

ARTICLES.

■ GRAPES OF WRATH REVISITED

And the Rural Poor Get Poorer

DALE MAHARIDGE

The road leading to Marysville, California, passes through some of the best farmland in the world, thick with orchards of peach, nectarine and prune. It's also a land rich with shacks and trailers and people—like that woman walking on the side of the road. With her tumbleweed hair and eyes as fierce as a winter sky, she is straight out of one of Dorothea Lange's Farm Security Administration pictures. This isn't surprising, given that Lange may have met the woman's grandmother while photographing the first New Deal government camp opened here in 1935 for Dust Bowl migrants. That camp was run by Tom Collins, who helped John Steinbeck in his research for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

All these years later, the Joads aren't doing so well. A movie-version sequel would find Rose of Sharon living her senior years in leaking shanty housing in Marysville, threatened by gentrification. Tom Joad's modern counterpart would be a victim of an unprecedented wave of rural unemployment, or working for the minimum wage, perhaps hooked on crank (methamphetamine), a rural version of crack preferred by impoverished whites. And others among the poor in the iconographic Central Valley, the Mexican and East Indian farmworkers, would be even worse off.

Rural poverty is far worse than its inner-city counterpart. Excluding crime, someone is now actually better off being poor (in terms of social services and jobs) in the South Bronx, Compton or Liberty City. Yet the illusion persists that the rural poor have it better, out there in the fresh air, with plenty of room to grow root cellars full of food.

We live in an age of ironies, and one of the most cruel is that many people who live where the food is grown are least able to acquire it. The rural poor often have no land to grow food on and pay more for it than people do in the cities, according to a Public Voice for Food and Health Policy study. Few competitively priced supermarkets exist—rural America averages just one supermarket every 265 square miles. There is a more limited availability of fresh fruits, vegetables and meats in those stores than in urban areas. At the same time, Public Voice says, the rural poor routinely exhibit clinical symptoms of hunger. And they are more prone to illness but have far fewer doctors, according to a 1991 report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The study found just 97 physicians per 100,000 residents in rural areas, compared

with 225 per 100,000 in cities; 111 rural counties had no physician at all.

Other studies show that working rural people are twice as likely to be poor as working central-city residents and have more limited access to adequate housing. While the rural poverty rate has always been higher than in the cities, each succeeding year following World War II saw rural conditions improve. According to the Agriculture Department, that changed in 1973, when a backslide started. According to the Population Reference Bureau, for at least twenty years prior to 1980, rural unemployment was lower than that of urban areas. Now the unemployment rate is higher, and the income gap between metro and nonmetro workers continues to widen. In 1979 rural workers earned \$4,800 a year less than urbanites; in 1989, the department reports, the difference was \$6,400 (in constant dollars). In places like Marysville, the jobless rate is consistently above 10 percent, rising to 15 percent in the winter. As in urban America, the official figure does not include the marginally employed.

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The rural poor are not welfare cheats, as the far right would have you believe about people who live in shacks and trailers. When doing research in rural Alabama for a book tracing the fate of the 128 survivors and offspring of the cotton sharecroppers documented by James Agee and Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I found none who were on welfare. Seven out of ten impoverished rural family heads work, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In fact, the rural household head who works is twice as likely to be poor as the urban household head; this is true for both whites and blacks.

The economy has been harsher on rural workers because their jobs are not on farms. A Population Reference Bureau study found fewer than 10 percent of the rural population on farms. Most work at unskilled jobs in resource industries or factories such as textile mills, occupations most affected by the faltering economy.

Marysville epitomizes the crisis facing rural America. When I started as a reporter for a California newspaper more than a decade ago, I made Marysville one of my beats. I interviewed people such as the woman who came from Oklahoma in 1934 in a Model T Ford that had only one problem: It lacked an engine. Her family harnessed the mules they used on their farm to pull the car across the desert to the promised land. A half-century later, she was living in a trailer and hoping to sell me a shirt for a quarter from a stand in her front yard. In 1986, when flood waters broke through the levees and forced 25,000 people to evacuate, I waded into the town and

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saw the onetime migrants and their children again defeated. I investigated methamphetamine labs run by what the Drug Enforcement Administration calls "six-toed Okie mutants."

I recently went back to Marysville, seeking the location of that first New Deal camp. When I inquired at the local library, the librarian whispered, "You mean, I hate to say it, you want to know about the Okies?" She produced some files labeled "Oakies." In Marysville, the town's leaders, many of whom trace their ancestry to the Gold Rush pioneers, still use this pejorative term and view them as unwanted outsiders, or even disavow their presence. After one of my stories was published, local politicians lambasted it in a public meeting and denied there was any poverty in their town. This attitude, prevalent in many rural areas, often keeps local officials from seeking scant state and federal money to build housing. Most of those dollars go to urban areas more eager to plead for it. In places such as Marysville, when affordable housing has been built, it has been bitterly opposed by the ubiquitous NIMBYs, who barely hide their bigotry.

Eventually, I found the site of the camp. It had closed in the 1940s. This past summer, the last of the rotting administration buildings was torn down by a peach farmer planting a new orchard. There was one remaining shack, occupied by a 70-year-old woman who pays \$54 a month to the farmer. She is lucky enough to have some ground on which to grow food, and the farmer lets her harvest windfall peaches, which she cans. Many people who lived in the camp fanned south after it closed, building ramshackle houses on a reclaimed flood plain guarded by weak levees. This congested area, known as Olivehurst, was severely hit by the 1986 flood. Most of the people washed out that night never recovered—their crude homes were twisted off the foundations. Many left, and those who remain are struggling.

Edna Stewart, 62, lives in Olivehurst on a little over \$8,000 a year from disability and Social Security; her son who lives nearby fixes cars in his driveway as his main source of income. Her home, spared by the flood, has other problems: She hopes to be able to lie in bed this winter without being rained upon. "The water just pours in," said Stewart, looking up at the

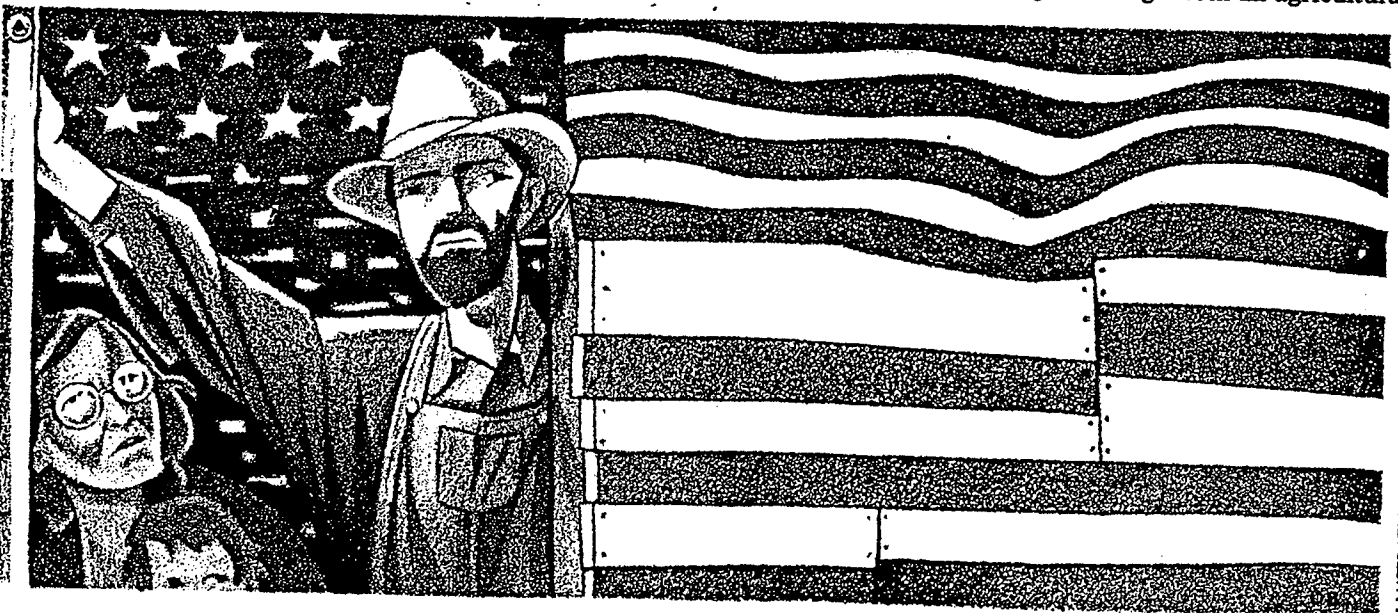
barnlike ceiling. "With this ceiling it's really cold. I don't have a heater. Just the cookstove."

Stewart tried through the nonprofit Rural California Housing Corporation to get a loan to fix the rotting roof, but the Feds won't qualify her. Funds are sparse because of the cut-backs of the Reagan years. "We aren't able to make loans to half the people we see," said Beverly Fretz-Brown of the housing group. "They want to see a borrower without risk."

To help replace the badly deteriorated housing stock, the housing corporation has so far unsuccessfully tried to build a low-income apartment complex. Local government has done nothing. The corporation has worked on its own and will vie for state bond money just now being released from a 1988 voter initiative to build affordable housing. Rachel Iskow of the housing group said cities such as Los Angeles, which are eager and able to fight for the money, stand a better chance of getting it. "The lack of sophistication in rural areas is appalling," said Iskow. Even if farm towns want to seek these funds, "they just can't compete."

While there is little government money for either the urban or rural poor, banks have continued making loans to home buyers despite the inflated California real estate market. When two-bedroom bungalows in Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area started selling for \$250,000, buyers turned inland. Now it's not unusual for some people to commute an hour and a half from developments sprouting amid farmland; some drive from Bakersfield in the southern Central Valley to Los Angeles, a distance similar to that between Hartford, Connecticut, and New York City, without an intervening mountain range. Marysville, forty miles north of Sacramento, has also seen housing prices climb beyond the poor's ability to pay.

Across a field of star thistle behind Stewart's home is the California Heartlands housing development, still under construction. In front of the homes, which start at \$105,000, is a for-sale sign festooned with flags. The phone number: 1-800-U-Can-Own. After the sales agent gave his pitch, I expressed concern about buying in such an impoverished area. "This town is going through a change from an agricultural



ILLUSTRATIONS BY D.R. JOHNSON

to a bedroom area," the salesman said, assuring me that the poor would be priced out. "We're developing a whole new community. . . . It will be different. There's only 9,000 people here now. We're creating a keystone."

What effect the recession will have on such developments is uncertain. But the rental inflation now in place is unlikely to be reversed. Particularly hurt have been the Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans who work the orchards. "In the past five years rents have doubled. Two wage earners cannot pay for basic needs," said Ilene Jacobs, a California Rural Legal Assistance lawyer based in town. She sometimes finds farm-workers living in miserable camps without water or toilets.

Irene Guzman, 33, is luckier than most. She lives with her husband, a fruit picker, and their five children in Mahal Plaza, a nonprofit apartment complex built with government loans specifically for agricultural workers. It is the only housing of this kind in the area, and there is a long waiting list to get in. Guzman's family would pay as much as \$700 a month in rent on the open market for an apartment like theirs, which costs \$250 a month. Her husband makes \$40 to \$50 per day picking peaches and apples as he migrates north to Washington State. Pay for fruit pickers has dropped, and each summer it seems to get worse. During the long winter months, the family has no income.

The farmers are an easy target, but in this part of California, it is still mostly small family operations that are going broke. I lived for a while with a peach farmer and watched him work seventy hours a week to earn a modest living. "They think you're rich," said Danae McDougal-Stewart, a prune and rice farmer. "This used to be the peach bowl. But prices have fallen and they're flying fruit in from South America. What's going to happen here? They're planning a city of 200,000 for the southern part of the county."

In the expanding urbanization the Dust Bowl refugees and the Mexican migrants have been consigned to the role of future homeless. Steinbeck envisioned the Dust Bowl migrants as unwilling revolutionaries, but as historian Charles Wollenberg has noted, they instead settled into the complacency common to the rest of America. The Mexicans who followed them have not had much more success in organizing against the farmers, much less in dealing with issues such as housing. "Either you work for what they pay or you don't," said Guzman of the farmers. So they sigh and endure. □

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■ THE WATERGATE SYNDROME

A Government Of Lies

STEVE TESICH

We're all too familiar with the term "Vietnam syndrome," but little has been said recently about another, far more disturbing and insidious syndrome that spawns ever more virulent strains of social decay: the Watergate syndrome. The revelations that President Nixon and members of his Cabinet were a bunch of cheap crooks rightly sickened and disgusted the nation. But truth prevailed and a once-again proud nation proudly patted itself on the back; despite the crimes committed in the highest office in our land, our system of government worked. Democracy triumphed.

But in the wake of that triumph something totally unforeseen occurred. Either because the Watergate revelations were so wrenching and followed on the heels of the war in Vietnam, which was replete with crimes and revelations of its own, or because Nixon was so quickly pardoned, we began to shy away from the truth. We came to equate truth with bad news and we didn't want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation. We looked to our government to protect us from the truth.

The high crimes and impeachable offenses committed by Ronald Reagan and his Administration, which included our current President, in the Iran/*contra* scandal were far more serious and un-American than the crimes for which Nixon was kicked out of office. These latest crimes attacked the very heart and soul of our Republic. A private little government was created to pursue a private foreign policy agenda and thereby circumvent the law of the land, the Congress, the Constitution itself. This hidden layer of government, which diminishes democratic institutions to a series of front organizations, is a well-known feature of all totalitarian regimes. In all of them there is the so-called "front" government line, which means nothing, and there is the "party line," which goes on behind the scenes. The line in this case was the Republican Party line, but it was no different in its implementation and in its implications from the Communist Party line of the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union.

And yet, nothing happened. Nothing really happened. The Iran/*contra* scandal became the Iran/*contra* farce. President Reagan perceived correctly that the public really didn't want to know the truth. So he lied to us, but he didn't have to work hard at it. He sensed that we would gladly accept his loss of memory as an alibi. It had simply slipped his mind what form of government we had in our country.

When the war in the Persian Gulf began we not only ac-

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