

SURVEY OF KERN COUNTY MIGRATORY LABOR PROBLEM

Kern County Health Department
Sanitation Division
C. F. Baughman, Chief

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT AS OF
July 1, 1939

During the fiscal year since the July, 1938 supplementary report on migratory agricultural workers was made, changes of importance affecting the health of our communities have occurred. The 1938 report predicted quite accurately the tendency of the Southwesterner to locate in Kern County; what the 1938 report did not predict was the many factors of this settling that are now dogging the health and welfare authorities: new serious problems.

Not until the 1940 census figures are available, will we

Where? What? Why?

know the exact extent of this new settling, nor the composition of the new-comers. Data from the schools, hospitals, relief and welfare agencies, and a superficial survey of camps, auto courts and subdivision developments must be the basis of any attempt to evaluate the present situation. From this material and from the observation of men in close contact with the rapid growth of Kern County, the



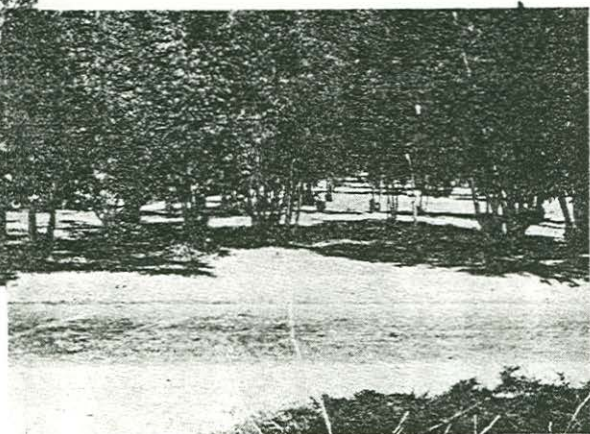
We had a good home
back in ---.

following general conclusions are derived.

First, squatter camps are gone from Kern County.



"NO CAMPING" signs and constant vigilance keeps it clean.



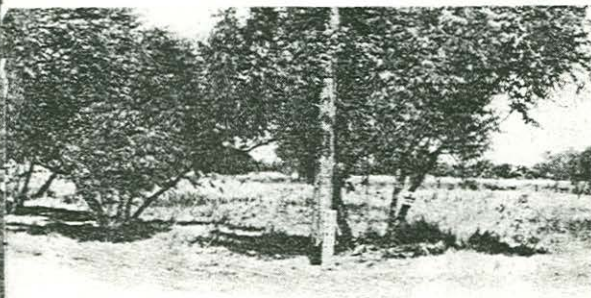
Typical 1937 Squatter Camp

Second, the migratory agricultural worker, as an institution, is rapidly vanishing in this area.

Several factors are responsible. The Southwesterner is by instinct a home lover and makes a poor fluid laborer; he is a man of the land and is attracted to the great expanse of potentially productive land lying idle in Kern county; his urgent need of employment has caused him to drive the better trained, more versatile migratory "fruit tramp" from the cotton growing areas in to

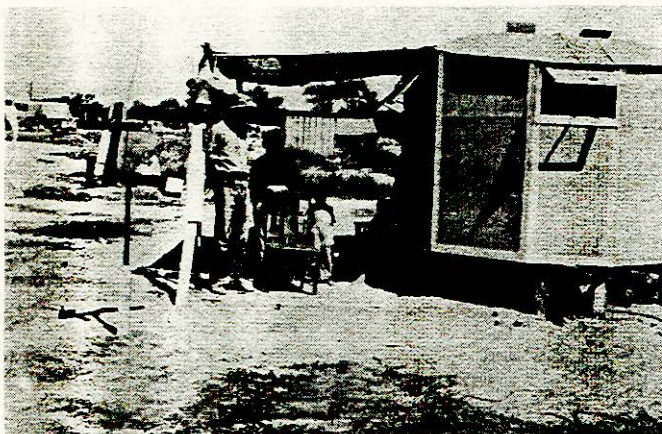


Property is posted and clean, 1939



Squatted on "Bank Property" in suburbs of valley city

agricultural fields less familiar to the Southwesterner; religious bonds, family ties, a sincere desire for opportunities for his children, and the rugged individualistic belief that in some way, some how, tomorrow will bring him a plot of land, a mule and the old familiar mortgage; all of these factors combine to limit his



"We found we had to travel, so we built this home on wheels. We're buying a lot and will build in Bakersfield."

wanderings in search of employment to a small area.

Growers have lost their fluid Mexican workers who miraculously appeared on harvest day and silently slipped away after their work was done; the white fruit tramp lies idle in the warm

winter sunshine of the Imperial Valley while the large family of the Southwesterner harvests the cotton of the Kern Valley; when the cotton harvest is over, the family hangs on as long as the grower will permit them to occupy the house the fruit tramp never demanded

From the thousands who roamed through this area in the years 1934 to 1938, the growers have selected the more responsible and have attempted to house and care for them in an economical and humane manner.



Many growers are finding themselves in a position

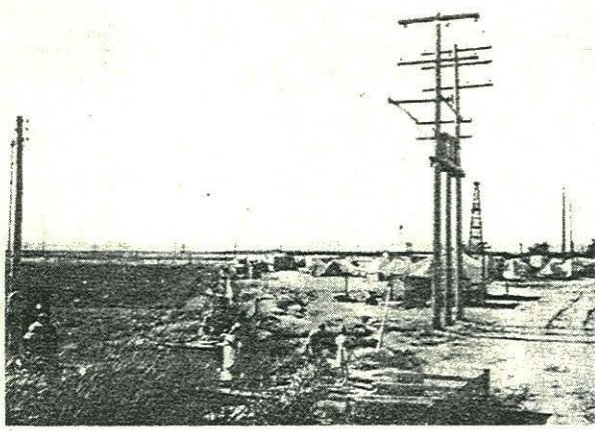
"A few more boards, a little stucco and windowglass; we'll move from the Jungle Camp pasteboard shack into our new home."

of feudal lord; their land is dotted with little communities of families who look to the employer for more work opportunities. The family needs credit at the store, the grower arranges it; the family needs a house, the grower builds it; the family gets sick, the grower telephones the public health nurse or secures hospitalization. Finally many growers are supplying land or assisting these new pioneers to secure land upon which to locate.

Several ranches in Kern County have three distinct types of camps; a tent camp of new-comers, a "cotton shack" camp for older workers, and for the more responsible workers there are two and three room houses surrounded by lawns, flowers and shrubs. One large rancher states that he is now employing more than a dozen workers who have graduated through the three camps and are buying modest properties in nearby communities and building their homes. Other growers report that the best workers often manage to get land of their own and desert the ranch that has trained them in the new art of irrigation and California farming.

Of all the factors responsible for the decline of migration of agricultural workers in this county, the planned attempt of large growers and grower organizations to diversify crops is by far the most deserving of mention. The nature of the labor supply and the fact that it came at a certain time has been an accidental influence on the migratory labor system; on the other hand, the conscious planning of diversified crop production stands as a laudible example of growers acceptance of the responsibility of providing a better life for their employees. Several growers now report a diversification of crops, and have found that their peak labor load is reduced to the point where adequate housing and camp facilities can be economically provided for the workers.

One ranch in the Buttonwillow district which has a long history of cotton production, now produces cotton, beets, corn and

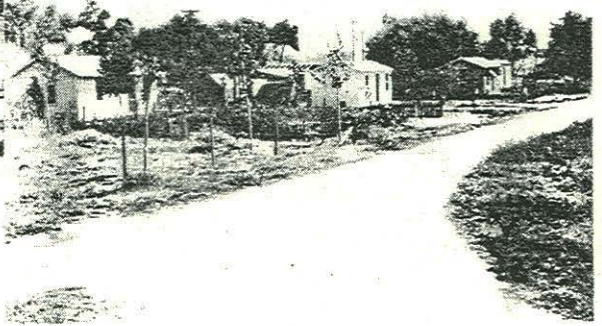


From this 1937 Squatter Camp

TO



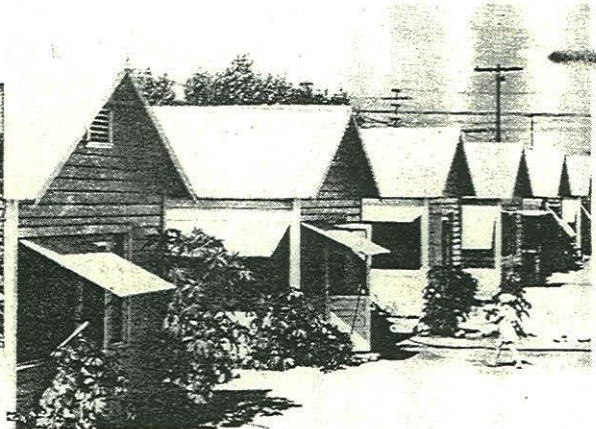
Cheap Auto Camp



Seven-fifty Per month for a Lot



Replacing the cotton Shacks
with Modern 3 Room Houses



potatoes; neat three room houses are gradually replacing the old "cotton shacks". The workers are buying furniture, planting lawns, creating homes and taking a part in the community life. Another rancher is removing approximately one third of the houses from a large camp in order to plant lawns and otherwise improve the camp for the "better type of workers" he is getting; crop diversification is also employed on the ranch. Another grower is discontinuing cotton because of the "curse of poverty" that seems to dog the white gold. Many growers are searching for a means of following the latter course.

Another new phase of grower responsibility that warrants mention is the 1939 activity in the Edison potato district. The 1938 report of the Health Department related the emergency camp experiment wherein elementary sanitary facilities, potable water and camp supervision were provided for necessary potato harvesters in the Edison and Wasco areas by the Sanitation Division of the Kern County Health Department. In the 1939 potato harvest, individual growers and grower combinations sought the advice of the health officer and erected temporary, mobile camps in compliance with the minimum requirements of the county and state camp acts. These mobile camps were sufficient to care for all needed labor. This grower cooperation released the county facilities for use at such public gatherings as glider meets, boat regattas and airport demonstrations, where permanent sanitation facilities are inadequate for infrequent and large gatherings.

So vast is the county of Kern that it is as impractical to compare one agricultural district with another as it is to compare one agricultural county with another. There is no sizable city in the Buttonwillow district; the ranchers find it economically sound to provide housing for their workers. On the other hand, there are hundreds of ranches in the county that are adjacent to urban centers

from which labor is always available. The elimination of squatter camps in the county by the Kern County Health Department has brought about a concentration of low income workers in the urban and suburban districts of the valley.

Arvin, Delano, Shafter, Wasco, McFarland and many smaller Kern towns have become the centers of such concentration. Lamont and Weedpatch are two communities that have appeared since the advent of the southwest population.

Bakersfield has experienced the creation of new subdivisions almost completely inhabited by people from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri. Many have purchased lots for as low as three dollars per month; houses have been constructed of any materials that can be salvaged from the alleys, or retrieved from dismantled structures in exchange for labor. Some of these communities have no satisfactory water supply, poor sewage disposal, no gas nor electricity; yet, they are teeming with hopeful life, buildings spring up over night; shrubs, flowers and scraggley trees swelter in the California sun drooping for the water that in some cases must be carried a considerable distance from a rasping, rusty pitcher pump.

On many of these properties can be seen three stages of the owners' life in the golden state. On the back of the lot may be the remains of the family car or truck with obsolete license plates from the state of origin; the chicken shed was once the pasteboard and refuse house of their squatter camp residence and on the front of the lot is a crude house of good, used lumber, perhaps with one side partially stuccoed or otherwise finished; built piece by piece as the family income permits. The lots generally are strewn with the litter of wire, boards and tin destined for a part in the finished home. Crude, often offensive, toilets dot the alley line, which threaten to leech their contents into the same strata of sand and subsoil from which comes the water supply.

The large squatter camps of yesterday are no more. Now, only a few isolated squatters can be located during a busy harvest season and none at all during the slack periods.

In isolated areas the growers have accepted the responsibility of housing their workers!

But, rural and suburban slums are now the problem which Kern County must face. In these slums live the agricultural shock troops: the men and women who harvest the cotton in the fall, go on relief until May, harvest the potatoes in the spring, work the vegetables and fruits in the summer and rest on relief until cotton harvest again. They work within a radius of thirty miles. They are learning to can vegetables, preserve fruits and otherwise augment their annual income in ways that are impossible for itinerant migratory workers.

This new population contains drunks, chiselers, exploiters, and social leeches the same as did previous migrations to the golden state: perhaps more, perhaps less; who shall judge? One look at the poor communities will convince the most skeptical that many residents are attempting to better themselves and their surroundings. The health department nutritionist finds them eager to learn the proper selection and preparation of healthful, economical foods; the sanitation inspector receives a generally good cooperation in so far as their resources will permit. The privies are flyproofed as soon as the necessity is explained by the inspector, and a general health consciousness is evident in most of these suburban communities.

The rapid growth of these suburban slums constitutes a serious threat to the health and welfare of the entire county. The concentration of low income people in crowded areas without proper sewage disposal facilities and without a safe supply of water is always dangerous. Most of them live in inadequate houses. The streets are unpaved; the yards generally unwatered and dusty in

summer. In winter, the poorly drained areas become veritable mud-holes. Such conditions constitute an insistent invitation to epidemics of communicable diseases which might spread to other areas of the county.

It is easy for the health officer to point out the dangers which lie in such insanitary communities; it is much more difficult to suggest a workable plan which might correct the undesirable conditions and prevent their occurrence in the future. Local and state realty boards might be urged to take steps toward preventing the creation of subdivisions which do not provide a safe water supply, adequate sewage disposal and drainage. It would seem for the general good of the county that minimum building and plumbing ordinances be adopted for the protection of all of the people. This cannot be done until the people are aware of the need and are willing to support the governing body in such action.

The next important requisite for converting these slum areas into healthful and sightly communities would be the provision of ways and means for the individual owners to finance low cost, durable houses that would protect them from the elements and be a credit to the social and economic wealth of this county. Such financial assistance might possibly be supplied established residents by a local, low-cost housing authority, operating in close cooperation with business, labor and the social agencies. Demonstrations carried out in other communities indicates that the low income and partial relief group could be adequately housed on a self-liquidation basis, with or without the assistance of federal governmental housing agencies, and at no cost to the tax payers.

One other practice which is gaining support of the farm operators is that of selecting their workers from the relief rolls of the county. The employment of residents, relief or non-relief, is highly desirable in order that those who are attempting to settle

will be able to maintain a decent home; the practice also will tend to discourage transient workers from seasonally flocking to Kern County and swelling our emergency relief load.

The final step essential to the rehabilitation of our rural and suburban slums is a continuation and expansion of the already successful crop diversification. Members of the various farm organizations are urged by the health officer to continue demonstrating and proving the methods of spreading the labor demand over a longer period of the year. Spreading the work will lower the relief load of the county; higher annual incomes will mean better health and lower public hospitalization costs; better homes and communities will result in less police problems and delinquencies and will tend to raise the social standards for the area.

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