EDUCATING FARM LABOR CHILDREN

Leo Hart
Interviewed
by
Gerald Stanley and Susan McColgan
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Transcriber: Barbara Lewy
Editor: Gerald Stanley
H: I came here in 1925 from the University of Arizona.
S: That's my alma mater.
H: Oh, really?
S: Yes. I went to the University of Arizona.
H: I didn't know that. I [was] trained there after the first war. I came back from overseas with tuberculosis and got my master's there. I came over here and taught in the junior college and in Kern County Union High School. I taught two years and then became the first head counselor in the Kern County High School system. While I was in the high school as a counselor I worked with all the children from all the
elementary schools in the district. There were some sixty elementary schools that were serving the district high school, and I recognized in the late twenties and early thirties there was a real problem in meeting the educational needs of migrant children. I could see it in the elementary schools because they were not set up to take care of this type of student [children of the Dust Bowl migration]. We had strictly academic courses and nothing else. We had no special education to provide for them. These youngsters came with all varying degrees of background in education and social activities. They came from farms and small towns in Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas mostly; and they were primarily all caucasian.

Most of these families were just down on their luck. Some of them were drifters. They came in and they settled wherever they could find a spot to settle; in abandoned buildings, in groves, on farms, or wherever they could find a place to set up camps. They built their cabins or their shelters out of cardboard, or tin, or pieces of wood--anything they could get. They had no facilities for sanitation. They had no running water in many of their camps.

Things got pretty bad here in the late thirties. Around 1938, about in there, the sheriff and his deputies had to warn the people to get out of their camp down by the Kern River bridge. They had to get them out because of the unsanitary conditions. Finally they had to burn the camp to get them out. But they would make their homes under bridges or anywhere they could squat. The teachers in the smaller schools could handle one or two probably, a few like that, but it was getting [to be] quite a problem in the larger schools. It was especially difficult for the
teachers. They had no special facilities, and were obliged to see that the local children were not neglected. They couldn't neglect them for the kids that would be "here today and gone tomorrow"—or maybe there a week, maybe three, maybe a month. You never knew how long they would stay. So in many instances, in most instances I'd say, the migrant children were set off by themselves in the corner and ignored. Well, the government came into the picture and established two camps, one in Shafter and one in the Vineland school district, which was called the Arvin Federal Camp.

S: Was this during the New Deal? Was this during the 1930's or 20's? H: Yes, it was during the 1930's. These camps were there when I took office. I was elected in 1938 and took office in January 1939. The big problem for me as county superintendent was to find out what to do for these children to get them adjusted into society and to take their rightful place. So I went to the superintendent of the Shafter elementary school, Richland School, and suggested that he let me set up a school in the camp there to take care of children and to relieve that district of the burden of the cost of their education. [This would] give me a chance to experiment with the educational program and find out what was needed. He refused to let me do that, in spite of the fact that they had crowded these kids into an old building, called the Santa Fe School, that had been condemned. He had hundreds [of children] in the building. He hired teachers that were prepared only for regular classroom work. They were, of course, paying them minimum salaries or less. Whether that was their reason or not I wouldn't say; but we were not permitted to set up the school there.
So I went to the Vineland School Board and told them what I would like to do for their migrant children, and they accepted my proposition. I leased a 10 acre plot of ground adjoining the camp. It was part of the government camp site, so we got it for ten dollars. Then we started to develop the school. The district donated two temporary buildings which they had in the camp, and we built two more, three more in fact. They were spaced twenty feet apart. They were just frame, temporary buildings. Then I went to State teachers colleges and sought out the best teachers I could find in the State, teachers whose attitudes indicated that they were really interested in this type of student and wanted to help in this program. So, we opened school in September 1940 on the newly acquired site.

S: Go ahead.

H: We opened that school in 1940 with 125 kids. There was no grass. There were no sidewalks. There was no playground equipment. There were no toilets. There was no water. The first thing we did was to get the boys together with the teachers, the janitors, the principal and myself, and we laid a thousand feet of 3/4 inch pipeline from the camp over to the school. That provided our supply of water during the first year, for the cafeteria, for everything. They dug two outdoor toilet facilities, one for the girls and one for the boys. Some of the boys had to be taught to use it. They had been used to just going wherever it was convenient. They would step outside the door and that was far enough. We stressed manners, morals, etiquette, and health throughout our program. [These were our] main objectives with these kids.
Our classrooms had no desks at first. We built our desks out of orange crates and used wooden benches to write on. The kids had to sit on the floor. The classes ranged from thirty to sixty in size. [We tried] to get these kids to be a part of the school because we didn't know them, didn't know what type of youngster we were dealing with. We knew that they had been subjected to all types of moral conditions. They had not had an opportunity for the best educational training. Some of them were seventeen years old and still had not been through the third grade. Our teachers were wonderful. We set up the cafeteria. We had the NYA come in and make us 25,000 adobe bricks.

S: Is that the National Youth Authority?

H: National Youth Authority. They made us 25,000 bricks, and I was going to build a home economics [building] and a shop building. But the State said, "you cannot do that because this is a temporary school, and you cannot use state money for temporary facilities." I was stuck with 25,000 bricks. So we built a sidewalk the full length of the school adjoining the buildings. Then we got the kids and janitors together, and we laid adobe walls between these buildings, that were twenty feet apart [with] a wall at the back with a window and a wall in the front [with] a door. [We then] put a roof over it. [An official with] the State Department came down and I showed it to him. I said, "I can't legally build a building, Charlie; but I can put up walls." We had four spaces between the five buildings. The first one we used for a kitchen. For the cafeteria we cut a hole through the end of the adjoining building and made a serving area there. We served a hot breakfast for 1¢ and a hot
lunch for 2¢, using the government surplus commodities only at first until we got our garden started. We had each class start a garden and raise vegetables. We got baby chicks and raised chickens. [We] had the boys build the pens, and we got sheep, pigs and cows from the Sears Roebuck Foundation. We had quite an assortment. Them, we dug a basement under the kitchen and put in a deep freeze so we could slaughter our cattle and use the meat for the cafeteria along with the surplus commodities and the vegetables from the garden. We were able to run a very nice cafeteria. The cook was paid out of the county funds.

The children's health was pretty bad, so I used one of the rooms for a health room. We had the county nurse and the county doctor come out from the public health department, and [they] gave all the kids a health examination. Those [children who] were undernourished and underweight rested an hour every day. [We also gave them] cod liver oil until the state said, "you can't give them cod liver oil, that's medical administration." We had to stop that. But we kept the rest period.

The third adobe unit was used for a wood shop and shoe repair and the fourth adobe unit we used for a typing classroom.

Then, as time went on, we built up the farm. We got nursery stock from the nurseries in Bakersfield. The stock that was getting too large for them they gave to us. We set up a big section of the land for nursery stock and taught the kids how to prune and take care of the trees and shrubs. We would let them go out and landscape buildings in poorer districts that didn't have shrubs. That gave them a chance to feel they were an important part of the community by giving something
and not just receiving. As time went on we developed a two-acre patch of potatoes; and when it came time to harvest, DiGiorgio Ranch sent over their digger and their men and dug the potatoes for us. Women [from the community] joined the women of the camp in canning vegetables and fruit. [This helped to] build a closer feeling between the community and the school. In the late thirties [there was a] battle between the farmers and the migrants. Some agitators came into the valley and the farmers and migrant workers fought one night with pitchforks, guns, bricks and clubs.

S: Who were the agitators?

H: I don't know who they were. A friend of mine was a deputy sheriff at the time. He said a hundred of those fellows were put in jail the night of the fight. Well, that didn't improve relations between the migrants and the farmers. The PTA would not admit the parents of the camp into the PTA of the Vineland School; [and] the resident children wouldn't accept [the children of the camp] on the campus. They fought; they called them dirty names. The teachers had to seclude them in the classrooms, [and] that was probably [why] the school board was willing to let them have a school of their own.

We finally got desks, books, and [other] materials. First we got used desks. We could buy them for a dollar from schools that had extras. We got excess used books from other schools at first. In one classroom we had a congoileum rug on the floor with a map of the United States, and out of that the teacher developed social studies, arithmetic, reading and geography lessons--a whole unit. They [were] unusually fine and
ingenious teachers. Kern County teachers used to have to attend institutes. [I had some of our teachers] take their classes there and put on a demonstration to show what could be done with migrant children. [They] did a masterful job of it. Those kids sat up there and performed perfectly.

We introduced the repairing of shoes into our curriculum. We taught the children how to repair their own shoes. We set up classes in dressmaking and got clothes from the Salvation Army and from churches to alter and make over. We purchased typewriters and set up classes in typing; and we set up a class in shorthand but learned from experience that it was too hard for them. We wanted to find out what [could be done] for these kids. We got shop equipment, power tools, hand tools and all, and set up a class in woodship. We also provided agricultural training.

So, the curriculum grew and began to attract a lot of attention. After three years, the trustees of the Vineland district petitioned my office to permit their seventh and eighth grade children to attend our school, where they could get some of the special training that we were giving to the migrants.

S: (Laughter) That’s an irony.

H: Yes. Wasn’t that an irony? Well, they came over and it worked out very fine.

We needed an auditorium and a home economics building because we outgrew our facilities. So, we went to the County Supervisor of the Third district for help. He let me have an old boxcar they had sitting empty on their lot and an old shed which we dismantled for the lumber. We hauled it out to the camp and built a home economics house out of it.
The boys and the principal did the plumbing, carpentry, plastering, and the wiring--everything. They dug the cesspool, the leaching trench, the whole thing. The girls in home economics made curtains for the windows, selected the furniture and arranged it. They made dish cloths and did the housekeeping. And an interesting thing developed out of this type of program; you could leave money, you could leave tools, you could leave anything you wanted anywhere on that campus--and it would never be [stolen]. I used to say, "Break the windows if you want to. Tomorrow you'll put 'em back in." (Laughter)

The students were wonderful to work with. We had a fine association with the youngsters. We never had any of them in jail, never had any in detention homes. We never had a discipline problem we couldn't handle ourselves. And I think [this was] because they shared in building the school. They did the work. We worked with them. I worked with them, too. As superintendent, I would go out there in my overalls and work with them, dig ditches, saw lumber, and do plumbing. So did the principal. And the teachers would select the most needy ones and bring them into town on weekends, take them to church, take them to stores, buy them articles of clothing and take them to the hairdressers to get their hair dressed.

We set up a course in cosmetics. Dr. Gertrude Witherspoon, who was then head of the chemistry department at San Jose State, was a very dear friend of ours; and she came down and saw what we needed. I don't know how she got it, but (laughter) she got some material for us from San Jose and set up our cosmetics department. The students made their own
toothpaste, their own face creams, their own rouge, and lipsticks and mascara. Then these teachers taught them how to use it wisely. [They taught them] how to wash their hair, keep it in shape, keep it done up right, and [they taught them] how to dress correctly.

S: How many children did you start with?
H: One hundred and twenty-five.
S: One hundred and twenty-five. What was the maximum?
H: Oh, I don't think we ever had over two hundred and fifty or three hundred.
S: At one time?
H: [Yes.]
S: How long would they be there? Weren't they mobile?
H: Well, here was the interesting thing. At first they just came for a short time, but after a while we noticed that when their parents would move out the kids were crying. They didn't want to leave. It was the first time they had ever had anything of their own, a school of their very own where all the attention was on them, where they were given the best and they knew that everybody cared for them. That was something to watch, I'll tell you. It had good effect throughout the community.

One of the last things the kids did, the boys, was set up teams during their physical education period to build a swimming pool on campus.

[They] built one 60 feet long and forty feet wide and nine feet deep. They dug that--these little kids with shovels, picks, and wheelbarrows. They formed teams and dug it, and tried to outrace each other in the amount of work they could do. When the boys would get a little unruly,
the principal would discipline them saying, "one more time like that and you can't work on this project. First, we had the kids tie the steel. They tied it and then set up the forms and the concrete mixer came out and poured the concrete walls and a deck all the way around. We used the 12x12 forms that were the floors of the tents over in the camp and built a wall around the inside. Then we had to hire a man to do the finishing job on the deck. The built that pool, and then they let the community, the people, come in and use it. The pool didn't have [a] filtering system. They used the water until it [became dirty] and then they drained it out to water the lawn. Finally, they, I forgot how many years it was before we got this but I think it was about three years, the government put in a big water system, a big tank, and put in a three-inch line to serve the camp. In exchange for five thousand adobe bricks we still had on the school grounds, [they] let us hook the school up with the three-inch water line. Then we had all the facilities we needed.

S: How long did the school last? It started in 1939 in two temporary buildings in the government camp and was there one year.

H: Well, the Arvin Federal started on its own campus in 1940 and ran five years. Then the district attorney came down from Sacramento one day with an opinion from the attorney general. He handed [it] to me and said that an emergency cannot last over five years. Therefore, you can no longer run this school.

S: No kidding?

H: Right.

S: And so the State officials closed you down?
H: Right. Closed me down but didn't close the school down. The district, at that time, was very much in favor of the school.

S: Right.

H: Pete Bancroft, who was then the principal of the school, was hired by the district as the district superintendent. He merged Arvin Federal school with the Vineland district; and he and the Board flew to Washington and got permission to build a new schoolhouse on the property. They did that. The new Vineland School sits out there on Sunset Avenue now. In fact, that home economics building the kids built with the boxcar and shed was still there and used to house district employees until the summer of 1978 when it was burned by the Kern County Fire Department. That was the end of the Arvin Federal Migratory School.

S: Really?

H: I think the pool has been closed in recent years by the Health Department. Today, none of the old wooden buildings remain but our school for migrants gave new life and hope to hundreds of under-privileged boys and girls and resulted in the unifying of a once torn and distraught community. It wrought one of the greatest social changes that this county has ever witnessed and beat a path for others to follow in providing for the educational needs of migrant children.

Finally, the people came together and the lessons we learned in this school were incorporated into the Vineland School District. That is, the philosophy, not the actual activities. But near the end, Bancroft, who had a pilot's license, got interested in bringing in an airplane. He got a C-47 bomber for $200 out of U.S. Government surplus commodities, and they flew it in and landed it on the field right across from the camp.
the longer people stayed. The greater proportion of them stayed the year round and worked so that their kids could stay in this school. Out of this experience I introduced into our Kern County rural schools, I think the first in the United States, the mobile units on a shared basis in order to enrich the education of the children. I provided a mobile typing unit and a home economics unit equipped with four stoves and four electric sewing machines, fully equipped, and I offered an agricultural and shop combination. The truck, the first unit I used, was a one-and-a-half ton Dodge with four-foot sides that folded up and had adjustable legs [to] let the sides down and adjust to the level of the ground. The truck was equipped with hand tools and power tools. It provided a four-foot area around three sides that served as the working area for the boys. We had power lathes, drills, saws, shavers, and everything you'd want in electrical equipment. They would hook up wherever they had electricity. We had these typing, home economics and shop units; and we provided shared-services in instrumental music, speech therapy, and supervision.

S: What were the aspirations of the children? Did they want to be farm laborers or did they want to do something else?

H: I think they wanted to do something else.

S: Really?

H: That was one of their best experiences.

S: I wonder if you could explain, if you can, why the community was initially hostile to these children.

H: Yes, I think [I can.]

S: [Was] it their culture?
The farmers went over in their tractors and pulled it over to the school camp. They used it for several years in the teaching of aviation to seventh and eighth grade students. Then they got a lot of surplus materials and taught them all the different parts of the machine. They would tear them down and put them back together. At the end of the year, their reward for good work, if they kept up their grades, [was to] run that airplane, down to the end of the runway and back, which was under a mile. (Laughter) But they were not permitted to get it off the ground, of course. They had to maintain high grades in arithmetic to take aviation. Boy, they worked. I'm telling you, they worked. It was good training. I have some pictures if you'd like to see them.

S: Okay. We'll look at those after. Let's finish the interview and then I would very much like to see them. I wanted to ask you about the early 1940's period when the bracero program was launched in California. Were there any braceros in your school?

H: Not that I know of.

S: Not any? Okay. Susan, do you have a question to ask Mr. Hart?

Mc: What were the responses of the parents to your school?

H: [The] response of parents was wonderful right from the start. We had a few of them come over to help with the cafeteria at first. But the thing is, the kids were happy and were learning in school, and that was carrying over into the homes. It couldn't help but have a good effect. We had good cooperation from the parents. What I'm saying is the parents stayed in the camp longer because the kids didn't want to leave. It began to stabilize the camp, and the longer we ran the school,
H: No. At first the community needed the farm laborer.

S: Okay.

H: They advertised in the Southwest for workers. They needed them.

Prices were low then. Cotton was six cents a pound, and that's terrible. Well, they could hardly afford to pick it. Times were bad, and these people came; but they came after they heard about the need for help out here. Everybody came. They came in droves, until the State got so upset it put guards on the roads and mountain passes to try to stop them and drive them back. But they couldn't stop them. They kept coming. They came, and came, and came. They were not wanted—I mean, too many of them. They were overcrowding the schools. They couldn't feed themselves. There was no work for them. And they were causing social problems around the area. You know, people were frustrated. Many of these migrants were ragged. Their kids were ragged. You know the story of the Joad family that came?

S: Yes, I was going to ask you about Grapes of Wrath.

H: Grapes of Wrath, yes.

S: I heard that the book was banned from our libraries in this area.

H: Oh, it was. Yes, it was banned. You can believe that; that's the truth. It was banned from the libraries, and people were not permitted to read it. So everybody read it. They bought it, you know. And it was a lot of truth. It was a good picture of conditions in the valley. In fact, when they made the picture, a couple of kids from this camp school were in the picture.

S: Oh, really?
H: Yes.
S: Did they have any trouble with children's parents concerning finances? You said it was one cent for breakfast and two cents for lunch.
H: Well, we didn't stick them for that. If they didn't have the penny or two cents, they ate for nothing. But we set that so they wouldn't feel [as if they were being given something for nothing].
M: What kind of learning problems did they have being migrant children?
H: Learning problems? Well, their learning problems were primarily caused by the lack of adequate training before they got here. I think they were an average group of kids as far as their mentality was concerned, though you couldn't convince a lot of people of that. I know when they started to settle in the Mountain View district—that was another district adjoining Vineland that was affected somewhat by these people, they moved to Lamont and built a shack town. Mountain View, which was up the road about two miles, didn't want these kids. No way did they want them in their school because they created an educational problem. If they were taught it took the teachers time; the farmers children were neglected. This is the problem. So we suggested that they were getting overcrowded [and that we should] build a new school at Lamont. I got a telephone call from the head of an oil company telling me, "you're not going to spend our money for those 'blankety blanks' out there in Lamont."
Well, I said, "I am." He said, "well, we'll see." So we built the school in Lamont; and Lamont has since become the business and residential area of that district. Now Mountain View is practically nothing. Lamont has become quite a community, developed out of that shack town, because,
the school was located there. Now they have two or three schools. But at that time this guy told me, "You can't educate those blankety blanks. They're going to grow up just like their fathers and mothers. They're a shiftless lot. They got no brains." That's not true.

S: I wonder if Buck Owens would like your school.

H: (Laughter)

S: We recently did an interview with Buck Owens. He sounded very typical. They came from Oklahoma in the mid-1930's. He was a kid [when he] came out here. [I wonder if he attended your school?]

H: He may have, I don't know. I know he's been out there. His sister was out there giving entertainments in the Vineland District.

S: So he followed that same path.

H: Yes.

S: But you think that they were just like any other children?

H: Yes, they were just like any other children. [They] had all the feelings, aspirations, and dreams of other youngsters. And they had more. They had experiences that no other kids had. That was something I wanted my daughter to experience.

Mc: Were the majority of these children Anglo?

S: Yes.

H: They were all caucasian.

Mc: All Anglo.

H: They were the Dust Bowl migration. They were all caucasian children. They weren't all lowbrows. Some of [their] parents had had nice homes, good homes, and some of them had stores and businesses.
S: They got wiped out, right?
H: Yes, wiped out, period.
S: That would be a problem for someone who's really established and then down on their luck.
H: Yes, that's right, that's right.
Mc: What sort of impact do you think the education has had on the lives of farm laborers?
H: Present day, I don't know. But at that time it had a terrific impact. I know from the reactions of the managers of the camp. It has also had a farther-reaching effect, if you consider these mobile units [that] were developed out of what I learned about what these kids could use. We put these mobile units in the schools and I offered them one at a time because they were new. I didn't know whether I was going to get chained or put in jail or what because I wasn't sure even about the use of the money for that type of thing. I furnished the unit, equipment and material; and all the district had to pay was one-tenth of the teacher's salary for each half a day that the unit was at their school. In other words, I went out and secured the best teachers I could find in the United States and put them on these units. We were paying at that time, $3,600 to $4,500 for a teacher for these elementary school mobile units, while high school teachers were getting $2,000 or $3,000. Yet, even for a $5,000 teacher, any district that wanted a teacher and unit, got them for $500 per year for half day a week, all year. (You see, they had nothing to lose.) They had no equipment to buy. They had no buildings to construct. The unit was the classroom. The teacher was the best, and
the materials were furnished. I did that. There wasn't any law, at that
time relating to mobile units, but I figured I could do it because it was
a duty of the County Superintendent of Schools to provide emergency teachers.
I just used the emergency fund. It seemed to be okay. We always had more
demand for these services than we had equipment, and I kept it that way.
I introduced one unit after another on a voluntary bases. I just sent
out letters listing the units that were available and advising them, "if
you want it, tell me how many half days and you'll get it."

S: Is there anything else you want to say?

H: Yes. Some of those units lasted twenty-five, thirty years. I
forgot which one it was, but Harry Blair was still using it during
his tenure in office.

We put in audio-visual aids that had never been in before. I had
the best audio visual man in the United States working here. His name
was Jim McPherson. I got him from Columbia University.

S: Wow!

H: He had all of his doctorate [finished] except writing his thesis. He
was making educational films in Maine, and I wrote to Columbia for a
candidate and they recommended him. We got him out here, and he developed
our program. We had it going but we turned it over to him and he developed
it. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the development of the Kern
County audio-visual program.

S: Oh!

H: The whole setup today is his program. Jim went from here to UCLA, then
to Drake University, Indiana, and then to the United States Office of
Education and the NEA. [He] became international president of the Audio-Visual Technicians.

S: Wow!

H: He was an educator, that boy. Terrific boy.

S: Was there anything else you'd like to add about the educational system that you can remember before we look at your pictures?

H: Let's shut this off and look at the pictures.