



The old die with nothing

# This is what la Huelga is all about

by Ed Icenogle

For tens of thousands of the poorest Americans, migrant farming is total life.

It is seldom voluntary. Few set out to be migrant farm workers, to stoop over dusty, loamy acres of pickles and strawberries, to climb rickety ladders and pick handfuls of cherries, to live in fire-trap rat holes. The migrants have no choice.

If migrant farm work is an inevitable choice for many of the rural poor, it is also a permanent one.

Once he is in the migrant stream, the endless biological cycle engulfs

the migrant for life. Each winter in the Rio Grande Valley, it means no job, little money and discrimination because of the workers' Spanish surnames. Each summer in the fields of Nebraska, Michigan, Colorado and two dozen other states, it means trying to scratch enough money from the earth to put the family through another winter.

Each generation's pattern is much like another's.

The migrant child is born into poverty, delivered by the vegetable-green stained hands of a midwife trained by birthing as many as nine or 10 children of her own. He cries

in a world that deserves tears. Rats, mud, manure, insects, sickness, heat and young people are quickly old.

His parents were forced from their meager sharecropping jobs by mechanization, by advancing suburbs, by new man-made lakes for 15-foot, 40-horsepower motorboats.

The child somehow lives. At the age of 8, he joins his parents in the fields. He grows into a classroom of beets and strawberries, not books and schools.

He meets and weds the black-haired, brown-eyed daughter of another migrant and they bring forth children to continue the cycle.

## NU students assist Migrant research

The photographs and stories on this page are excerpts from a four-part series printed in August in the Detroit Free Press, Michigan's largest daily morning paper.

While the series dealt specifically with the migrant workers in Michigan, the scope of the series was national and the application is universal.

The plight of the migrant workers in the beet fields of Nebraska is similar to that of

his cousin in the strawberry fields of Michigan.

All photography is by Mike Hayman, University of Nebraska senior in journalism who interned with the Free Press this summer. The excerpted copy is by Ed Icenogle, University of Nebraska senior in journalism, who also interned with the Free Press and who was one of three reporters who compiled the series.

The extensive interviews conducted by the Free Press staff indicate that the common belief of interested persons and experts is that the answer to the migrant's plight is in retraining and unionization.

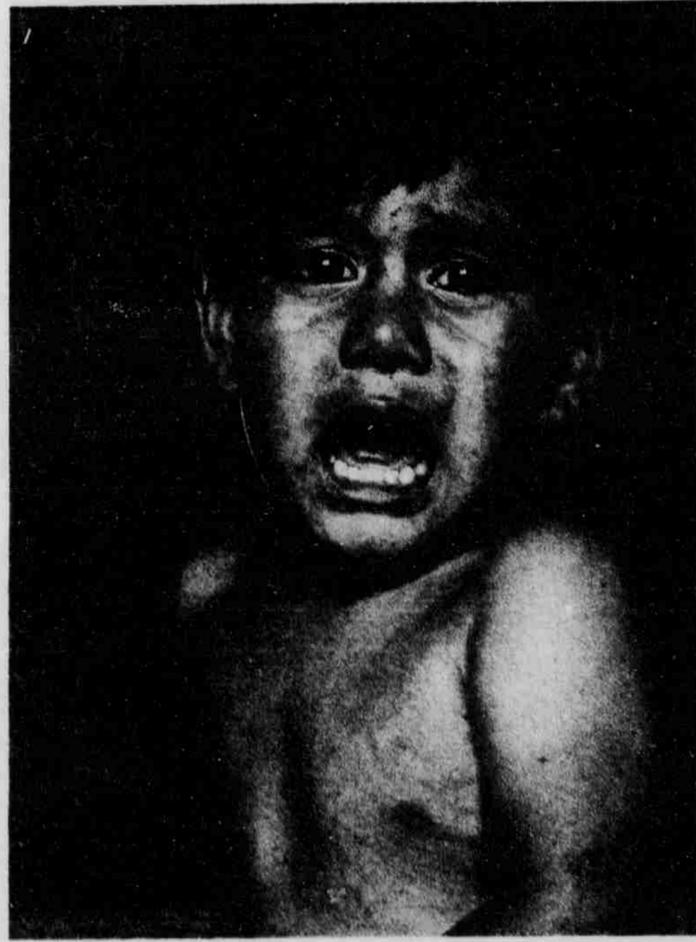
Unionization is the purpose of "La Huelga," the national grape boycott and strike against the grape-growers in California who will not recognize the migrant's infant union, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.

The organizers explain: only through economic pressure on the growers can unionization be accomplished. And only through a national boycott of grapes can this first step towards alleviating the shameful American tragedy through a Union.

After grapes, the organizers hope to unionize other crops and boost the laborers' salaries from meager pennies to at least subsistence level.



Migrant farm workers feel firsthand the disparity between amount produced and amount



The migrant babe is born with nothing. He will grow up with little, only to reach the same destiny as the old.

## A father watched as his first-born died

Raymond Caro's first-born son died this summer.

A doctor said the baby died of dehydration. Caro, a 20-year-old migrant farm worker, said the baby died because the hospital in Watervliet, Mich., would not admit his son.

Raymond Caro watched his baby die, slowly. Panicked by the child's continuous vomiting and diarrhea, he had taken Raymond Jr. to the hospital.

He said a nurse there refused to admit the infant. She talked with a doctor over the phone, describing the baby as having no temperature or apparent vomiting and diarrhea. Caro said.

Caro, reticent like most Mexican-Americans when faced with bureaucracy, left the hospital.

That was Sunday evening. By 3 a.m. Tuesday the baby was dead. The mother of the nine-month-old infant wandered away from their migrant camp, dazed and possibly in shock. She was found several days later at an Indiana relative's home. Caro sent his wife back to

her Texas family. Now he's working alone, trying to make some money and pay the \$42 he still owes for the baby's \$100 burial.

The superintendent of the hospital apologized for the death of the baby and said it wouldn't happen again," said Caro, a handsome, sad young man whose quiet English is softened with Spanish accents.

"The hospital administrator, Aileen B. Miller, denied that Caro was given an apology or told "it wouldn't happen again."

"The nurse reported the temperature to the doctor," she said. "The baby didn't seem to be critically ill."

The only difference between the treatment of the Caro baby and the child of a local resident, Mrs. Miller said, was that the doctor probably would have previously seen the local baby and known its medical history.

A social worker who attended a meeting between Caro and Mrs. Miller said the baby's death is typical of the migrant.

"I think it is significant. If a city councilman came in and was turned away, he would insist," said Anderson Hewitt, program coordinator of Michigan Migrant Ministry, a project founded by the Michigan Council of Churches.

"But the farm worker is reserved and meek," Hewitt said. "He won't press it. He won't say, 'You give me the service or I'll sit here until you do.'"

Raymond Caro didn't press it. Hospital procedure required a doctor to admit the baby, but no doctor was there and apparently the nurse did not think the baby ill enough to call in a doctor.

Baffled by being turned away from the one place he knew could heal sickness, Caro took his son home and waited.

"But the thing that got to me the most was the man I work for," Caro said. "He didn't even express a condolence."

Mexican-American migrant babies die at nearly double the rate of other Michigan infants.



Families are large, often crowding the fire-trap rat holes in which they live.