

The Race of Heroes and Saints

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Summary: Discusses the Californian migrant workers exploitation by large corporations. Describes the condition of the migrant worker and those people who are trying to better it. Condemns the large landowners for denying the migrant worker property that makes him responsible and free. (DDLW #169).

Peguy said that the race of heroes and the race of saints stand in contradiction, the contradiction of the eternal and the temporal. He was writing of Joan of Arc and he said that the two races meet in her, that meet nowhere else. We would say they met also in Gandhi.

With the Bishops of the United States pointing out that the greatest danger of our age is secularism, it would seem that it is a time when we must beg God to raise up for our time men in whom saint and hero meet to solve the problems of the day. And not by war!

One realizes that there on the west coast where you see the problem of the rich and the poor so clearly. It is a region which is almost monstrous in its exuberance. I thought of that word when I saw the giant trees north of San Francisco. I thought of it again when I saw the coarse gigantic seaweed on the beach. Mountains and sea—all are different from the east. And I never realized so clearly the problem of the soil here until I reached the delta section between the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers, between the mountains and the city of Stockton. This is the first time I ever saw this section, although I've been up and down the valley many times before, and made a study of the migrant problem on one trip in '38 when I drove down the valley visiting all the Federal migrant camps which had been established by Roosevelt for the protection of these most neglected workers.

Those camps are owned by corporations now. And the situation of the migrant is worse than ever before. For those who work, especially the “nationals,” the braceros, Mexicans who are brought in under contract, wages and hours and conditions have bettered. The pay is good and the worker can save. Hundreds of them live in camps away out in the fields miles from the towns, and the meals served at the camp are uniformly good. The workers save, and when they go back to Mexico they want to return. If they come back, or if they stay illegally, they are the “wetbacks,” and they are helpless and have to take any wage they can get. Much has been written about this problem, in the press, in Cary Mc Williams' **Factories in the Fields**, in Steinbeck's **Grapes of Wrath** and **Of Dubious Battle** (to speak of popular books) and there have been many government reports, the latest just issued and available from the government printing bureau. We have known of it in the past as the problem of the fruit tramps, of the dust bowls, of the “Arkies” and the “Oakies,” people who in their

hunger for a better life, and also because they have been pushed off the land, have come from Arkansas and Oklahoma to California over the last two decades.

What I saw when I visited Stockton in December was the problem of the land. How much land does a man need? Surely not the tens of thousands of acres owned by the California Packing Company, the Southern Pacific, the Pacific Gas and Electric, the Bank of America, in addition to some individuals whose families administer their holdings like medieval barons, ruling over vast territories and treating their laborers like serfs. These corporations and individuals make up the Associated Farmers.

It was spring in the valley as I left Berkeley on my way to Stockton, and there was green on the hills all around. It was the time of lambing and of pruning and heaps of branches were burning in the orchards. Flowers were in bloom everywhere, Christmas season though it was; one walked through gardens of violets, roses, cala lillies, stock, babies' breath, geraniums, heliotrope and every variety of flower, but nothing was fragrant because the air was chill and the sun not strong enough to bring out the smell of the gardens. The sun comes out in the morning, and then the fog rolls in from the bay and shrouds the hills, and the valleys are gray and the sky hangs low. Some days it is bitter cold and the frail frame houses are heated with gas, a damp heat familiar to tenement house dwellers in the east.

It was on just such a cold misty day that I set out with Fr. Thomas McCullough to visit the "islands," enormous tracts of land extending as far as the eye could reach. The land lay below the sloughs, and the roads were rough and built up high along the side of the river and the sloughs.

The San Joaquin river drops very gradually from Mendota to Antioch. Therefore the bay tides affect it very much. Seven to ten feet tide drops are not rare in the upper reaches of the river. Ocean going vessels can go up to Stockton. And the entire area is a garden of pleasure for fishermen. One thinks of Venice, or rather of Zochimilco in Mexico. The sloughs are called by picturesque names,—Potato Slough, Whiskey Slough, Disappointment Slough, Sand Mound Slough. Some of the islands are called tracts and there is a McDonald tract which started my mind singing "old McDonald had a farm," but these black acres stretched out into the thousands. There is a Coney Island and a Staten Island which made me homesick and there are Venice and Bouldon and King and Andrus Islands. Our course brought us through Roberts Island to Hold, past Bacon Island, along the McDonald Tract, up along Connection Slough to Hayes Point on Mandeville Island, where we came upon a hive of industry in the way of a packing plant and a camp. It was dusk when we reached there, because we were many miles out of Stockton, after a long drive over rough road. It was five o'clock and we stopped in a sea of mud to see some of the workers coming out of a huge plant where men and women were grading potatoes for seed. It was still not too dark to see a bit of the camp where there were a few apartments in houses for families and a long river boat tied up in the slough for dormitories for the seventy-five or so Mexicans under contract. There were both Japanese and Mexicans in this workgroup.

We stopped to talk to some of the young women and an older woman who was their mother. The father had worked nine years before he could bring them up from Mexico. One girl had just died.

Everywhere the priest was greeted with love. When was he coming out again for Mass and the rosary? Did he realize that he had not been there for three months? Mass often had to be in midweek and then at four in the morning.

But Father has eighty camps that he must visit and it takes a long time to get around to them all.

We were invited to dinner in the shed where long tables already held about eighty men. They had hurriedly washed in the common laundry off to one side, and now they sat down to what was a typically American meal. Big jars of jelly and peanut butter in the middle of each table, and mounds of white bread still wrapped in waxed paper. And for the meal, stew. There was a big bowl of sugar on a side table, and pots of tea. There were some Japanese among the workers, but mostly Mexican. Father told me the workers had also been imported from the Fiji Islands, from Guam, and there were many Mohammedans from India. In spite of the tremendous labor pool, new workers were always being imported, and the slums of valley cities grow.

I was glad to sit down and eat with these men in this great barracks twenty-five miles out in this swamp of black land, reclaimed by the labor of thousands, made to bloom by building ditches and dikes for hundreds of miles. Shacks had been built for these crews, and then used for other imported, contracted crews of single men. They have come in their strength, already close to the earth in their habits, and loving the earth which they tend. But they know that it is a cruel earth. "It is an earth that bites," they say. It is like peat, full of organic matter, going down twenty feet. It burns, and when a fire starts in it, they have to dig down twenty feet and flood it and dig around it, and sometimes it takes a week to put out the fire. This soil grows everything, the largest crops of asparagus, of celery, of lettuce in the world. fortunes are made from the obedient earth, and any change in the system is bitterly fought. Whenever there has been a strike there has been a reign of terror from these feudal barons and their hired men who manage these estates. Because of course the owners do not live on them.

The men that I saw were still men and strong. They live close to the seasons and react to them. When it is dull and foggy and cold, they eat, work and sleep and are dull and half alive. When the sun comes out and warms the earth they light up and smile and their movements are quickened and they live. (there is this reaction when they see Fr. McCullough). When they come up to the States they are men who live simply and need little in the way of stimulus. And as they go on living in the United States they begin to take to American clothes, garish outfits, the gawdy and superficial pleasures the skid rows of the towns have to offer them, dance halls, drink, cheap amusements, gambling, movies, houses of prostitution. Because the real joys of life have been denied them. They have been separated from their homes and families for long periods; they have been deprived of land. All that is real and beautiful in life, all that makes them responsible and free, is denied them.

"Their conditions are not bad," one hears everywhere. Yes, they have food, clothing and shelter. Sufficient wage to save, but on the other hand the same system that hires them, also robs them. They are robbed by every merchant (our Christmas season is a sample of the enticement and lure of the meretricious.) and they are conditioned to reject the life they have left, the life of the village, the austere life of a country without dime stores and skid rows,

and also without the abundant opportunity for their children in our schools. So they get back up as quickly as they can and settle in the cities. The miles and upon miles of tiny houses in the slums around Stockton (and other California cities) show this change. Sometimes their condition is bettered. Fr. McCullough told me of one family who came up from Texas who had saved six hundred dollars. They put it into two acres. Then they borrowed money and paying for material by stages they put up a house of concrete blocks, five bedrooms, living room, kitchen. There are no partitions in it yet, just studding, no ceiling, no windows, except one in the kitchen, and one door. The others are boarded up until they can afford the materials. It will take another five hundred dollars to finish it and they have already spent \$1,200, which was loaned by the bank as the work was being done. They borrowed money for seed to plant two acres or thereabouts, of onions. Then tragedy struck the family and the man lost a hand in a machine. He got \$98 a month disability and fifty went to repay the loan and forty eight to live on for himself, wife and six children. He will get some permanent disability money, from which this allowance will be deducted, so he is not yet defeated. If that accident had occurred on the land and not in the factory he would not have been so well off. There is no unemployment insurance, no benefits for the man on the land.

Heroes in suffering and hard work are these men and heroes in their own way are Fr. McCullough and other young priests like him who are living close to their people. Fr. McCullough lives with eight nationals in a little farm house outside Stockton. He tried to get a shelter going for the unemployed, but the rent was \$250 a month, and being a priest and not a layman, the State sort of moved in on him with regulations. Fr Duggan has a small parish in Decoto and he takes many a destitute one into his parish house. Other young priests try to keep up with the camps of contract workers, with the migrants, with the unemployed in the towns.

Sister Xavier of Maryknoll, who heads the Catholic Charities in Stockton, and Frances Wilson and Margaret Noonan are social workers such as our system has not seen before. The two girls, inspired by Sister Xavier, have moved into the slums, and living in a little four room house (one bedroom has two double deckers and the other, on.) have taken in people who have been in grave need for short and long periods. Their house stands on a low lot with a drainage ditch around it, and on the same lot a tiny community has come about. There are three Mexican families, and a trailer in which a single Mexican cotton picker lives, and a common laundry house with washing machine and tubs showers and toilets, and an extra guest house meant for some Mexican Missionary sisters who have not yet arrived. Fr. McCullough and seminarians built the cement block house, making three thousand blocks at four cents a piece which commonly cost eight and a half. Every time they had an extra five dollars they bought a load of cement and sand.

The Alonzo's who live in one house have four girls alive out of nine children and he is away picking cotton in Fresno. The Torres were living in a basement room with a dirt floor with open fire with a sheet of tin over it to cook on. There were seven children. He works in a packing house in Tracy.

This tract with its four houses was bought for \$2,000. The girls' house had to be added to and finished and it is still a frail bit of a building which they have painted and attractively furnished. There is a cess pool in the center of the yard which serves the five houses and they

have electricity, city water and are heated by gas heaters. The trailer brings in five dollars a month and the other houses ten monthly. There was an attempt to build upon private ownership and community by asking payments of fifteen a month, but the girls are lucky if they can get ten dollars a month rent now, to keep up the payments, the taxes and the repairs. The families were just too far sunk to make good community material and the little group of houses remains as they are in this time of the year in a sea of mud, no shrubs, trees or grass. One family has planted geraniums along one side of the house and a chicken coop on the other. Other families in the neighborhood, according to their strength and substance, paint, plant and make a home.

The problem of the worker under this capitalist industrial system is the problem of the land. The family needs property. Property is proper to man. Property means freedom and responsibility.

The evil is so deep seated and power is so entrenched that the State of California is powerless. Which means that men are looking to the Federal government to work out the problem through such existing legislation as the Federal Reclamation Act which has been on the books since the last century and which tries to restrict holdings to 160 acres. The corporations, the Associated Farmers, want the benefits of the government projects such as the Central Valley program and the Shasta Dam, but they don't want supervision or the terms of the reclamation act enforced. There is a war on between the Federal Government and the corporations and big farmers. The poor look hopefully toward Holy Mother the State, who protected them in the past by Federal Migrant camps and to whom they look for relief in the future. They have known slavery under the contract system and their freedom when they finished their contract and aspired to citizenship did not mean freedom from destitution.

We have yet to hear from press or pulpit any condemnation of this system of brutal inequality. There are no prophets crying out from the housetops to make straight the way of the Lord for the poor. But God, who created this earth to serve men, not to enslave them, is not mocked. Woe to the rich. It is in the name of the people, in the name of the poor, that revolution is rising all over the world, by the permissive will of God.

Where are the heroes and the saints, who keep a clear vision of man's greatest gift, high freedom, to oppose not only the dictatorship of the proletariat, but also the dictatorship of the benevolent state, which takes possession of the family, and of the indigent, and claims our young for war. In China, in France, we hear rumors of those who uphold a Third Force as we of the Catholic Workers do, and these may have the ideology the green revolution for which we pray.