

HOUSING MIGRATORY AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

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IN CALIFORNIA, 1918-1948

Thesis

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By

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to properly feed, clothe, and otherwise care for a normal family.¹⁸

Table 6

Family Earnings in California Agriculture during 1935

Number of Families	Earnings
87	\$100 or less
190	101-200
180	201-300
126	301-400
76	401-500
44	501-600
18	601-700
16	701-800
3	801-900
3	901-1000
7	over 1000
3	not stated

Source: State Relief Administration, Migratory Labor in California, 1936, p. 121.

Since 1935 the average annual earnings of families in agriculture have increased. A study made by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics¹⁹ indicated that the average annual income for California migratory agricultural families in Farm Security Administration camps in 1938 was \$826.83. This figure, higher than the study made in 1935, which covered mostly 1934, probably is due to an ability of the migrants located in government camps in 1938 to secure a greater amount of work, and certainly to increased rates of pay.

Since 1938 the average annual earnings of migrant families has further increased. The lack of compilations of average annual earnings since 1938 necessitates the use of average hourly earnings of hired laborers as one possible means of showing the trend of improvement. In July, 1941, the average annual earnings of all hired laborers in California was 36 cents an hour; in July, 1942, it was 48 cents an hour; in July, 1943, it was 69 cents an hour; and in April, 1944, it was 77 cents an hour.²⁰ Had wage ceilings not been imposed, they might have risen even higher.

While earnings increased during these years, the cost of living also increased. Thus, this apparent gain was not all an improvement in position for the migrant, but in part a reflection of the general price increase. On the other hand, with the shortage of labor, employment per family increased. As Paul S. Taylor has indicated, "A Recent study of the change in earnings between 1940 and 1942, of migratory

families in camps operated by the Farm Security Administration in Arizona and California shows a gain in employment of 2.7 times, in average daily earnings of 1.9 times, and in average weekly earnings of 5.1 times!"²¹

The trend of earnings since the end of World War II has been downward. A great influx of migrants into California has resulted in more competition for jobs which have not increased in number and in less employment for the individual migrant. Thus, a report from Kern county, a major agricultural county in California, stated that in early May the inhabitants of a squatters' camp, in the area of the potato harvest, were working only 50 percent of the time.²²

The labor contractor system is another characteristic of the supply of agricultural labor in California which complicates the problem of providing decent and sufficient housing. It makes the fixing of responsibility more difficult, since growers use it as a means of relieving themselves of responsibility in housing their labor. Carey McWilliams, as Chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing, in his testimony before the Tolan Committee, described the contractor system as follows:

(1) Investigation made by this Division indicates that with respect to areas of production in California, that the contract system is fairly all-embracing . . . it can be said that there is hardly an important agricultural area in the State in which labor contractors do not operate . . . there are some 150 labor contractors registered. . . . (2) The size of the labor operations of these contractors varies considerably . . . 6 to 12 or 15 workers . . . (to) 500 and 600 (3) Some restrict their operations to a particular locality or county or to one or more adjacent counties. On the other hand, there are many contractors who follow a definite pattern of migration year in and year out, and these contractors have come to be looked upon by growers as the agencies through which a fixed seasonal labor supply is recruited (4) This system seems to be most firmly entrenched in those segments of agriculture where the packing, processing, canning, shipping and refrigerating aspects have come to have an ascendancy over the purely productive aspects (5) The great bulk of the contractors whom we have contacted are Filipinos and Mexicans . . . these contractors show a preference for the employment of members of their own race This is by no means true of all contractors, as a matter of fact, many other groups will be found in the crews particularly of Mexican contractors including so-called white American workers (6) Most contractors work for a number of employers.²³

McWilliams went on to say: "Perhaps, the most serious disadvantage of this system is the following, namely, that it offers no opportunity of advancement to the workers; no possibility of steady employment; no possibility of establishing an employment record through continuity of employment. It is a 'dead end' system."²⁴

The sanitary conditions of "labor contractors' camps are as a rule below the standard of those camps maintained directly by growers."²⁵ With the contractor acting as employment agency, as well as the housing agency, he has, and often uses, the power to influence the migrants to live in his camp. He also may distribute the

CHAPTER III

THE MIGRATORY WORKERS' OWN EFFORT

Migratory agricultural workers who provide their own housing live principally in squatters' camps, in auto camps, and in shacktowns. The squatters' camp represents the very lowest form of housing the migrant can come to live in and marks complete inability of the migrant to provide decent housing, because he has no money and no job, or because there is no available housing to be obtained even with money.

Housing conditions prevailing in squatters' camps are the most primitive. The site is a field, a river bottom, a ditch bank, or a roadside, devoid of all basic sanitary facilities. Migrants build their own shelter, carry their own water supply from the ditch bank or some other distant point, and dig their own privies. Everything is makeshift. Under such conditions it is inevitable that these camps should become areas of disease. The State Relief Administration describes one such camp:

In the Santa Ana Wash between San Bernardino and Redlands, many families were found camping in February in an area about a half of a square mile. Some of the families were obtaining their water from a dairy where it was also possible to buy bread, milk or honey at low prices. Still others depended on the water they secured from a filling station where they bought kerosene for their lamps. From a distance, the Wash gave the impression of a small town of white tents, but on closer observation it was found that most of the families were living in shanties constructed of paper boxes, junk tin, and scrap iron, or in trailers or house-cars. The sandy, stony ground was almost bare of vegetation save for a few scattered trees and brush. Most of those camping in the upper part of the Wash above a gulley were families, while at the other end were the unattached men. Wood was scarce and also wet and it was difficult to make it burn. One man had somewhere found a large supply of tar-soaked roofing paper which he was using for fuel although it made a very smoky fire. This man and his wife and two children were traveling in a 1928 Buick car which was also used as sleeping quarters for the children. A ten foot trailer covered with brown canvas and a blue and white oil cloth served as the house. Smoke was pouring out of a stovepipe which extended out the front of the trailer.¹

Descriptions of squatters' camps were generally the same. Here is what Carleton Beals says in *American Earth*:

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 march. Official

investigations have shown that the water used in camps is often contaminated.²

Residence in squatters' camps is of uncertain duration: the length of time the migrant stays varies from overnight to a week or to months. The camp itself may endure for a long time. With the frequent moving from squatter camp to another squatter camp, shacktown, or employer camp, the disease of one camp can be spread through the communities the migrant travels and to the new camps he comes to stay at. Epidemics have resulted: "It is known that during last year (1938) agricultural workers carried smallpox from the San Joaquin Valley to the Imperial, and typhoid from Imperial into Kern county."³

When the size of the squatters' camp is large, the danger of disease and the plight of the people is greater. The size of the squatters' camp at Marysville, prior to establishment of the first government camp, was about 100 families.⁴ One at Edison in 1938 was occupied by about 150 families.⁵

Today the ability of the migrant to house himself is no better than it was in the 1930's. Admittedly, the menace of squatters' camps lessened from the later 1930's to 1945 when first the government camp program made more shelter available, and then the war created a shortage of labor and the growers provided better housing to keep labor on their farms. But, since 1945 squatters' camps are again on the increase, and conditions common in the 1930's are again appearing. In June, 1946, the Division of Immigration and Housing reported to the Governor's Council:

Conditions similar to those of 1936 exist today in Kern County where a tremendous influx of migratory labor is arriving to work in the potato fields. Many of the growers can make no provision whatever for housing their crews who, therefore, are camping in backyards, on roadsides, and on ditchbanks with the most meager type of sanitary conveniences.⁶

A step above the squatters' camp in the matter of permanence of residence and of cost is the auto camp. Since the auto camp is already built and is operating as a commercial venture, it is not entirely the migrants own effort to house himself. However, it is the rentals received from the migrants, without subsidy, that pay for maintenance of the camp. For this reason auto camps will be discussed here.

In 1930 there were some 250 auto camps housing migratory agricultural workers on a permanent basis.⁷ These camps take on the aspect of a permanent community with usually a filling station and grocery store catering to the inhabitants. Although the auto camps were built for transients and did not have the sanitary facilities necessary for permanent occupancy, the cheapness of the rentals and the housing shortage were factors which influenced the migrants to use the auto camps for permanent housing. Carey McWilliams describes the problem this created.

This development, namely, of auto and trailer camps becoming a form of permanent housing, is a matter of serious concern to the division of

immigration and housing. The auto and trailer camps which cater to this type of clientele are, of course, among the cheaper grade camps in the State. They were never constructed, laid out or designed for any other purpose than to provide overnight accommodations to tourists, and when units of an auto camp of this kind are used to house families on a more or less permanent basis it makes for extremely bad health and housing problems. Furthermore, when auto and trailer camps are used for this purpose they rapidly take on many of the characteristics of small communities, that is, gasoline stations, stores, beer parlors, etc., begin to develop around the auto camp, so that many sites of this character are the nuclei of new communities, but of course, they were never planned or designed or laid out with any such purpose of mind.⁸

Shacktowns represent about the highest form of housing the migrant is able to obtain by himself and provide the most permanent residence the migrant can obtain. To have a shack in a shacktown represents the ability of the migrant to purchase some land and to build. It is an accomplishment. But remembering the economic status of the migrant, what kind of a home can it be?

The shacktown is usually a community just outside an incorporated town. It is the slum of the city, catering to the lowest income groups. Growth of shacktowns was very rapid during the depressions of the 1930's, and they have become a well-established mode of housing in California.

Shacktowns grew up around most towns and cities in California, as Sacramento, Stockton, Lodi, Woodland, Marysville, Yuba City, Gridley, Chico, Redding, and had absorbed at least 150,000 families by 1939.⁹

Shacktowns are similar in character. The one in Sacramento during depression years was located along the Sacramento River, near the filtration and incineration plant. It had a population of 1,500 people, mostly white. The State Emergency Relief Administration made a survey of 539 households along the principal street, Jibboom Street.

Not only is there a lack of proper sanitation but also there is a deplorable absence of furnishings and personal possessions within the depression settlement dwellings which could make living more agreeable. Thirty-five households have no beds of any description, and what beds or cots there are have been salvaged from dump heaps or have been crudely constructed at home. Most of the beds are equipped with springs and mattresses, but nearly all of these, like the beds, are salvaged from junk heaps and are in need of repair; many are hand made. Nearly all of the households have stoves, most of them battered, rusty and inefficient. Twelve families have retained radios from more prosperous days, but since no electricity is available, some are utterly useless.

The outside appearance of most dwellings is repellant; decay has rotted scrap construction material and the overflow piles of sodden junk help prepare the visitor for a sordid look within the household. Even in mid-day the interior is

dark, but the noxious odors are strong of dampness, rot, stale atmosphere
Some shacks contain nothing but a blanket roll.¹⁰

The survey remarked that the typical shacktown is devoid of every recognized American right and standard of living.¹¹

To live upon a plot of ground in this shacktown, which was termed "unfit for human occupancy," a rent was charged for the houses ranging from \$3 to \$20 a month, depending on its nearness to the Sacramento River. Some of the ground was purchased for permanent houses. Ground space for tents and makeshift housing rented for \$1.50 to \$5 a month.

The shacktown at Arvin in Kern county was described in detail by Carey McWilliams at the Tolan Committee Hearings:

Arvin is unincorporated and, as such, there are no building-construction regulations, a condition that has nurtured the development of a large rural slum area where many habitations are constructed of sacks, canvas, boxboard and whatever other material was at hand at the time of erection, and the broken-down auto trailer is there in vast numbers. Many entire families are overcrowded into this general class of housing, a situation that no doubt contributed to the fact that the community has a high tubercular rate, according to the records of the Health Department. Oneroom shacks are prevalent throughout the territory, the occupants cooking, eating, and sleeping in the same compartment.¹²

The shacktown at Modesto, much like the ones at Marysville, Salinas, and Brentwood, has become a permanent section of the city, located on unincorporated ground. Modesto's "air-port community" grew rapidly under the influx of dust bowl migration. The migrants bought lots for \$125 and established makeshift homes. In time these makeshift homes evolved into whitewashed frame houses.

By 1938, 200 families, 1,000 persons, lived in the shacktown. Most of the makeshift homes gone, 60 percent of the homes had unimproved outdoor toilets, 50 percent disposed of garbage on the surface of the ground. Sanitary facilities were generally inadequate. By 1939 almost 400 lots had been sold.¹³

The land in these shacktowns commonly represents agriculturally poor land; the most economically profitable use the owner of such land can make of it is to subdivide it and sell it in lots. As a result, writes Creisler, ". . . the promoters of these subdivisions will have profited on agriculturally submarginal land to the extent of over \$75,000."¹⁴

The danger of such a community as the shacktown is clear enough. "In comparison with a desirable American standard of living, residents of these colonies are living on a low plane and may establish a low standard for agricultural workers throughout the state."¹⁵

Carey McWilliams summed up the development of the shacktown during the

1930's before the Tolan Committee. In essence, he testified that shacktowns are the rural slums of California and have the general characteristics of most of the migrant housing built in the 1930's: (1) they are located in unincorporated areas; (2) the settlements are unplanned and unreasoned, and therefore the communities tend to lack some of the minimum requirements of water, sewage disposal, and the other similar items necessary for a normally healthy community life; (3) the housing is makeshift, starting with tents, and evolving into a more permanent structure with whatever materials the migrants can obtain or find over the years; (4) the developments become permanent in nature and take on the characteristics of permanent slums.¹⁶

FOOTNOTES

¹ State Relief Administration, Transients in California, 1936, p. 237.

² Carleton Beals, American Earth, p. 395.

³ Omer Mills, Health Problems Among Migratory Workers, Farm Security Administration, 1939, p. 3.

⁴ State Rural Resettlement Administration, Resettlement Administration, Statement in Support of Project to Establish Camps for Migrants in California, 1935, (unnumbered page showing picture of the Marysville camp).

⁵ Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor, An American Exodus, p. 118. This photographic and textual study portrays many migrants, in squatters' camps, growers' camps, government camps, and on the road.

⁶ Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Immigration and Housing, Report to the Governor's Council, June, 1946, p. 9.

⁷ Carey McWilliams, Testimony before the La Follette Committee, part 59, p. 21891.

⁸ Carey McWilliams before the Tolan Committee, part y, p. 2542.

⁹ Catherine Bauer, before the Tolan Committee, part 6, p. 2576.

¹⁰ SERA, Sacramento Depression Settlement Survey, 1935, p. 38.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹² Carey McWilliams, before the Tolan Committee, part 6, p. 2550.

¹³ Lillian Creisler, Little Oklahoma, unpublished Master's Thesis, University of California, 1940, p. 80.

CHAPTER IV

EMPLOYERS' CAMPS

A majority of migratory agricultural workers are housed by their employers. The quality of the housing ranges from excellent to bad. Within this range of quality the distribution of camps is very unequal. In 1945-1946 the Division of Immigration and Housing inspected 3,910 private labor camps of all types and rated 1,177 camps, or only 30 percent, as "good." The Commission rated 2,352, or 60 percent of the camps, as "fair"; and 10 percent of the camps as bad. (See Table 7.) A "good" camp is one that complies with the standards set up by the Labor Camp Act; a fair camp is one lacking some of the essentials of a good camp; and a bad camp complies with only a few requirements. Thus, only 30 percent, or less than one-third of the camps inspected in 1945-46 complied fully with the standards of the State Labor Camp Code.¹

Reviewing the entire record of 35 years of inspections, since the beginning of the Division, there is no instance where even two-fifths of the camps inspected were rated "good," i. e., in full compliance with law and regulations. The highest percentage rated as good in any inspection period was 39.3 percent, in 1924. In 17 inspections or less than half the total inspections noted in Table 7, as many as 30 percent of the camps were rated good.

Of course, the Labor Camp Code, which is the basis of standards and inspections, has changed and improved over the years. Consequently, the ratings are not comparable one year with another, in terms of a fixed standard. However, there is comparability in respect to the degree to which camp operators obeyed whatever standard was currently set under the law. On this basis, the record of compliance by growers' camps plainly is low.

Reports of the Division of Immigration and Housing over the years say that the growers cooperate in the enforcement of the Labor Camp Code. Such statements as the following appeared in most of the reports:

Generally speaking, the division received complete cooperation from the operators of both agricultural and industrial labor camps.²

But the statistics of the Division indicate that the cooperation received is of a limited nature, that the examples of model housing are not numerous, and that those which comply fully with the law house a minority of migrants.

The best information available on the number of agricultural labor camps in California and the population of these camps was given by Carey McWilliams in his testimony before the La Follette Committee. In 1938 there were approximately 5,437 in California, inhabited by 145,000 persons for a substantial part of the year.³

Table 7

Number of Labor Camps Inspected and Ratings Given by
Commission of Immigration and Housing, 1914-19

Year	Total Number Inspected	Number			Percentage		
		Good	Fair	Bad	Good	Fair	Bad
1914	876	287	316	263	33.9	36.1	30.0
1914-15	983	335	342	374	35.0	34.8	31.2
1917	1,033	241	420	374	23.2	30.6	36.2
1918	969	378	399	192	38.8	41.3	19.9
1920	2,022	670	1,069	283	33.3	52.8	13.9
1922	1,710	628	934	148	36.8	54.6	8.6
1924	1,565	614	804	147	39.3	51.3	9.4
1926	1,551	362	691	468	25.2	44.6	30.2
1927	1,994	484	982	528	24.3	49.2	26.5
1928	2,413	543	1,183	687	22.6	49.0	28.4
1929	2,366	526	1,290	550	22.2	54.6	23.2
1930	2,004	536	1,036	432	26.7	52.8	21.5
1931-32	1,934	569	1,009	356	29.4	62.2	18.4
1932-33	2,120	755	1,050	315	35.6	49.5	14.9
1933-34	1,423	295	628	500	20.7	44.2	35.1
1939	1,481	360	610	431	24.3	46.6	29.1
1945-46	3,910	1,177	2,352	321	30.0	60.0	10.0

Source: Annual and Biennial Reports of the Commission of Immigration and Housing.

Some 33.6 percent of these persons lived in 479 cotton camps and some 15 percent lived in 83 pea camps. Both the pea and the cotton camps are rated generally as the worst in the state. Further, almost half of the camp population live in these 562 camps which constitute only 10 percent of the agricultural camps. Generally the agricultural labor camps are overcrowded, and sanitary facilities are very limited. "Practically none of them have flush toilets and practically none of them could truthfully be called 'houses.'"⁴ Not only are the physical conditions bad, but also some of these private labor camps permit no community life. They appear much like company towns where there are company stores, where the right of free assembly is difficult to exercise, and where the practice of eviction by law officers in labor disputes prevails.⁵

The dramatic Wheatland Riot in 1913 made California conscious that its agricultural labor camps constituted a problem. It was a vivid example of how bad a camp can be, how irresponsible an employer can be toward his labor, and how great a social explosion can result.

The Wheatland Riot occurred on August 3, 1913 on the Durst Hop Ranch near Wheatland, Yuba county. Some 2,800 men, women, and children were involved; many persons were injured and four men were killed. The riot was caused largely by the overcrowded and filthy living conditions in the camp.

The Durst Ranch advertised for 1,500 hop pickers to be available for work on August 5. The advertisement indicated that the ranch had good camping grounds and sufficient tent and sanitary facilities. Within a few days, Durst found he had about 2,800 persons, half of whom were women and children and half were aliens. Knowing that he had an oversupply of labor, he did nothing to reduce the numbers to the necessary size, but, on the contrary, "there is evidence that Durst planned, through state-wide advertising, to bring more pickers to his ranch than he could possibly keep in the field."⁶

The wages being paid were the standard \$1 per hundredweight for hops; but Durst held back 10 cents of this to guarantee that the workers would stay on to the completion of the harvest. His legal right to do this was seriously questioned; and it was found in the investigation that many workers could not brook the unsanitary conditions of the ranch and left, to the financial advantage of Durst. Carleton Parker reported, "The Durst management, knowing exactly the unsanitary condition of the camp, and the threatened migration of part of the picking force because of it, had in its refusal to correct the abuses, laid itself open to the suspicion of intentional carelessness because of the gain accruing to Durst in the thus forfeited 'Bonuses' of pickers leaving."⁷

For 2,800 people there were only nine toilets, less than one to 300 people; these were merely holes with depth of two feet, which quickly filled and overflowed, causing nausea and vomiting. Dysentery broke out. People waited fifteen and twenty in line to use them. Other sanitary facilities were also lacking, no provision was made to provide water for the workers in the field. Suffering such conditions, the pickers had little compunction against rioting.

Although the Durst ranch was particularly vile, many other camps had similar conditions.⁸

Those ranches which grow crops with the shortest seasonal labor demands, as peas, tomatoes, prunes and potatoes, have caused the Commission of Immigration and Housing the most trouble, because the camps lie idle for about ten months each year and fall into disrepair. Growers often do not have the money to invest to keep up the housing all year round or to prepare them before the harvest according to standards set down in the Labor Camp Code. The Division of Immigration and Housing has noted a slight tendency on the part of growers under pressure of law enforcement, to choose to abandon the camp rather than comply with the code. It said:

Our 1940 report indicated that there is a slight tendency on the part of employers to abandon their privately operated camps in favor of federal or county camps. There has been a slight tendency in some parts of the Sacramento Valley to abandon operation of the privately owned camps, and we are inclined to believe, if a check were to be made of this movement, it would be found . . . , the general

which contributed mainly to the improvement during this period.

Immediately following the close of the war there ensued a period in which the great shortage of building materials has prevented the growers from enlarging their housing facilities to care for the increasing size of the labor force that has come to California to work their ranches. The Division of Immigration and Housing observed in May, 1946:

The (Immigration and Housing) Division's field men are confronted with a rather difficult problem in enforcing provisions of the State Labor Camp Act for while most employers who operate labor camps have ample funds to expand or improve their camps as required by this law, the difficulty of securing building materials has slowed down the program in some places, and, in others, brought it to a standstill. Conditions similar to those of 1935 exist today in Kern County where a tremendous influx of migratory labor in arriving to work in the potato fields.²³

Despite all the war-developed housing, the Division in the same Report was obliged to conclude that

Many of the growers can make no provision whatever for housing their crews who, therefore, are camping in backyards, on roadsides and on ditchbanks with the meager type of sanitary conveniences.²⁴

Since the problem so often has been a condition of having no housing at all for some workers, the question arises: Have the employers made all the concerted effort to build and obtain housing that was possible for them to make?

In 1927 the employers and communities received legislation which enables them to build housing. In that year the Public Service District Act of 1927²⁵ was passed to provide machinery for establishment and financing camps under jurisdiction of the county supervisors. By position of a majority of the electors within a proposed district the Board of Supervisors is empowered to establish, construct, and maintain a labor camp. To establish and operate a camp the county can levy a tax on property within the district of the camp, not to exceed five mills on the dollar. To govern the camp the Board of Supervisors may appoint a Board of Trustees.

Apparently not one camp has ever been established in 21 years under this legislation. One attempt to do so in Stanislaus County failed late in the 1930's. Whether the growers are reluctant to permit the community a voice in the operation of the camp, or whether they are unwilling to tax themselves, or whether there are other reasons for this failure is not clear.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Housing, Biennial Report, 1945-1946, p. 47.

But the Department of Agriculture is under mandate of Congress to dispose of the camps. So Secretary of Agriculture Clinton P. Anderson offered the camps to the state.

Large farm interests immediately brought their biggest guns to bear upon the legislature to spike state purchase. In the midst of debate on the issue, Secretary Anderson offered to sell to the state at \$611,000 facilities estimated to be worth more than six millions. He gave the state a 30 day option on the offer.

But the Legislature snubbed the deal and (the Senate - ed) passed a resolution forbidding state bidding for the camps over the strenuous pitch of Senator Harry Drobish for delay until next January when the whole matter could be considered at a regular session.

The move cleared the decks for private purchase and farm interests which expected, with state competition eliminated, to be able to buy the camps for a song, converged on the office of William Anglim, Federal representative in Berkeley on April 23 in the belief they could "write our own ticket" for the purchase.

But the day before, Mr. Anglim was notified that the option offer to the state was being extended temporarily.

The private buyers were indignant. Some were reported to have said the Government should not sell the camps to them at 10 percent of their current value, but should give them outright to the private interests. Others were dubious that they could pay as much as 10 percent.

When they learned that they could not buy or beg the camps forthwith, some raised the question of why they should not be permitted to continue operation of the camps on a lease basis.

Meanwhile, the forces representing the California State Grange, A. F. L., C. I. P. and small farmers had been rallying to the support of state purchase.

While this group has not as yet enunciated any clear-cut program, they are understood to be ready to propose that the state buy the camps, then lease them to private interests for operation under regulations insuring adequate maintenance in the interests of the tenants.

This is the issue as it stands today (May 1948).

How is it that this problem of housing migratory agricultural workers should suddenly explode again into public view as a controversial question? The inadequate condition of the housing of migrants has existed for year after year in the open where everyone could see it by merely looking.

The issue came again into public view when several related facts were made known in the press. These facts were, first, that migrant housing conditions were,

in 1948, about as bad as they had been in the 1930's, and second, that the Federal camp program, by a law passed in 1946, was headed for early liquidation.

The recurrence of distressing conditions of migrant housing had been reported in 1946 by the Division of Housing to the Governor's Council, the very year that Congress was ordering liquidation of the program. In June of that year the Division of Housing reported to the Governor's Council that the pressure on migrant housing was so great and the supply of housing so short that the conditions of 1935 were again appearing (see Chapter IV). In the same report, the Division went on to say:

Reports of the prevalence of typhoid, polio, and other similar diseases are already coming in from several county health officers in the San Joaquin Valley but our field men are helpless to relieve this situation since most of the employers are unable to construct labor camps.

Another complicating condition is the return of family groups to labor camps which will multiply present problems by adding those of schooling and maintenance of public health standards.¹

Again, in the September 1946 Report for the Governor's Council, the Division of Housing stated:

Our inspector for Stanislaus and Contra Costa Counties reports that this season the farmers in that area have had more migrant labor than they can house²

In November 1946 the Division stated:

For several months, the Division has called attention to the change taking place in many of the agricultural labor camps. After release from wartime industries and allied manufacturing operations large groups of workers have returned to their normal occupation--agriculture--and many of these are family groups. With a reduction in importation of Mexican nationals, the type of camp which was in operation for single men necessarily had to be altered and reconstructed for family-group use.³

Conditions of the migrants tended to become worse as more and more people came back into agriculture. Then, there occurred in May 1947 the following incident --characteristic of so many incidents during the 1930's:

Agricultural labor contractors (San Luis Obispo) circulated hand bills throughout the southern end of the State, soliciting pea pickers for harvesting a pea crop and almost overnight several hundred persons--men, women and children--began to arrive and camp on the banks of the Santa Maria River. The contractors had made no arrangements for a camp nor was any work available for several days after the people began to arrive.⁴

Soon the increasingly difficult housing problem faced by the migrants began to receive attention in the newspapers. But the fact that Congress had decided the

camps should be liquidated remained unnoticed.

On May 2, 1947, the Fresno Bee described squatters' conditions in the Edison district of Kern county akin to those of the 1930's. Some 300 families, 1,500 persons, were ordered by the county health officer to vacate temporary shelters. Eviction from the squatters' camp was ordered because of the outbreak of dysentery and one reported case of diphtheria among the migrants. According to the Bee, "Dr. Buss (Kern county health officer) asserted there are not sanitary facilities and no water-- a condition which makes the scattered settlement of tents and box shacks a potential disease center."

A similar squatters' camp and similar conditions existed in the Edison District before 1938, as pointed out in Chapter III. In 1938 the Federal Government established a mobile camp there. The squatters' camp and attendant conditions immediately disappeared, and sanitary conditions prevailed until 1946. In that year the Federal Government stopped operation of the mobile camp and almost immediately a squatters' camp arose. The Bee continued significantly:

Last year the government operated mobile camps which followed the harvests. This year there are no such facilities. All labor camps in this county, the officials said, already are crowded.

Again in reference to Kern county the Bee said: "Lott (a farm placement manager) said the county's current crops cannot provide work for all the newcomers and even at the harvest peak there will not be sufficient jobs."⁵

The influx of newcomers came from war industries as well as from other states. Among them, the Bee pointed out, were veterans: "Some of the families are those of veterans. Most are from out of state." And so again in the fields of California are to be found a wide and diverse range of social groups.

The Chief Deputy Sanitarian of Kern county feared a serious health problem as a result of the pressure of the newcomers on the short supply of housing:

The influx, Sumner asserted, poses a serious health problem because there is not enough proper housing to care for the migrants. As a result, he said, they are living in tents, shacks and other crude shelters where there are no sanitary facilities, and in many cases, no water.⁶

Upon eviction the squatters had to move somewhere, and naturally most of them were expected to start north. But the condition there was already crowded and distressed.

The Fresno Bee on the same day reported from Tulare county:

Dr. C.S. Ambrose, Tulare County Health Officer, declared today that he does not know whether any of the 300 families to be evacuated from unsanitary camps in Kern County will come here, but asserted Tulare has a serious camp problem

of its own.

Dr. Ambrose said four camps in the county have been abated within recent weeks because of inadequate sewage facilities and other unsanitary conditions. He declared the migration of families, mostly from the Middle West, is increasing and most of them are living in tents.

The Christian Science Monitor quickly carried a story on distress in the valleys of California:

The heavy tide of migrant farm workers flowing into California's fertile Central Valley threatens to reproduce the marginal living conditions so well publicized during the 1930's.

Thousands of persons from agricultural states are coming into California every month. An immature industrial economy has dumped war-trained workers on a tightening labor market. The impact of this greatly augmented labor force is already being mirrored in "jungle" conditions.⁷

The article went on to describe the pea picker incident at the Santa Maria River in San Luis Obispo County, earlier in the month, already referred to.

The fact of impending liquidation of the Federal camp program, which so far had received no attention in the press, suddenly was publicized in a series of articles in the San Francisco News on June 25, 26 and 27, 1947. The articles pointed out that the results of the liquidation of the camps would be to split up families because available housing could not accommodate them. The small farmer would find difficulty in getting his labor supply, for the Federal camps had served to bring laborers together for him.

In an editorial on June 26, 1947, to emphasize the point under discussion in the series of articles, the San Francisco News stated:

Farm workers and their families numbering 20,000 now are housed in 28 camps in California. Setting these people adrift to roam the state like the "Joads" of "Grapes of Wrath" fame or subjecting them to semi-peonage of "company-housed" laborers would be a most regrettable reversion to conditions that brought the state much unfavorable publicity in the days before the war.

Whether the American Farm Bureau Federation, which had obtained from Congress legislation for the liquidation of the Federal camp program, had anticipated that migrants and growers would suffer so great a shortage of housing in 1948 or not, is not clear. At any rate, by 1947 the Farm Bureau was not willing to leave assignment of the camps in the hands of the War Assets Administration for liquidation any longer. There must be no closing of the camps; no gap in their operation.

Speaking for the American Farm Bureau Federation, Mr. Ogg testified before the Housing Agriculture Committee in February 1947 in favor of extending the Farm

Labor Supply Program:

We recommend that at the Federal level the Extension Service in the Department of Agriculture continue to administer the farm labor program as now authorized, with authority to continue the operation of the present federal farm labor supply centers and camps with an understanding that arrangements be made for the lease or sale of such centers or camps to growers, grower groups, or State or local agencies as soon as practicable.⁸

The bill intended to give the American Farm Bureau Federation what it wanted, was the Hope Bill, H.R. 3367. Introduced in Congress on May 7, 1947, by Congressman Hope of Kansas, it provided that the temporary housing units for agricultural workers in rural areas be declared surplus and disposed of intact. The farm labor supply centers, labor homes, labor camps, equipment and facilities it provided should be sold by December 31, 1948, to farmers and associations of farmers only, who would operate them for the purpose of housing agricultural workers in the community.

The Hope Bill was supported by organizations which represented large growers, including the Western States Farm Labor Conference and the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Opposition to the Hope Bill arose immediately. In California the San Francisco News, the Catholic Rural Life Conference, the California State Federation of Labor, and Others were quick to declare their opposition. The News, in the same series of articles discussing liquidation of the camps, criticized the Hope Bill sharply. An editorial of June 26, 1947, asked:

In California to have a repetition of the scandalous days of the "dust-bowlers" and "Oakies" with their disease-breeding migrant camps scattered through the Central Valley?

Already this drift back to an experience that was the shame of the state during the great depression has started anew. It will be intensified if legislation now under consideration in Washington gets the congressional nod.

Pending is the so-called Hope bill (HR 3367) purporting to enable the secretary of agriculture to co-operate with land grant colleges in collecting information concerning the need and supply of farm labor. But in the bill is a provision that the labor camps maintained by the Federal Government shall be liquidated by Dec. 1, 1948, and that in the process they shall be sold ONLY TO FARMERS AND ASSOCIATIONS OF FARMERS for the purpose of housing agricultural workers. These camps were established by the Federal Government to remedy the terrible conditions resulting from the influx of workers during the depression. They have been administered by the Government ever since. The bill provides that, until they are liquidated as above, they shall be available to state agencies.

Putting them in the hands of farmers and groups of farmers, with no requirements

as to their maintenance according to specific standards of sanitation, medical service and recreation, doubtless would mean establishment on a broad scale of the "company housing" system among California's "factories in the fields," with all the evil consequences that implies.

A serious migrant housing problem in Santa Clara Valley was described in the News, as it continued the fight against the Hope Bill and against liquidation of the camps to growers. On July 8, 1947, it reported:

Last August (1946) Dr. Turner's staff (county health official) found 580 trailers, tents, shacks, and similar makeshift units scattered throughout the county. Many of them were without even rudimentary sanitary facilities.

"We know that the situation contributes to the incidence of disease in the community, which is high," Dr. Turner admitted, "But what can we do? We can't kick them out.

"Where would they go? Besides the growers need them for work in the harvests. If we force them out, they will leave the community and their service will be lost to the farms."

The San Jose Mercury-News on August 24, 1947 said that

. . . the migrant harvest workers who are indispensable to the valley's prosperity are housed in dirty camps along ditchbanks or in vacant lots, or else simply pitch tents in the growers' orchards.

Another editorial in the San Francisco News on July 8 continued the attack on "company housing":

. . . And the Hope bill, as we previously pointed out, means reversions to a company housing system ultimately, which could result in exploitation of the workers

It is obvious the state cannot ignore the problem or depend upon private ranchers or farm organizations to shoulder the responsibility. The small farmer cannot afford to maintain housing for his seasonal workers. Regulation and policing of private camps likely would cost the state more than actual operation and result in unsatisfactory conditions as well.

The Federally operated camps in the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys have been examples of orderly, sanitary and healthful conditions of orderly, sanitary and healthful conditions with rentals within reach of the workers. Experience of past years indicates that private operation simply does not fill the bill. It is because of this experience that farmers and farm organizations shy away from undertaking it now.

. . . (referring to Santa Clara County) Shocking lack of sanitation, most

primitive types of shelter, disease and squalor mark the temporary or permanent camps in which the fruit pickers live. This season one area near San Jose was threatened with an epidemic of typhoid fever due to lack of sanitary controls.

The disease-breeding potential of these unregulated centers is the compelling reason the Federal or state governments should assume their operation and maintenance. They are a positive menace to the whole state and other states as well.

The point is that these camps must not be allowed to degenerate into control of private operators with selfish motives who will utilize them as company housing projects or money making enterprises in which the workers, who have no alternative except "ditch camps" will be exploited. If the Federal Government will not, then the state must take them over permanently.

The California Grange News soon joined in the debate, and in an editorial on July 20, 1947, it summed up the housing problem of migrants from the point of view of the small farmer in these words:

September 30 forbodes a crisis. Unless something is done before that date, a federal operation of migratory labor camps in 24 states will cease. Within this state about 17,000 men, women, and children have no other shelter, and many farmers are depending on these seasonal laborers to harvest their crops.

The family farm operators of California have not asked that the camps be liquidated. The smaller farmers cannot afford extensive facilities for numerous workers during the brief season they need their labor and for that reason have found the federally operated camps a help, when located near enough to serve them.

. . . . Their usefulness was so thoroughly recognized that when war came, the program was enlarged until they have developed a capacity of nearly 100,000 persons and operate in about 24 states.

The Grange then told publicly for the first time in California the manner in which, virtually without public deliberation and debate, the Congressional mandate to liquidate had been secured. The Grange disclaimed all responsibility for the crisis itself, and laid responsibility for the action of Congress squarely at the door of the Farm Bureau:

During the war in 1944 a spokesman for the American Farm Bureau Federation, an Arkansan, urged Congress to order liquidation of the camps at the war's end. The witness was not asked why a successful program should be ended, nor was explanation offered. This was an issue which had drawn national attention before the war, yet with no airing of its pros and cons and apparently without consideration of what might or might not take the place of the camps Congress complied with the spokesman's request. That ill-considered action in 1944 produced today's crisis. Most citizens of California must have grave doubts of the wisdom

farm workers in decency and comfort, are to be offered for sale. Priority in the bidding is given to state or local governmental agencies with second choice going to bonafide associations of farmers. Governor Warren has urged that the state make arrangements to purchase and maintain these camps as a vital service to agriculture. His recommendation has thus far been ignored by the state legislature. Senator Drobish has introduced a bill in the upper house asking the federal government to delay the "dead-line" on sale of the farm labor camps until the state has more time to investigate and act. The Drobish bill should be passed and the recommendations of the Governor carried out without delay. There is no reason to believe that purchase of the camps by so-called "bona fide associations" of farmers would have other result than to turn them into the same old type of recruitment centers for undesirables of all types and races. Such has been the history of such "private" ventures in the past. We can see no change of heart on the part of those who sponsored them, then, which might lead us to think that their operation of these camps would be any better. The state should take them over and operate them. Then the people would have some voice in their management, as a necessary social function.

The Committee approved the Resolution, and sent it on to the Senate where it was passed after a floor fight, then sent on to the Assembly. There the Resolution was reported in the Rules Committee, hearings were held, and the resolution kept in Committee.¹⁶

An effort from the floor to have the Assembly pass a resolution identical with the Senate resolution was not successful. As the Weekly News Letter of the California Federation of Labor pointed out:

A last minute effort by Assemblyman George R. Butters to obtain passage of the Senate resolution opposing the State buying the 21 farm labor camps from the federal government was defeated when his effort to obtain a suspension of the rules to consider an identical resolution by the Assembly was voted down 35-34. To suspend the rules would have required the vote of two-thirds of those present. The resolution had previously been adopted by the Senate, but the Assembly Rules Committee refused to pass it out. The latter committee, however, okehed money so that the entire question will be studied by an interim committee.¹⁷

The Legislature adjourned on March 27.

As the disposition of the Federal camps was being argued in the State Legislature, the San Francisco News carried on March 25, 1948 the following news story from the San Joaquin Valley:

Charging privately owned farm labor camps now in operation do not meet reasonable health and sanitation standards, a Kings County public health nurse has appealed to Gov. Earl Warren to oppose private acquisition of 21 Federal farm labor camps in California.

In a letter published in the Fresno Bee, Miss Lillian Jacobs gave private camp

conditions an "A" for appalling, as she has seen them in the San Joaquin Valley.

"I am asking you to reconsider the offer of the Federal Government to sell the Farm labor camps to the state," she wrote the governor.

"I have been employed as a public health nurse in Kings County for the past two years and during this period did not see a single privately owned labor camp that met all the sanitary laws. In fact, a few met none.

"Gross violations and in some instances inhuman conditions prevail. It would seem cattle, especially milk cows, enjoy better surroundings."

She continued that she has visited camps where water pumps, worn out and inadequate, broke down habitually, leaving tenants without water a good part of the day.

She recounted finding a water supply on one place which, while bacteria-free, was so contaminated with oil and sand as to be unfit to drink;

"Shower facilities and hot water are not available in many of the camps," she declared. "The outdoor privies--there are a few flush toilets--are unspeakable, contributing to outbreaks of diarrhea that sometimes occur.

"In rare instances is there a regular cleanup man assigned to the camp. If a mother is concerned about the health of her family, she will clean the many-shared privy herself.

"Garbage and tin cans and mosquitoes flourish in many of the camps because of the lack of proper receptacles and drainage in the camps. Screens are scarce, making the nights intolerable in the mosquito season.

. . .

"This letter is not intended as an indictment of our county government and branches affected by the presence of labor camps in our midst," she told the Governor.

"On the contrary, our existing facilities are being strained to the utmost in an endeavor to improve these conditions.

"On the other hand, private camp owners cannot be blamed entirely, since the period of active employment is short and the cost of financing a suitable camp cannot be met."

She praised the Federal Farm Labor Camp at Linnell in Tulare County as the answer to the problems she outlined.

The State Senate this week adopted a resolution introduced by Senator George J. Hatfield, himself a large landowner and employer of farm labor, saying the state is uninterested in purchasing the camps.

At the very time the California Legislature was considering purchase of the Federal camps and the Senate all but rejecting it, the San Francisco Chronicle was running a series of articles on March 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 and April 20, 1948, discussing present situation of housing for migratory agricultural workers. The Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Stanton Delaplane was assigned the series. He wrote in his first article from the San Joaquin Valley:

Here (Fresno) in the center of the five richest farm counties of the United States, the man who is squeezed at the waistline is the man whose labor makes the crops.

The migratory worker and his family are actually hungry. There are people a few miles from here whose children haven't eaten in the last 24 hours.

. . .

Farm crops bring the county better than \$180,000,000 a year. By employer pay-roll figures, the migrant worker invests \$25,000,000 worth of labor in them.

But nobody can figure how to give him an off-season return on the investment.¹⁸

On the same day the Chronicle was reporting the distress of the migrants, it reported also the action of large farm interests, which, having persuaded the California Senate to pass Senate Joint Resolution No. 8, now expected to obtain the camps for themselves:

The Department offered the 21 camps, valued at \$6,000,000 to the State of California for 10 cents on the dollar. But the Legislature failed to take any action. Opponents, representing the views of the big farmer organizations, said they didn't want the State to enter into any public housing projects.

The big farmer organizations came here yesterday prepared to bid for the camps which they want operated--but operated and owned by them. There has been considerable opposition to this by some veteran groups, smaller farmer organizations and by organized labor, all of whom want the camps owned and operated by the State.

In a later article on March 26, 1948, Delaplane was at some pains to record the attitude of the large farmer:

An official statement by Ralph Bunje, secretary of the Agricultural Labor Bureau, speaking for the employers, may sum their attitude along with the defensive feeling farmers seem to have on this subject (of housing):

"Labor camp conditions are no worse then slum conditions in any big city."

One answer to the problem, continued Delaplane is: