

FACTORIES IN THE FIELD

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

IN THE saga of the States the chapter that is California has long fascinated the credulous and charmed the romantic. A fabled land, California, rich in the stuff of which legends are made. Proverbially it is a wealthy and indolent province, blessed with a miraculous climate and steeped in beauty. Here gold was discovered and the colorful pageant of '49 was enacted. The legends about this land at the rainbow's end thrilled a nation for decades. Even before the discovery of gold, California was the scene of a favorite chapter: the idyllic period of Spanish occupation "before the gringos came." Here, according to the fable, handsome Spanish grandees enjoyed a somnolent existence for generations and monks, famous for their courage and benevolence, trekked up and down "the fortune coast" founding missions, converting the Indians, creating the society of Alta California. Here, reads the fable, life has always been easier and abundance an acknowledged historical fact. Something of this legend, embellished by the fantasies of latter-day fabulists, has survived into the present. But there has long existed another California — a hidden California. Its tradition parallels the legend. The tradition dates from the ugly, but not generally known, records of Indian exploitation; it carries through the period

of the ruthless American occupation; and, occasionally, it echoes in the violent history of racial exploitation which has long existed in the State. This book is designed as a segment — one of the chapters — in this hidden history. It is intended as a guide to the social history of California, an attempt to dispel a few of the illusions and to focus attention on certain unpleasant realities. It deals with the hidden history of the State's first industry, agriculture, and with the workers who have contributed to its establishment. "Agriculture" is a quiet word, but, in California, it has taken on new meaning and novel implications.

There is a surface placidity about the great inland farm valleys of California that is as deceptive as the legends in the books. Travelers along the highways pass through orchards that seem literally measureless and gaze upon vast tracts of farm land stretching away on either side of the road to the distant foothills, yet, curiously enough, there seem to be no farms in the accepted sense. One looks in vain for the incidents of rural life: the schoolhouse on the hilltop, the comfortable homes, the compact and easy indolence of the countryside. Where are the farmers? Where are the farmhouses? Occasionally the highway passes within view of a row of barracklike shacks which the traveler mistakenly identifies as, perhaps, the hovels of section hands. In the harvest seasons, the orchards are peopled with thousands of workers; and, in the great fields, an army of pickers can be seen trudging along, in the dazzling heat, in the wake of a machine. The impression gained is one of vast agricultural domains, huge orchard and garden estates, without permanent occupants.

These amazingly rich agricultural valleys — Imperial Val-

ley, a vast truck garden reclaimed from the desert; the great San Joaquin Valley, an empire in itself; and the Valley of the Sacramento — withhold many secrets from a casual inspection. The richness of the soil and its staggering productivity, for example, are not readily apparent. Here a new type of agriculture has been created: large-scale, intensive, diversified, mechanized. The story of its evolution, quite apart from social implications, is a record of remarkable technical achievement. Because of peculiar soil and climatic conditions — the great variety of soils and the division of the seasons into two periods: a short rainy season and a long stretch of warm and rainless and sun-drenched days — it has been possible in California to evolve an agricultural economy without parallel in the United States. Over one hundred and eighty specialty crops are produced in the State. Crops are maturing, in some sections, throughout the year, a circumstance that has given rise to the boast of the agricultural industrialists that “we’re green the year round.” In 1929, California shipped 240,000 carloads of perishable agricultural products; today the production is much greater. The value of these products has risen steadily until today the annual value of agricultural production in California is close to a billion dollars. So far as fruits and vegetables are concerned, California could feed the nation. This great industry, moreover, has been created in a remarkably short period. It is a created industry and one that is, to a large degree, artificial. Deserts have been changed into orchards; wastelands and sloughs have been converted into gardens. California agriculture is a forced plant — the product of irrigation. Fifty years ago the great farm valleys were wastelands and deserts into

whose reclamation has gone untold human suffering. Today it is impossible to visit these valleys without gaining an impression of vast power, of immense potentialities, and of the dramatic conflict between man and nature. But, beneath this surface conflict, which is everywhere apparent, are social conflicts no less dramatic and no less impressive.

Occasionally the urban Californian, the city dweller, catches an echo of these underlying social conflicts. From time to time, he reads in the newspapers strange stories about bloody riots, about great strikes, of fiery crosses burning on hilltops, of thousands of migratory workers starving in the off seasons, of vigilante terror. Although these stories have appeared with increasing frequency of late years, the city dweller is inclined to regard them as mere aberrations of the "heat counties" and to forget them, but gradually the State and the nation have become vaguely aware that California agriculture is charged with social dynamite. Eastern reporters have come out of Imperial Valley breathless with stories of beatings, violence, and intimidation. Social workers, intrigued by reports of unbelievable human misery, have gone on slumming expeditions along the canal banks and have penetrated into the shantytowns and jungle camps. Occasionally the entire State has been shocked by incidents of inexplicable wholesale violence. But, in general, the tendency has been to engage in excited moralization and to ignore the facts, so that the real story has not been told. Back of the surface manifestations of violence and unrest in California farm labor is a long and complicated history. To understand why the valleys are made up of large feudal empires; to know why it is that farming has been replaced by indus-

trialized agriculture, the farm by the farm factory; to realize what is back of the terror and violence which breaks out periodically in the farm valleys, it is necessary to know something of the social history of California. It is this history which the latter-day commentators, busy recording impressions and giving vent to their indignation, have largely ignored.

It is, in many respects, a melodramatic history, a story of theft, fraud, violence and exploitation. It completely belies the sense of peace and lassitude that seems to hover over rural California. It is a story of nearly seventy years' exploitation of minority racial and other groups by a powerful clique of landowners whose power is based upon an anachronistic system of landownership dating from the creation, during Spanish rule, of feudalistic patterns of ownership and control. The most remarkable single circumstance pertaining to the entire record is the unbroken continuity of control. The exploitation of farm labor in California, which is one of the ugliest chapters in the history of American industry, is as old as the system of landownership of which it is a part. Time has merely tightened the system of ownership and control and furthered the degradation of farm labor. As far as the vast army of workers who operate these great tracts are concerned, their plight is nearly as wretched today as it was thirty years ago.

In all America it would be difficult to find a parallel for this strange army in tatters. It numbers 200,000 workers and a more motley crew was never assembled in this country by a great industry. Sources of cheap labor in China, Japan, the Philippine Islands, Puerto Rico, Mexico, the Deep South, and Europe have been generously tapped to recruit

its ever-expanding ranks. As one contingent of recruits after the other has been exhausted, or has mutinied, others have been assembled to take their places. Although the army has been made up of different races, as conditions have changed and new circumstances arisen, it has always functioned as an army. It is an army that marches from crop to crop. Its equipment is negligible, a few pots and pans, and its quarters unenviable. It is supported by a vast horde of camp followers, mostly pregnant women, diseased children, and fleabitten dogs. Its transport consists of a fleet of ancient and battered Model T Fords and similar equipage. No one has ever been able to fathom the mystery of how this army supports itself or how it has continued to survive. It has had many savage encounters, with drought and floods and disease; and, occasionally, it has fought in engagements that can hardly be called sham battles, as its casualties have been heavy. Today the army has many new faces as recruits have swarmed in from the dust-bowl area eager to enlist for the duration of the crops at starvation wages. But, in substance, it is the same army that has followed the crops since 1870.

To those who have found the patterns of social behavior in California somewhat enigmatic, the story of this strange migratory army should be illuminating. It is a story with many ramifications. It is impossible, for example, to understand the early race riots, the fierce anti-Chinese campaigns of the seventies and nineties, and the hysterical "yellow peril" agitation against the Japanese at a later date, apart from a close study of the changing patterns of agricultural operations in the State. It is the farm-labor history of California that illuminates these social problems and that places them in proper perspective, and it is precisely

this history that has remained unwritten and, in large part, unknown. Labor history in general has a tendency to remain unwritten, but the story of farm labor in California has been almost wholly neglected. To get at the facts, it is necessary to go back to contemporary newspaper files, to the early reports and documents, and, from this starting point, to piece together the fragments of a rich and dramatic story. It is likewise impossible to understand the social phenomenon known as "vigilantism" — a peculiarly Californian phenomenon — without some knowledge of the absorbing history of farm labor in the State. Here again it is necessary to push aside the official histories and to examine the facts. Vigilantism is not a peculiarity of the California climate. Its roots are to be found in the history of farm labor in the State.

Not only are the ramifications of this history interesting and varied, but its implications, with respect to the future, are of the utmost importance. California, in these critical times, should be the subject of close scrutiny. Here the mechanism of fascist control has been carried to further lengths than elsewhere in America; and both the reasons for this development, and the possibility of its still further extension, are, I believe, set forth in the following pages. On several occasions in the past serious riots, scarcely distinguishable from a variety of civil warfare, have swept the farm valleys of California. Today some 200,000 migratory workers, trapped in the State, eke out a miserable existence, intimidated by their employers, homeless, starving, destitute. Today they are restless but quiet; tomorrow they may be rebellious. Before these workers can achieve a solution of the problems facing them, they will have to work a revolution in California landownership and in the

methods of agricultural operations which now prevail. When these circumstances are considered in the light of the entire background of farm labor in California, the necessity for a study of this character is immediately apparent.

Before proceeding with a study of landownership in California, a word of explanation is probably advisable. In the summer of 1935, in company with Herbert Klein, I made a trip through the San Joaquin Valley, inspecting some of the ranches, talking with workers, interviewing organizers who had been active in the strikes of 1933, and gathering material for a series of articles on farm labor. In collaboration with Mr. Klein, I wrote one article which appeared in *The Nation*; and, later, in March and April, 1936, six articles, presenting the work of such research and investigation as we had made up to that time, appeared in the *Pacific Weekly*, under the general title of "Factories in the Field." The present work, however, is based upon entirely new research. I think it should also be stated that the manuscript for this volume was forwarded to the publishers prior to the time that Mr. John Steinbeck's novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, was published. This fact will account for the circumstance that no reference is made in the text to Mr. Steinbeck's excellent book. It should also be pointed out that the research for *Factories in the Field* was concluded independently of the thoroughgoing research on migratory labor that has been performed by the Federal Writers' Project, Oakland, California. As my manuscript was finished prior to the time that I first inspected or knew of the Oakland Project, it was not possible for me to go over the material that the staff of the Project has so painstakingly assembled.