

Debt Slavery in Chicago, Michigan

CHICAGO, July 20--A century ago, drunks were dragged out of bars and off the street, in effect kidnapped, and pressed into service in the army, navy, or merchant marine.

Today, in Chicago and other big cities, poor alcoholics, 'bums' and 'winos' in the vocabulary of their more fortunate brothers, are being captured and pressed into a form of labor debt slavery and serfdom to soften the misery.

The Rev. Virgil Oyer of Adrian, Michigan, became aware of this modern day horror story and has tried valiantly to get state officials to intervene. But Rev. Oyer's own investigations have revealed widespread complicity and collusion by state and local officials in the system.

Rev. Oyer first became aware of the situation when an American Indian, Edgar Broussard, came to his church asking for food and lodgings. Broussard said that he had walked out of a farm labor camp run by Wardell Williams on a farm outside near-by Blissfield, Michigan. Broussard had been working picking tomatoes for Williams for a week. But at the end of the week, Williams told Broussard that Broussard's earnings for the week which came to \$43.84, were owed back to Williams for food and rent. Williams also claimed that Broussard owed him an additional \$5. That's when Broussard decided to split.

When Rev. Oyer inquired as to how Broussard had gotten into this situation, he got an even more shocking story. Broussard had been standing on West Madison Street in Chicago's "Skid Row" when a cop came up to him and told him, "I got just the thing for you." The cop told Broussard, "Come with me."

The cop took Broussard to a bus, where he was told that he was going to have food and a place to stay and a good job and a chance to earn some money. Broussard later

learned that the cop collected \$1.50 a head for each worker that he delivered to the bus.

When the bus was filled, it left Chicago. Williams, the labor contractor who ran the bus, proceeded to make the "recruits" feel at home by passing out bottles of cheap wine. Williams then took the workers to the farm near Blissfield, where, he told them, they would be picking tomatoes for 16¢ a box.

Broussard picked 274 boxes during that week. But at the end of the week Williams informed the workers that he was deducting from their paycheck \$2 a day for a bunk (without sheets, pillow, or blanket), \$1 per meal, \$3 for each pint of wine he had "given" them, and 40¢ for each pouch of tobacco. Broussard ended up owing Williams \$5 after the week's work.

Broussard escaped. Another Chicago "bum", Steve Lahetta, was not so lucky. After working a time for Williams, he was thrown out of the camp because he was sick. State Police found him in a ditch near Blissfield. They took him back to the Williams Camp. Ten days later, Williams brought Lahetta into the Adrian Hospital. Lahetta died shortly thereafter of amoebic dysentery and peritonitis.

Rev. Oyer charged that not only police, but also the Michigan State Employment Office cooperate with

Williams and other labor contractors and growers in supplying men and protecting the growers from any "harrassment by 'meddlers' and 'do-gooders'".

Wardell Williams, by the way, should be familiar to readers of EL MALCRIADO. He was recently found guilty by a Florida judge of brutally murdering his wife. But the Judge put Williams on probation, stating, "He's an employer of people. When farmers need fruit pickers, or other workers, they deal through him. To put him away would be putting many people out of work."

William's Florida payroll alone reportedly exceeds \$500,00 a year.



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