SCENE
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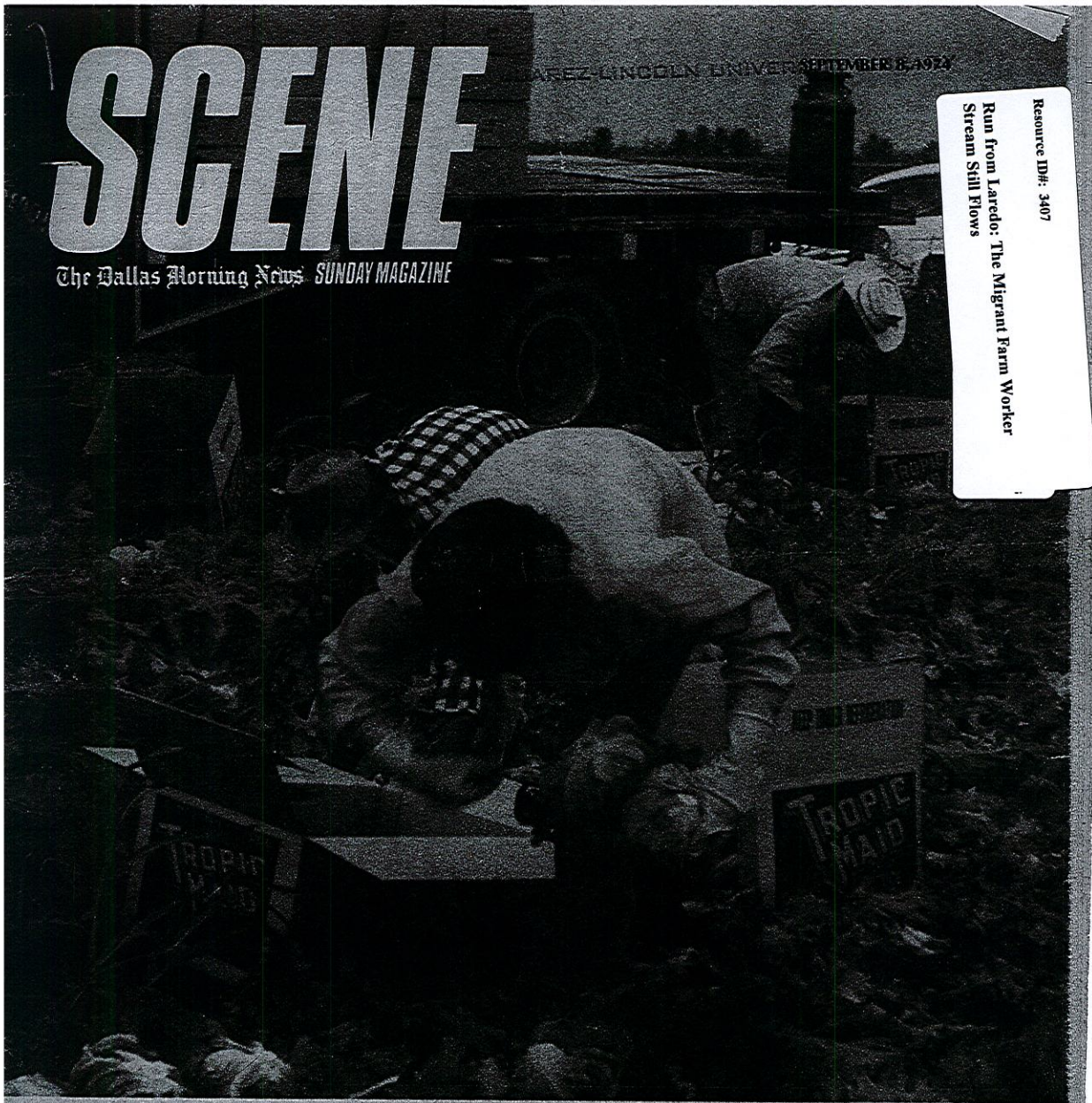
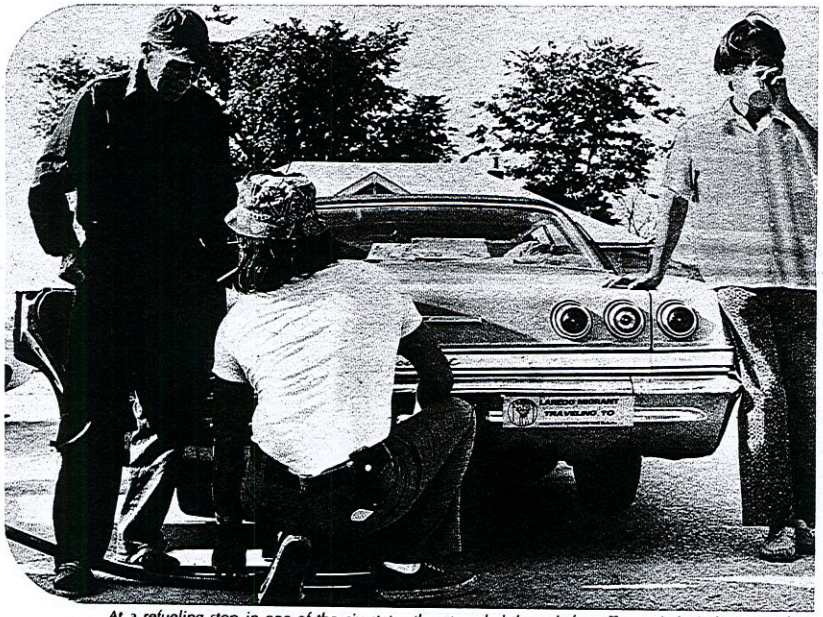


RUN FROM LAREDO:

The migrant farm worker stream still flows

Run From Laredo



At a refueling stop in one of the six states they traveled through from Texas, Luis Arriaga, standing, discusses the route ahead with his nephew while first-time migrant Vicente rests from hours of riding.

Story and Photographs
By BETTY COOK
Scene Staff Writer

We used to see them in early summer when I was a child, the migrants, brown dusty people packed close as cattle onto open flatbed trucks. Most of the caravans carried men, an impassive cargo of standing bodies braced elbow to elbow against the bone-rattling roughness of their long ride. But sometimes the ancient, slow-grinding trucks were filled with families, the children riding in nests made of old quilts and pillows and boxes. Out on the highway, they'd watch your car come up from behind, and as you passed you'd have time to exchange curious stares with those too young to have learned to go faceless with reserve among strangers.

If we drove out through the flat red-land cotton fields of West Texas, we would see them working—men, women, any child large enough to lift a hoe—strung out along the young green rows, chopping and weeding and thinning, unshielded under the sun. It was not the life you'd choose for yourself, but somebody had to do it, and these people traveled far for the chance. Along with most other small-town Texans, I had the notion they all came from the country many still called Old Mexico—a poor place where a man couldn't make a decent living, not like here in the U. S. of A. The migrants felt lucky, I was told, to be allowed the luxury of employment in a nation so generous they could earn enough in four to six months to live on for a year.

That much I remember. Luis Arriaga remembers more. He remembers 1927 when, as a youth of 21, he was earning six cents an hour as an irrigation ditch laborer. His 60-hour work week sent him home with $3.60, which would amount to an annual income of $187.20 if he didn't miss a day. No one could have been surprised that Arriaga might want to migrate to richer country. The surprise was that his ditches weren't Mexican; they were American, as was Arriaga himself. When he climbed aboard his first flatbed truck to join the migrant stream, it was as a U. S. citizen fleeing the bitter poverty of his hometown, Laredo, Texas. And by the time I joined the stream with him this year, he was heading for the same fields he has hoed now for 32 summers . . .

* * *

Laredo in June is a dress rehearsal for hell. Thermometers hang at a *merciless* 109 degrees until desert darkness brings them down to 90. A hot wind braises you in your own juices. Even so, if you're vacation-idle, stopping over at the posh Posada, ambling across the international bridge to shop in Nuevo Laredo, sipping a gin fizz in the Cadillac Bar, bringing back your one bottle of booze and your duty-free bargains, the border town's ramshackle bleakness can seem picturesque. But spend four futile days trying to talk your way past the inscrutable reserve of Mexican-Americans who have learned to trust nobody, and you wonder why all the town's 71,000 inhabitants don't abandon its dusty squalor to the tourists.

Some 15,000 of them do each spring, pouring north with the river of humanity that is called the Migrant Stream. On the map, the stream's course looks like a mighty tree, its thick trunk rooted in deep South Texas, its branches fanning out to cross virtually every state in the union capable of supporting plant life. They reach to Seattle, across Colorado to Wyoming, due north almost to Canada. They finger the Great Lakes, probe Florida and California. Fed from the 10 Rio Grande Valley and Winter Garden counties that are the migrants' primary winter working base, the stream carries an estimated quarter of a million workers to employment in fields and food processing plants all over the country during the May-through-September season. Ninety per cent of the nation's migrant labor force comes from Texas. They are Mexican-Americans. Not Mexican nationals—

not legally, anyhow. The Bracero Act of 1951 choked off their once-legal flow with red tape, although in 1973 more than half a million wetbacks that the U.S. government knows about crossed into this country; no one knows how many came undetected.

But the migratory force that flows from Texas to tend and harvest crops all over the country is made up of Chicanos who are citizens of this state. For them, the age of affluence means that most no longer ride herded into the old-time truck caravans. They migrate now in cars and pickups, traveling independently by single family or expense-sharing groups.

It was to journey with such a group that I was in Laredo. My timing could have been better. Most of the migrant families with children left the moment school closed, a few days earlier. Those who remained were in no mood to welcome Anglo intruders: In Boulder, Colo., two migrant Laredo youths had been killed by a car bomb blast which many suspected had something to do with anti-Chicano organization activities.

"The family you may be riding with stayed behind for the funeral today," Onesimo Castillon tells me in his paper-cluttered office, one small room in a low wooden building crowded with aggressively busy Texas Migrant Council personnel. They are all young, most of them escapees from their family's migratory pattern. Several wear Raza Unida buttons. A number of them are packing to follow the labor stream to areas where they will work out the season in mobile Head Start centers, which incorporate day care, medical and nutritional services in an ambitious program designed to give migrant children advantages their parents never had.

Castillon, who as deputy director will remain in Laredo, has agreed to help me locate a family which might accept and have room for a passenger. "I've got someone calling now — actually, it's not a whole family. It's a widow with children who drives her own pickup and needs someone to share expenses. She's young, but doesn't look it — you'll see lots of that, migrant women in their early 20s who look middle-aged."

I don't see this one. The TMC staff member who called reports that the widow has had second thoughts. She has taken on a migrant rider and left just hours ago. There is another possibility. Blas Reyes, a clinically-trained TMC specialist in human development who used to migrate with his own family, has called a neighbor who is leaving before dawn next day for Colorado with his wife, nine sons, two trucks and a pickup. There might be room for me if his wife agrees.

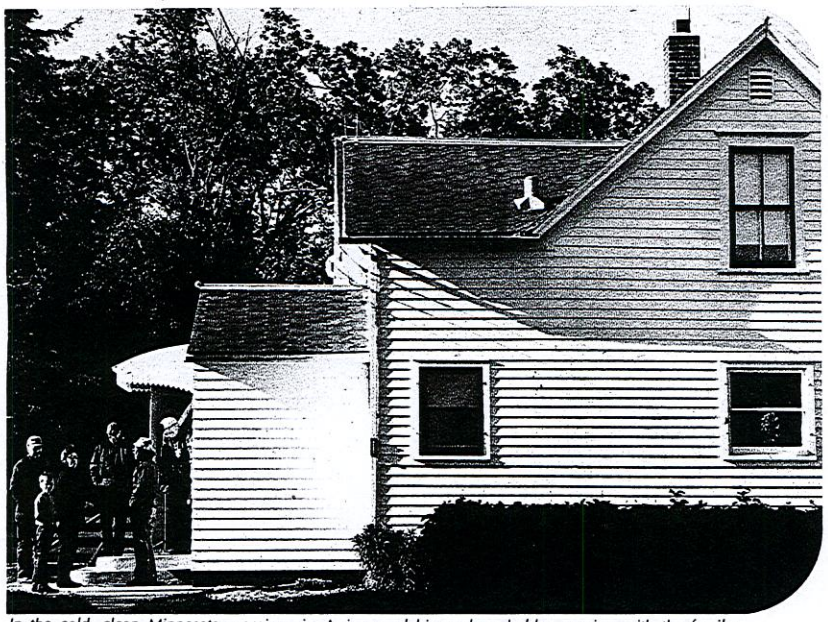
At their home across town, the wife, a small, heavy woman with an angelic face, interrupts her packing to lead us briskly into stifling heat past a kitchen table on which stands a half-carved watermelon with a knife in its heart. In her tiny, clean living room, she turns on the miniature window air conditioner the family clearly reserves for company, before explaining her decision in torrential Spanish. They travel poorly. I would be uncomfortable. Their food is Spartan and eaten without stopping. If they must stop to sleep, it will be by the side of the road. She politely does not believe I could endure the trip without being a burden.

She has, too, a deeper objection. Many migrant camps and farms have been embarrassed by publicity. Migrants whose names or pictures are published sometimes cannot find work again. Her husband is a crew leader, and where they are going my presence might get them all in trouble.

Trouble is the spectre that almost strands me in Laredo. Besides the ordinary human reluctance to take on the trouble of a prying passenger, the migrants I meet during the next few days show an equally human apprehension concerning the motives, sincerity and simple sanity of anyone anxious to travel so far for a reason they can't understand.

Between discouraging phone calls, I put together pieces of the life-style I want to witness. A health department official in ▶

An exploratory voyage on the migrant farm worker mainstream



In the cold, clean Minnesota morning air, Arriaga and his nephew hold a reunion with the family on whose farm the uncle was working 25 years ago when the nephew was born there.

"Texas is one of the most backward states"

Austin has told me that Texas, the largest supplier and user of migrant labor, was the last state to enact a migrant labor law. Castillon confirms this. "Texas is one of the most backward states in the nation," he says. "Looking at the statistics, we're high on income, but low-ranking in social services. Great on highways, in other words, but not much on humans. Other states—Michigan, for instance—are just the opposite." He shrugs cynically. "Most states don't want to do a damn thing for the migrants because they don't vote. But they perform a work which requires some skill, and they are a vital part of this country's economy."

There is some progress, however. This year, the Texas governor has announced a new migrant commission with a Mexican-American at its head. And since 1972, Mexican-Americans have been appointed to positions of decision for the first time—in a state where Mexican-Americans make up 20 per cent of the population.

Meanwhile, I pick up bitterly revealing bits of human information. The average U.S. citizen's life expectancy is 72 years; the migrant's has recently moved up to 51. For his average $2,000-a-year family income, the migrant works 10 to 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week during the season. An eight-member family can earn $5,000 in four months, but that rate of pay can mean they made 25 to 50 cents an hour. The official federal minimum wage is $1.30 an hour for field work, but many companies pay by the acre or by quantity of harvest. "They put the kids to work at 13 or 14," one informant tells me. "The crew leaders pay the fathers, and they get away with it."

Crew leaders can get away with cash, too, according to Castillon: "Say they're given $30 by the companies to give the worker to get to the job. They may give the worker half and keep the rest. The companies don't care as long as the worker shows up, and it's a tax write-off for them anyway." And Alfredo Garza tells me some crew leaders collect workers' wages, deduct for social security, and fail to turn in the money, leaving the worker without recourse when he needs it.

Garza knows about this trick because as Office of Economic Opportunity Migrant Coordinator in five counties he ▶

dispenses emergency vouchers migrant families can use to buy food for their journeys. To qualify for the $30-per-family maximum he can provide, applicants must show the record of their previous year's social security deductions to prove they are genuine migrants, and not ordinary needy residents.

In the last six weeks, Garza has handed out vouchers to 300 families, together with lists of 24-hour gasoline stations and bumper stickers which are supposed to guarantee migrants some measure of fuel priority. A tired, merry man, he is intimate with his people's poverty. "Last year they came back defeated," he says. "Too much rain, bad crops. But a migrant is like a gypsy—it's in their blood to travel."

It's in Luis Arriaga's blood, certainly, and it is Garza who arranges for me to travel under Arriaga's protection. "I've known him for years. He's a gentleman, an old bachelor — you'll be safe," Garza assures me primly. Where would we be going? "To Minnesota. You'll leave Sunday morning at 7 o'clock. You'll drive straight through."

Actually, it is half past 10 when Arriaga arrives to collect me. The afternoon before, I had persuaded a sullenly disapproving cabdriver to show me the tiny mint-green cottage he lives in, behind a decrepit hotel across from the depot. I also had my misgivings dissolved by a meeting with Arriaga himself, a slight balding man who wears blue workclothes, cotton socks, open sandals and a patrician air of authority.

The authority is real. Besides him and me, his Chevrolet holds three other passengers—Arriaga's fiercely bearded 25-year-old nephew, a slim moustached youth named Vicente, and a silent man who evidently thinks he is traveling alone. Arriaga's nephew, the only one of them who speaks English, tells me the silent man's name is Miguel. Miguel himself tells me nothing, then or later. The nephew drives, but Arriaga captains his ship, charting the route and issuing mild commands which are obeyed by us all without question. A magnetic religious emblem, one of several adorning the dash beneath a mirror-hung crucifix, must be straightened before we are allowed to leave. The odometer reads 98,792 miles as we pull out of Laredo, perhaps five miles more when we pause at the roadside border patrol station where each man shows the green card that is his proof of citizenship.

In the car, step by tentative step, we begin to construct the tenuous framework that will enable us to inhabit the same cubicle of space for the next two days and nights without intimacy or antagonism. In our two-language isolation, Arriaga and I are not quite reduced to baby talk, but our attempts at pleasantry come perilously close to "See Jack run" simplicity. Nonetheless, he attempts to include me in his conversations, alternating between fluent paragraphs to his nephew and one-word explanations, with gestures, to me. At one point, he addresses the nephew at length, gesturing toward the fields we are passing at precisely the legal speed limit. Then he turns to me, repeating the gesture. "Cows," he explains. "Oh, yes. Cows. Yes!" I reply imaginatively. We beam at each other with the mutual delight of established wits.

In San Antonio, I learn that gas stops are to be a continuing series of small adventures, not because there is any shortage but because Arriaga and his nephew are avid comparison shoppers who choose a station only after cruising closely by several to scrutinize pump prices. At the first stop, my offer to pay is firmly refused by Arriaga, who manages to convey that he will collect my share of the travel cost when we arrive in Minnesota.

From his nephew, I learn that Arriaga will hoe sugar beets on a farm outside Kennedy, Minn., for six weeks, returning to Laredo for a month or so before driving back up to Illinois for the tomato harvest. Last year, Arriaga was paid 16 cents for each 30-pound basket of tomatoes he picked; he picked 180 baskets per day, for a total of $28.80. The nephew's cousin, with four people in his family group, cleared a little over $3,000 during last year's migrant season.

The nephew himself is not going to work in the fields. He is a heavy equipment operator with a job promise in Chicago. He will drive his uncle's car there after a brief rest in Minnesota, where he was born on the farm which employs his uncle. "Like, my parents pushed me until I finished high school—they didn't want me coming here every year. 'Course, if I'd wanted to be a bum, why that's it, man—they can push you and tell you to to do it, man, but you got to do it yourself."

He has done it, but even so found no opportunity in Laredo. He'd had four jobs there in the last nine months, trying to improve his income. Getting a job, he says, is easy, but getting a living wage is not. "They say when you're hired, 'Oh, we'll let you know later how much'; then you find out they're paying $1.60 an hour. You can't support no family on $50 a week." His last job paid $2.15 an hour, but his employer demanded 12-hour workdays and refused to pay overtime. Why didn't he complain to labor authorities? "It's a lot of politics in Laredo—if I was to report an illegal practice they'd find out I did it. Then I couldn't get a job."

Marlys Nelson, whose husband Merle now runs the farm her parents own, discusses old times with Arriaga and the nephew she hasn't seen since he and she both were children.

He recalls working with his parents, picking cucumbers in Wisconsin. "I go out there and if I work hard, I make $3 all day long. I was 13 then. The last time I came was in 1966. There are fewer people going now—the younger generation doesn't like to go up there. So they stay put, try to make ends meet. I heard on the radio that there was work in New Jersey—$2.25 an hour. How can they afford to go way up there for $2.25? But people like my uncle, that's the only thing they know how to do . . . "

At our first meal stop, the silent Miguel looks at the menu briefly before signaling the truck stop waitress to duplicate Arriaga's chicken-fried steak order.

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"Miles spin out behind us"

When his plate arrives, he gravely proceeds to butter everything on it except the salad, which he ignores. He spreads butter with his fork until he sees someone using a knife. A clear look of surprised comprehension slides across his face, and he switches implements, spreading butter smoothly on his bread with the concentration of a scientist who has just made a dazzling discovery. I am struck by the way Arriaga holds his after-dinner cigarette — cupped in his palm, like a hunter or a bandit. The effect is curiously cosmopolitan. We ask for separate checks, and we each pay our own.

The miles spin out behind us. In Dallas, we drop by to spend a few minutes with Arriaga's sister, a vivacious woman who offers us coffee and magnificent homemade tamales. She and her husband used to migrate too, to Minnesota. Now they both have year-round jobs in Dallas, where they are raising four handsome teenagers in a home they own themselves. Arriaga expands with pride and pays me the compliment of a Spanish sentence. "La casa," he says, twinkling at me. "Es bonita, no?" For once I am able to answer: "Si, es bonita — muy bonita."

Late in the night, crossing Oklahoma, his nephew translates when Arriaga falls to reminiscing. The first time he went to Minnesota, he says, was in a 1929 Ford truck with a 12-foot bed. Its 27 passengers had to take turns sitting and standing. They left on a Sunday, arriving in Minnesota the following Saturday. The trip which will take us two days and nights took a week in the open truck. They earned, at that time, about $15 a day, working by the acre. Nowadays, the same work pays around $35 an acre, the nephew says. "By the time we get there, the farmers have planted the sugar beets, and if they are big enough the men will go ahead and start hoeing, getting the weeds out, thinning. After that, they go one more time over it, get all the weeds left behind. That's it. The beets are harvested later, by machine."

Two friends who used to come along with Arriaga have stayed behind in Laredo this year, and he is bringing the other two with us to replace them. "My friends are too old," says Arriaga pensively. He is himself 69.

Time becomes a series of waves, dipping in and out of sleep. The country changes. Once out of Texas, we've been counting our progress in states instead of cities.

Kansas. Main Street in Marysville had to be built from a Mark Twain description. ▶

"I awake stiff with cold in the eerie quiet"

The land looks like my child's-eye memory of rural Texas—not flat, as I thought Kansas would be, but rolling and green.

Nebraska at noon. We postponed buying gas in Kansas at 52.9 cents; now, we see our mistake: It is seven cents higher here. By 4 p.m. we have crossed the broad Platte River, going into Freemont, and a radio weathercaster says the lower 70s will be "warm." Last night, while we shivered in the 50s, Arriaga's nephew told me when the men reach Kennedy they will be given credit to buy food and supplies. If they don't have a car, their farmer takes them to get their provisions. The living accommodations are free and variable — there will be a small place, two or three rooms, probably, for all of them. But eight miles before we reach Kennedy we must stop in Drayton, N.D., to report to the company field man. He assigns the workers to farms, pays the travel allotment of $19 a worker.

Nebraska still. In Oakland, a little storybook town barely interrupting a tree-blurred skyline, I notice the car's odometer has flipped over its 100,000-mile limit and started again in the new-car low numbers. The vanes of a windmill we pass walk perfect cartwheels along the ridgepole of a small barn in the background as we sweep into the Omaha Indian Reservation. We drive into night again.

I awake stiff with cold in the eerie quiet, sitting straight in the back seat between Vicente and Miguel. We are no longer moving. We have arrived. "Cafe!" commands Arriaga, and we stumble into a dim country diner for breakfast. We are in Drayton, where the 40-degree night cold and the 6 a.m. sunshine both cut through us like knives. We arrived there at five this morning after 41 hours on the road. At seven we will go to the field man's house.

His name is Tom Dunford, and he greets Arriaga warmly, acknowledging my presence guardedly but without surprise. "You want to go out to where Luis is staying? Fine. I'll pick you up later, show you some of the fields."

At the farm, Arriaga knocks happily on the back door of the main house, as he has for 32 years, and enjoys a hearty reunion with the Petersons, for whom he worked before they turned management of the 130 acres of sugar beets over to their daughter and son-in-law, Marlys and Merle Nelson.

Moments later, Marlys drives over from her new home across the road, where she immediately invites me to stay ▶

◀ **Run From Laredo**

Stiff from two days and nights of travel, Arriaga enjoys a cigarette with migrant friends outside one of the cottages.

as her guest. She is exuberantly pregnant, and so energetic one feels her baby may spring forth at any moment and hit the ground running, perhaps even able to read. She used to carry Arriaga's nephew in her arms when he was a baby, and she greets him now with delight, pausing only to tell me I must see the community's school for migrant children.

I must indeed, but not before I have settled with Arriaga. The odometer stands at 527. We have traveled 1,735 miles, and I ride with him one more time, a few hundred yards behind the big house to a pair of tiny white-washed structures at the edge of a field. Proudly, he shows me where he will stay, sharing one of the two-room cottages with Vicente's uncle, an old friend of Luis who is unexpectedly here. The workers quarters are clean, better than I expected—certainly better than Texas or any southern states are said to offer. Grandly, inside his little house Arriaga offers me a cup of coffee and tells me, when I ask, how much I owe him for the trip. The company pays everyone $19; he considers the sum a fair one and will accept no more from me.

We say goodby. Before the day is over, company field man Tom Dunford, whose responsibilities include recruiting and contracting with migrant labor for the sugar beet farms in his district, will show me a story he wrote for the American Crystal Sugar Company's house organ in 1965. The brief item, carried beneath a photograph of Luis Arriaga hoeing in the field, says "A good job deserves some recognition. Luis Arriaga thinned all of Arnold Danielson's 41 acres of sugar beets plus 10 acres for another grower in the Drayton area. How does he do it? Just plain hard work and long days. Tom Dunford, area field man, said Mr. Arriaga's working hours are 4:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., and he works at a rate of about 88 strokes a minute."

At this year's twice-over pay scale, Arriaga would have made $1,810.50 for his outstanding work, I figure. But he's not an average worker, Dunford says. "He's double the average—if they do 25 acres, they do good. The people we've got are spoiled. They're treated too good, think nothing of writing up here in the middle of winter if they're short $400 down in Texas. But I've given many and many of

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Arriaga will make $560

them money, and to this day I've never lost a dollar. They've given me every cent back."

Dunford drives me some miles, trying to find fields which are ready to work. There are none—heavy rains have washed out the first planting, and the migrants who have poured in from Laredo over the past few days will cool their heels for as long as a month before re-seeded fields are ready to hoe.

We are in the broad valley of the Red River of the North, 30 miles south of the Canadian border. "Many of the migrants' tasks are now handled by machines," Dunford tells me. "Out of 120 farms in my area, 80 use migrant workers. I used to hire 500. Now, I'm down to 250, but they're the cream of the crop. We know them, they're like old friends." He laughs fondly. "I figured out once that Luis had hoed enough beets that year to hoe to Minneapolis and back if he had hoed one straight row. Every year he tells us he's not coming back—he did last year, but now here he is."

Here he is, and this year the lateness of the planting will cut his income by more than half—the workers will probably have time only to hoe the fields once, for $14 an acre. If Arriaga can cover his usual 40 acres, he will make $560.

So will it go for the parents of the 150 infant-to-teenaged children I see when Marlys shows me through the school. She is an Outreach worker for the summer program, responsible for counting the heads of children as they arrive and urging their parents to send them to school on the buses she schedules to cover the county. Most of them will—most are two years behind where they should be, she tells me, and hungry for knowledge. She is politely curious about their Texas educations, and the lack of feedback the progressive Minnesota educators receive in answer to their annual requests for information from Texas school systems. Other Kennedy faculty members ask me the same questions, some indignantly. I am unable to answer.

Why don't more Texas schools offer the bilingual help Mexican-American children must have to learn? I can't answer that either. I am spent, with no energy left to wonder how this year's migrants will make it through the winter in South Texas on half a season's salary.

The day ends, the trip is over at last, I leave for home. There are many things wrong with Texas, but it's where I live, and I'm ready to fly there with my load of unanswered questions.

Not to Laredo, though. Maybe to Laredo never again. ■