Migs
America's Shantytown on Wheels

by CARLETON BEALS

UP  DO NOT TRUCK ON THIS SIDE
FRONT
FRAGILE
HANDLE WITH CARE
WARD'S DE LUXE ELECTRIC REFRIGERATOR
MONTGOMERY WARD  USA

The wooden panel on which the above was stenciled no longer encased an ice-making machine; it swung as a door on a shack of flattened oil tins, burlap, cardboard, and rags in the vast Hooverville jungle of Bakersfield, California. Before this improvised door and the tilted rusty smokestack poking above it, was a small bed of onions, withering in the terrific April heat of the inland San Joaquin Valley.

On a small box in the scant shade of a cottonwood tree sat a tow-haired girl of about eighteen, patching a pair of overalls, faded almost white from an incredible number of washings. Her round curves and silken corn-tassel hair made her seem fresh, but a lean hardness chiseled her face; she wore a loose, tattered calico dress and torn sneakers without stockings. At her feet, playing with an iron bolt, was one of her babies, tow-headed like herself, seemingly fat, but yellow and stinking with dysentery and covered with flies.

She and her family were fairly typical of several hundred others in this fowl slough which stands on Bakersfield's main street, across from the trim lawns of the Chamber of Commerce building. And the Bakersfield jungle is typical of dozens of such places stretching across the land, particularly from the vast shambles in Oklahoma City out by the pig dump in Los Angeles, El Indio, Nipomo, Holtville, Calipatria, El Centro, Brawley — to name but a few of those I personally have visited.

Out through the cotton fields, pea fields, vineyards, and orchards of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Idaho, Oregon, and other States, one encounters transient labor camps a step above the Hooverville jungles but almost equally deplorable with regard to health and broken lives.

One can easily imagine these haphazard camps: rows of tents, trailers, shacks, lean-tos, side-by-side close, with perhaps a single faucet for several hundred families, with half a dozen privies usually set in the very center of the camp. Imagine the lack of privacy, the misery of rain and sickness. It had been raining for two weeks when I visited the camps around Pima, Oceano, and Nipomo; the tents were literally swimming in mud.

The most atrocious camps are those on the fringes of the large cities. In the countryside are camp sites provided by the large ranchers — available, of course, only during picking season. These are perhaps the best. Elsewhere camps are provided by farm agents and labor contractors.

The contractor camps, though the contractor must be licensed and must provide running water and a certain number of privies, are usually inferior to those provided on the ranches, and there is more exploitation. The contractors carry their workers over a few weeks until picking time. The goods are charged at double their proper value. The contractor also gets a cut on wages, usually about twenty per cent. He is, in a way, often a sort of labor "dick" for he guarantees the growers not only an adequate supply of labor but a group of
workers tagged with the nonstrike guarantee. There are always more workers in the camp than are necessary in the fields — last year nearly two men for every job — and the contractor parcels out the work to those who show the most submissive deference.

Many colonies, however, are made up of roadside squatters. These impromptu camps are, of course, the very worst. Usually they have no sanitation whatsoever. One such had no water supply; the people used ditchwater. Another camp was dependent on water from a filling station, at five cents a bucket. Most are badly situated. One was on the edge of a malarial marsh.

The dwellers in these places are the Migs, as they call themselves — migratory workers. They are part of the debris of the depression and are living symbols particularly of the drought disaster in the Midwest. They are the “rubber tramps.”

I

Lately I have been buzzing up and down the highways of the West, along the coast, through the San Joaquin, along the Salton Sea, through the citrus-fruit region, in and out of the Imperial Valley; and wherever I went, by main route 50 or 80 or 90 or the dustier side roads, I encountered these people in motion. They travel along in old hooded wagons, with bony nags, or in old rattly cars, sometimes with elaborate homemade trailers, or in light trucks. Each vehicle is stacked high with dirty bedding, cots, bedspings, tents, an iron stove. On the running board may be seen a battered trunk, a galvanized tub, perhaps a dog or an accordion. Each vehicle is crowded with children, grandfolks, aunts, cousins, neighbors. They all set a great store by kinsfolk.

In southern Arizona, I met a young Oklahoma farmer in a 1928 runabout, with his young wife and five children covered with sores, all their belongings stacked mountainously on fenders, running board, and hood. He was bargaining an old shotgun for drained motor oil and gas to get a little farther.

One such family I saw by the side of the road in the burning desert beyond Blythe. The woman was feeding her six children with flour gruel, made by scorching the flour in a pan and mixing it with water and a little grease. This and a dried prune apiece constituted their meal — all the food they had left. They were patiently waiting until the father should return. He had walked ten miles into town with a spare tire to try and trade it for some gas. The remarkable thing was that this woman did not feel set upon or hopeless. The Lord, she said, would help them; if He didn’t, it was because in His wisdom He saw best to do otherwise.

Etta Pitchford, age 39, was one the Lord did not aid. She came to a tragic end in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Driven out of Antlers, Oklahoma, by the economic collapse of that region, though suffering from tuberculosis, she gathered her three children together and got as far as New Mexico. There the last of her savings disappeared. She could not get on relief because she lacked the proper residence and she was too proud to beg — few of these people will ever beg. At last, in desperation, she gathered weeds and boiled them. As a result, she, Hanley Marion, aged 10, and Eliza, aged 8, were poisoned and died. Ova Belle, aged 12, survived.

A storekeeper of Oceano, California, told me of another woman and two babies whom he found starved to death on the sand dunes.

Though many a tragedy is locked in the mystery of this strange twentieth-century migration of folk, it is surprising on the whole to observe their unfailing optimism, religious faith, and spirit of mutual aid. There is plenty of trouble, jealousy, and slander, as is inevitable in the crowded quarters of the camps, but on the whole the spirit of co-operation is greater. Mostly it is share and share alike.

The newcomers are ineligible for relief, but I was in the San Luis Obispo relief agency when a special federal order was being carried out to distribute a few dollars per head during the lean week prior to the beginning of the pea harvest.

"Did you get everybody?" the head of the agency asked.

"Just about," said the field worker. "But, if I missed one or two, it won’t make much difference. The funds will be evenly distributed. They always divvy up on everything anyway."

II

This vast migration is an economic shift of great importance to the country, of large significance for the future. It is as dra-
matic in its way as the trek of Bedouins out of the Arabian desert upon the garden towns to the north, as described so vividly by Lawrence in his *Seven Pillars*, or some great movement of peoples out of central Asia. For it is a migration that has not ceased; if anything, despite any return of prosperity to the country at large, it will likely be further augmented.

For though drought and depression are immediately responsible, peculiar agricultural conditions in the Middle West and the Pacific States, among other places, point to the probability that these Migs are to become a permanent phenomenon of American life. They are apt to increase rather than decrease in numbers. They form a group already recognizable, with peculiar mores and, despite their low economic level and apparently hit-or-miss life, with rigid standards — moral, social, and otherwise. Among them is developing a distinctive lingo and folklore. In short, the Migs are in process of becoming America's permanent gypsies.

About a fifth of them are Okies, i.e., from Oklahoma; three fifths of them are from the drought States of Arizona, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri; 80 per cent all told are from drought areas. A small fraction is made up of traditional migratory workers from Western and Southern States; a still smaller fraction is drawn from the industrial centers of the Middle West, the East, and New England; and a still smaller fraction of them comes from the share-cropper States of the South unaffected by drought.

Most of them, a few years ago, were sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or independent ranchers. Most are men traditionally close to the soil, who turn instinctively to the soil, who are unhappy away from the soil, and who are quite unfit for industrial activities even could industry absorb them. There is even less prospect of agriculture's reabsorbing them on a settled basis; and the most extravagant plans of the resettlement program, even before it was whittled down to fragmentary welfare work, could scarcely have solved their problem. And so they bid fair to become a permanent gypsy class, for, as gypsies, there is a definite niche for them in the Western American agrarian and economic scheme. Peculiarly enough, their disasters came at precisely the moment when more than ever there was a need for them in the migratory role which they were obliged to assume. And as roving gypsies their condition in certain instances has improved since the worst days of the depression.

Dr. Paul Taylor of the University of California has made a detailed study of the migration statistics for that State. These Migs had been arriving in a growing stream all through the period of the depression. The number of those in the Mig class who arrived by motor vehicle — excluding those who arrived afoot, by bus, or by train — totaled for the twelve months ending June 15, 1936, 71,047. It is estimated that more than 150,000 Migs have become permanent denizens of California alone, without fixed address, mostly a roving horde.

As one camp denizen told me, with a proud laugh, "Oklahoma has captured California without firing a shot."

One can call these folks indigents, paupers, tramps — all the ugly terms which have been applied to them by the smug newspapers of California and elsewhere. But it is fair to remember that the American frontier was settled originally by folk who came West with even fewer resources than these latter-day emigrants — except that in the earlier days a gun secured food and the present folk have no such chance at nature, which has all been fenced in, less chance in fact than a Central American Indian. And they find no homesteads to clear at the end of the trail, no chance to build themselves up into comfortable citizens. Such emigration has made the whole history of the United States what it is. Settlers have cleared the land, put in crops, built homes. When the land petered out, they moved west to new land. And so, in recurring waves, the frontier was settled. Of such emigrations, one
can recall, for instance, the famous Mormon pushcart brigade, that strange expedition of folk who crossed pristine wilderness through northern snows, pushing their scant belongings ahead of them in carts. They, too, were in rags and tatters, and far more of them left their bones by the roadside than during the present migration.

IV

There is also something of a definite frontier slant to these later day migrants. Like their predecessors, they are abandoning untilled lands but now they find no frontier waiting their industry. They arrive in the midst of a highly developed industrialized agricultural system. But they have the appearance of romance novels or screen versions of another age.

In the Oklahoman there is often something of the Hoosier; frequently one sees the ungainly Abraham Lincoln shape to the bodies, the same long hips and loose legs. Usually the Oklahomans have short torsos and hard, bony faces, with tight-creased lips in bitter half-moon curve; small, deep-set, boring eyes, pale, almost colorless; short, thin noses — a pushed-together, economical sort of face that seems to lift toward the sky looking for rain. The Texans have heavier bodies and legs, are thick of jowl, have fatter, open lips, as though about to drawl, a half-adenoidal expression — big men with simple, babyish faces.

One gets to know the regional types. From parts of Texas come women with pioneer pink sunbonnets, drum-shaped, sewn with flexible cardboard stuffing that gives the appearance of staves, loose cloth flaps down the cheeks, and poached with cloth at the back of the head. The men wear short leather jackets, big-brimmed felt hats, short boots with forward-slanting high heels.

Above all, they are a religious folk. This, too, is in the tradition of American migrations. The Atlantic seaboard was settled by folk who brought with them a stern, ever righteous God. The Mormons led an another migration. The Moravians spread through Pennsylvania and Ohio. One still finds, scattered through the Middle West, old religious land colonies, with quaint communal customs.

The Pentecostals also quite conveniently leave everything to God, even health. Mostly they scorn the services of the nurses provided by charitable organizations and the relief administration. When a typhoid epidemic was
little remedied by a return of general industrial prosperity. In fact the ranks of the Migs are likely to be added to; more folk must leave the Middle West, and from the South at least 2,000,000 folk are apt to be uprooted unless the plantation system is modified or a new cash crop is found to substitute for cotton. This appearance of the American rubber gypsy coincided with an economic situation in California and periphery Western States which made the Mig the proper answer to the agricultural system devised there and which now tends to make him a permanent if not particularly happy American institution.

In California, improved land reached its maximum acreage back in 189. Since then, the area cultivated has been declining. However, of this improved land, the proportion under artificial irrigation has steadily increased. California has gradually abandoned dry farming and extensive crops to grow intensive crops. In its day, the central valley of California was the principal wheat granary of the world. The blight of rust, the discovery of new hard varieties for colder climates, and other factors forced a shift to other grains, finally to intensive irrigated crops supporting a larger population through greater productivity. Whereas intensive crops (at first grapes and fruits, later hops, sugar beets, cotton, truck gardening) had in 1869 provided but 6.6 per cent of the value of California farm products, by 1929 they provided 80 per cent and were worth nearly $400,000,000. This shift meant that, while in 1860 less than 40,000 persons were gainfully employed in California agriculture, by 1930, 332,024 were so employed. But, what is more important sociologically, California has a larger percentage of farm laborers among those engaged in agriculture than any other State in the Union. California agriculture is run on a large-scale industrialized pattern.

Of large-scale farms, i.e., those having an annual product worth $30,000 or more, California has 36.7 per cent of the total of such farms for the entire United States. Compare this with Mississippi, usually considered a large plantation State, which has only 0.4 per cent of such large farms. Even in cotton, Mississippi's greatest product, California has 133 large-scale estates as compared to only 29 in Mississippi. Within the borders of California in 1930 were 40 per cent of the nation's large-
scale dairy farms, 44 per cent of the large-scale general farms, 52 per cent of the large-scale poultry estates, 60 per cent of the large-scale truck farms and fruit farms. Thus, with the possible exception of the Soviet Union and the American tropics, California represents the maximum development of large-scale industrialized agriculture in the world today.

VI

Recently I visited the federal labor camp near Weedpatch, south of Bakersfield, where some slight effort has been made to provide a handful of Okies and Migs with sanitary conveniences. I had driven there up over the Coast Range, through one of the most beautiful valleys I had seen anywhere in California, and saw in that rich, ample, and fertile corner only one human residence—a gas station. I was traversing part of the vast Miller estate of the Kern County Land Company, over 400,000 acres. This was just northwest of the federal labor camp. Look at the map of California and you will see in that part a great stretch almost unmarked by towns or public roads. It is part of this estate. Above the Miller estate stretches the great Lux estate. Below it stretches the big Hoover ranch. All about the federal camp are the broad acres of Di Giorgio, subsidiary of the great fruit company in the Salinas Valley, where last year in the lettuce fields strikers were murdered, and terror reigned. And south of the camp, stretching as far as the eye can reach to the far mountains, are the broad acres of the Chandler estate.

The head of the labor camp told me that, even if a man should come into the region with $1,000 in his pocket to buy a modest five acres, he would have difficulty obtaining it. The federal authorities found real difficulty in locating ground they could lease for their camp, and were fought every inch of the way in their efforts to help out the Migs.

This large-scale industrial agriculture requires a large rural proletariat—at harvest season. It has little need for labor the rest of the year. Hence it needs a floating population.

Originally this seasonal labor supply was largely furnished by Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, in later years particularly by Mexicans. Stricter immigration regulations in 1929 limited the supply of such aliens. The depression here and improving conditions in Mexico caused the return of large numbers to the homeland. A depleted labor supply enabled the remaining Mexicans to organize, and several bitter labor struggles ensued.

Now the Migs and Okies have made their triumphal way into the California agrarian system, in part by undercutting the previous wage levels of Japs, Mex, and Filipinos.

Though California agriculture needs the Migs, a great hullabaloo has been raised against them both in and out of the State. The cities which must bear the relief burden during the off season naturally are wrathful. Los Angeles County arrogantly posted policemen outside its own borders at the State line to stop the influx. Imperial County also took a hand at stopping the Migs at the State line, but, when an unusually large harvest in the county and a short season made additional hands suddenly necessary, the big growers did not hesitate to rush agent contractors to bring in large additional cavalades from Arizona.

In short, California really wants the Migs when the crops are ready to harvest, and she wishes they were in Timbuktu the rest of the year, for then they can only drift into the cities or into roadside slums, menacing public health, while they starve through to the next crop or through a year until they become eligible for relief. Relief is not so much a subsidy to the Migs as it is to the big growers, but this is not recognized. In the work season, therefore, the Migs are hailed gladly; in the off season, they are railroaded from county to county, jailed for vagrancy, and otherwise molested.

But, whatever the contretemps of their lives, they represent a dramatic population shift, they are part and parcel of a new economic development in the Far West. The only life they can lead is a gypsy life. They are the new American gypsies on wheels, following the crops from the early harvest in hot Imperial Valley, on up the coast to the pea harvest, over into San Joaquin for the grape harvest, finally the cotton picking. They have no homes; their children attend half a dozen or more schools during the year. Each year they become more definitely a group with cultural frontiers, less adaptable to any other kind of life. Most of them would no longer have any success as settlers. Once they were farmers; now they are nomads. They are agriculturists without roots in the soil whose wealth they garner.