve their condition.

Perhaps the solution of the migratory farm labor problem lies in the further mechanization of agriculture. Great progress has been made in recent years in the reduction of the amount of hand-labor required in agricultural production, especially in cotton and sugar beets. Indeed, it has been predicted that within the not too distant future the production of cotton will be completely mechanized. Less progress has been made in mechanizing the hand-labor tasks in fruits and vegetables, but there is evidence that even in these crops machines and new processes will be introduced which will drastically reduce the seasonal labor requirements of these crops.

Although the elimination of seasonal hand-labor requirements in agriculture will greatly modify the present migratory labor system in Texas, the problem of finding employment for the migrants in other parts of the economy will arise. Whether the transition from agricultural employment to industrial jobs can be made without great suffering on the part of the migrants is problematical. In the meantime, the existing problems confronting the migratory farm workers remain to be solved.

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