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Cotton Pickers Wanted—
placards on the road, handbills out, orange-colored
handbills—Cotton Pickers Wanted.

Here, up this road, it says.

The dark green plants stringy now, and the heavy
bolls clutched in the pod. White cotton spilling out
like popcorn.

Like to get our hands on the bolls. Tenderly, with
the fingertips.

I'm a good picker.

Here's the man, right here.

I aim to pick some cotton.

Got a bag?

Well, no, I ain't.

Cost ya a dollar, the bag. Take it out o' your first
hunderd and fifty. Eighty cents a hunderd first time
over the field. Ninety cents second time over. Get your
bag there. One dollar. 'F you ain't got the buck, we'll
take it out of your first hunderd and fifty. That's fair,
and you know it.

Sure it's fair. Good cotton bag, last all season. An'
when she's wore out, draggin', turn 'er aroun', use the
other end. Sew up the open end. Open up the wore
end. And when both ends is gone, why, that's nice

cloth! Makes a nice pair a summer drawers. Makes
nightshirts. And well, hell—a cotton bag's a nice
thing.

Hang it around your waist. Straddle it, drag it be-
tween your legs. She drags light at first. And your
fingertips pick out the fluff, and the hands go twisting
into the sack between your legs. Kids come along be-
hind; got no bags for the kids—use a gunny sack or
put it in your ol' man's bag. She hangs heavy, some,
now. Lean forward, hoist 'er along. I'm a good hand
with cotton. Finger-wise, boll-wise. Jes' move along
talkin', an' maybe singin' till the bag gets heavy.
Fingers go right to it. Fingers know. Eyes see the
work—and don't see it.

Talkin' across the rows—

They was a lady back home, won't mention no
names—had a nigger kid all of a sudden. Nobody
knowed before. Never did hunt out the nigger. Couldn'
never hold up her head no more. But I started to tell—
she was a good picker.

Now the bag is heavy, boost it along. Set your hips
and tow it along, like a work horse. And the kids
pickin' into the old man's sack. Good crop here. Gets
thin in the low places, thin and stringy. Never seen no
cotton like this here California cotton. Long fiber, bes'
damn cotton I ever seen. Spoil the lan' pretty soon.
Like a fella wants to buy some cotton lan'—Don' buy
her, rent her. Then when she's cottoned on down,
move someplace new.

Lines of people moving across the fields. Finger-
wise. Inquisitive fingers snick in and out and find the
bolls. Hardly have to look.

Bet I could pick cotton if I was blind. Got a feelin'
for a cotton boll. Pick clean, clean as a whistle.

Sack's full now. Take her to the scales. Argue.
Scale man says you got rocks to make weight. How
'bout him? His scales is fixed. Sometimes he's right,
you got rocks in the sack. Sometimes you're right, the

scales is crooked. Sometimes both; rocks an' crooked scales. Always argue, always fight. Keeps your head up. An' his head up. What's a few rocks? Jus' one, maybe. Quarter pound? Always argue.

Back with the empty sack. Got our own book. Mark in the weight. Got to. If they know you're markin', then they don't cheat. But God he'p ya if ya don' keep your own weight.

This is good work. Kids runnin' aroun'. Heard 'bout the cotton-pickin' machine?

Yeah, I heard.

Think it'll ever come?

Well, if it comes—fella says it'll put han' pickin' out.

Come night. All tired. Good pickin', though. Got three dollars, me an' the ol' woman an' the kids.

The cars move to the cotton fields. The cotton camps set up. The screened high trucks and trailers are piled high with white fluff. Cotton clings to the fence wires, and cotton rolls in little balls along the road when the wind blows. And clean white cotton, going to the gin. And the big, lumpy bales standing, going to the compress. And cotton clinging to your clothes and stuck to your whiskers. Blow your nose, there's cotton in your nose.

Hunch along now, fill up the bag 'fore dark. Wise fingers seeking in the bolls. Hips hunching along, dragging the bag. Kids are tired, now in the evening. They trip over their feet in the cultivated earth. And the sun is going down.

Wisht it would last. It ain't much money, God knows, but I wisht it would last.

On the highway the old cars piling in, drawn by the handbills.

Got a cotton bag?

No.

Cost ya a dollar, then.

If they was on'y fifty of us, we could stay awhile,

but they's five hunderd. She won't last hardly at all. I knowed a fella never did git his bag paid out. Ever' job he got a new bag, an' ever' fiel' was done 'fore he got his weight.

Try for God's sake ta save a little money! Winter's comin' fast. They ain't no work at all in California in the winter. Fill up the bag 'fore it's dark. I seen that fella put two clods in.

Well, hell. Why not? I'm jus' balancin' the crooked scales.

Now here's my book, three hunderd an' twelve poun's.

Right!

Jesus, he never argued! His scales mus' be crooked. Well, that's a nice day anyways.

They say a thousan' men are on their way to this field. We'll be fightin' for a row tomorra. We'll be snatchin' cotton, quick.

Cotton Pickers Wanted. More men picking, quicker to the gin.

Now into the cotton camp.

Side-meat tonight, by God! We got money for side-meat! Stick out a han' to the little fella, he's wore out. Run in ahead an' git us four poun' of side-meat. The ol' woman'll make some nice biscuits tonight, ef she ain't too tired.