

When migrant children arrive

...Volunteers are There to Help

Crop Pickers' Dilemma

By MARGARET HICKEY

MOTHERS know that their growing boys and girls need the vitamins that tree-ripened fruits and garden-fresh vegetables provide. But how many know the human, often tragic story behind the harvesting of these crops so vital to the family's health? Those snappy string beans admired by Mrs. Smith of Main Street may have been picked by a barefoot, undernourished child who has never romped on a real playground or by an older boy unable to write because the family's dusty truck never stopped in one place long enough for him to go to school.

Crop picking is essential work, so migrant families—more than a million of them—move up and down the country, belonging to no town. Their only shelter may be a shanty, a dilapidated barn, an abandoned freight train, or even a chicken coop.

U. S. Children's Bureau studies have produced striking facts about the unhappy conditions of these transient children's lives. One private organization—the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A.—has established a program of concrete help.

Last summer, 150 teachers, school principals and ministers, along with another 150 college students, moved into migrant camps in 12 states. They organized child-care centers for the youngest, high-school classes for the older children and adults; arranged Sunday-school and worship services; provided recreational activities for all age groups. All told, they reached an estimated 100,000 migrants.

A typical child-care center, according to Miss Edith Lowry, leader of the home-missions program, provided breakfast, lunch and two between-meal snacks, including always orange juice and cod-liver oil.

High-school instruction followed the quick and effective method of putting over the three R's originated by Dr. Frank Laubach, literacy expert. Pickers learned to read road signs, count money, make telephone calls, use the post office and the bank.

The activities stirred up by the National Council of Churches have encouraged other groups to help. Boy or Girl Scout leaders are undertaking to bring the Scout program to transient children in Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New York and New Jersey. In California, two 4-H clubs have been organized and a State Migrant Committee is under way.

In Wisconsin, the Governor's Commission on Human Rights urges communities to accept the migrants as temporary citizens, grant them the same privileges that others enjoy. Community interest was first aroused in 1949, when Texas-Mexican children were denied use of the swimming pool in the Waupun area. Now both local and visiting children play together on municipal playgrounds under locally sponsored supervision. Churches and organizations put on family-night programs at the camps and Saturday-night fiestas in town, with both migrant and local families attending.

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It was nearly suppertime when the doctor beckoned Mrs. Martinez into her office. The mother had been there since eleven, cradling the sick baby in her arms and whispering to it softly in Spanish.

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long," Dr. Elfriede Horst spoke slowly, distinctly, to help her understand. She had seen one patient after another all day, still had three house calls to make before giving a talk at her women's-group meeting. "Why didn't you call to let me know you were coming?" she asked. "Then I could have seen you right away."

Mrs. Martinez smiled shyly. She was a small, very young woman with scrawny arms and a thin face that brightened when she looked at the baby. The neat flowered cotton house dress she wore showed plainly she was expecting another child. "I no understand telephone," she apologized. "I wait."

Doctor Horst had heard this same explanation from other wives of Spanish-speaking migrant farm laborers. Many of these Mexican-American families who had left Texas for the summer to pick onions, tomatoes, string beans and corn on farms near Des Plaines, Illinois, did not know how to use a telephone. And they were afraid to try because it was hard to understand and be understood in English.

"What are you feeding the baby?" Doctor Horst asked as she picked up the pale, listless Martinez child, lean and puny for his nine months.

"The formula," his mother answered.

"What formula?"

"The one the doctor give when he is born."

"My goodness!" the doctor exclaimed. "That's not enough for a growing boy." From her desk drawer she took several sample cans of baby foods. "Your baby needs more than just milk," she explained. "Take these and buy more later. Be sure that he eats three times a day." Then she vaccinated the infant against smallpox and gave him his first inoculation against typhoid, tetanus and diphtheria.

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In carefully enunciated English, these Spanish-speaking children of farm workers from Texas recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag at the A. A. U. W. Migrant School in Des Plaines, Illinois. With the help of friendly volunteer teachers, they are learning that, though only temporary members of the community, they are citizens too.

