

The American Yawp Reader



Bertha McCall on America's "Moving People" (1940)

Bertha McCall, general director of the National Travelers Aid Association, acquired a special knowledge of the massive displacement of individuals and families during the Great Depression. In 1940, McCall testified before the House of Representatives' Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens on the nature of America's internal migrants.

My name is Bertha McCall. I am the general director of the National Travelers Aid Association. I am here because our association, together with a number of other private national organizations, has been interested for many years in the problem of what we call "moving people." We are interested in this problem because we see the individuals, and go from the specific back to the general. You have just heard of the general, and we start with the specific and go to that general.

...

The problem of transiency and migration was not a new phenomenon in our history. Drought, flood, war, opening of new territory — all resulted in making individuals in the families move to new pastures in hopes of finding better ones. ...

The national private agencies of the United States have used such terms as "nonresident," "transient," "migrant," "migratory workers," "immigrants," "travelers," "strangers," "nonsettled," "dislodged" — these are all terms that we apply to people who are without roots in a community.

In the 2 years from 1929 to 1931 there was special cause for migration. For those in our country who had remained stationary for many years, carrying on the work of the world, came the closing of shops and factories and the loss of jobs that had seemed as permanent as life itself. It is not necessary to recall the problem of transiency in the days of 1930 and 1931. The Federal Government felt the pressure of this and called upon such agencies as the National Y. W. C. A., the Family Welfare

Association, the National Travelers Aid, to advise in planning for this special problem. Community after community reported that it was swamped with the numbers of people moving around, especially the young because one was doing one thing in one area and one in another.

The problem of transiency and migration was not new in 1931. We had known about it off and on for many years. I recall from my own experience seeing the letters that came into the Federal Government agency, the reconstruction group of Washington, stacked very high, from all parts of the country, saying, "Come out and help us."

...

We have known for a long time the nature of the people in this group. We have evidence to prove from private agencies, from public agencies, from direct association with the transients themselves, that a transient population differs very little from the average static population. ... We all know that there was a period in which the general public looked upon transients as bums and hoboes. The Federal transient program records show that most of these people were enterprising and energetic. A good many of them had good social background and good educational preparation. Except for the fact that these people are nonresidents, they are not a distinct and separate group of Americans.

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Mr. Curtis: Miss McCall, what one thing more than anything else makes it necessary for families to take to the road in search of a home or jobs or something or other? What puts these people out?

Miss McCall: Well, the whole family, that is, the family as a whole, when it picks up and goes, does so because it does not have enough to live on well where it is and thinks that the next field is much greener than the one where it is, and it keeps on going in that way.

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, *Interstate Migration: Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), 43-45, 60. Available via Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/stream/interstatemigrat01unit/interstatemigrat01>).

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