

With fake names, fake Social Security cards and few rights, migrant farm workers stay invisible in plain sight.

# USED AND ABUSED



**A grueling day's work awaits these field hands:** Migrant farm workers living in Lake Worth ride a bus along Boynton Beach Boulevard to pick peppers on a farm west of Florida's Turnpike in

unincorporated Palm Beach County. Sun-baked, sweat-drenched work performed by laborers such as these puts fresh produce on our tables. This scene plays out hundreds of times a day in Florida.

Staff photos by DARRY CRONIN/NOI

## Working to pay off smuggling debts, some migrants are locked up at night.

Unscrupulous labor contractors regularly cheat migrants out of their pay, sometimes charging exorbitant fees for food and transportation.

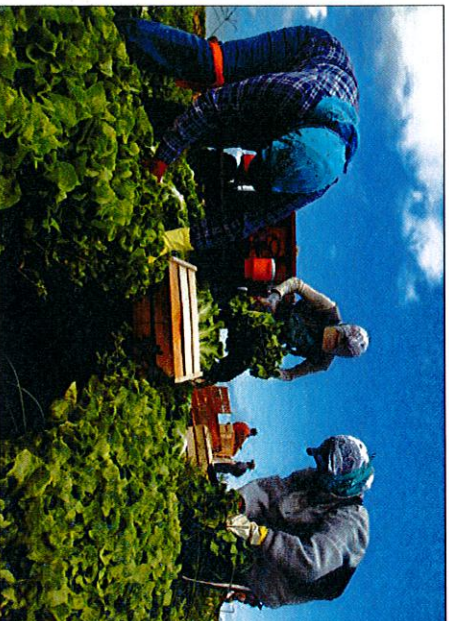
Five of the most notorious slavery cases since 1997 happened in Florida — three of them involved Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast.

The brutal reach of slavery in Florida extends to rape and forced prostitution.

Illegal migrants must buy fake or stolen Social Security numbers to work in the fields. Taxes collected on \$375 billion in wages for workers with mismatched Social Security numbers now sit untouched in a special fund.

Despite federal regulations, some workers do not get pesticide training and do not have access to drinking water and toilets on the job.

Migrants often live 10 to a room in unburnished trailers in our cities, trying to save money to send home to destitute families.



**Close to the soil:** Field hands cut, prepare it for packing during November's harvest in Palm Beach County. The produce is shipped principally to northern states to get the crop out; farmers and citrus growers often rely upon undocumented workers supplied by labor contractors.

Farm workers — both legal and illegal — say they have been held under lock and key by their employers.

PAGES 2, 3



Migrants sleeping 10 to a trailer wire wages home to Mexico and Guatemala. Their day ends just as it begins — on a bus packed with workers.

PAGES 6, 7

Among women laborers, many victims of sexual assault never report it, fearing immigration will be contacted.

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## USED AND ABUSED

Modern-day slavery

### Five recent cases with slavery convictions

These slavery cases were uncovered and prosecuted in Florida in the past six years. Most involved farm workers.

#### Three men try to escape Lake Placid contractor

On the night of May 27, 2000, a labor contractor in Desoto County attacked the driver of a van in North Cass, Fla.

The three who had been held against their will, wanted better work. They said they were spending too much of their earnings to settle their \$1,000 smuggling debt to Ramiro Ramos, 43, and Ramos' brother and cousin, Ramos struck driver Jose Martinez in the face with a pistol several times, accusing him of stealing his workers. Martinez said, Police were called, and Martinez testified at trial.

On June 29, 2002, the Ramoses were convicted of involuntary servitude. Ramiro and his brother, Juan, 35, were sentenced in Fort Pierce last November to 42 years and three months, Jose Ramos to 42 years and three months, and were ordered to forfeit \$3 million in money and property amassed through their crimes.

#### Two cousins locked in trailer with 22 other farm workers

Jose Antonio Martinez and Francisco Martinez got sick of working 10 hours to make \$15 after being promised \$150 per day.

Almost all their money in early 1999 went to their labor contractors for rent, food and their \$750 smuggling fees. After picking tomatoes all day, they weren't allowed to leave the reach-in-steeled trailer they shared with 22 other workers west of Immokalee.

They had no fresh food, said, "I didn't stink your head out." Fresh food, said, "The floor had holes through which they saw snakes, and their messes were on the floor."

The cousins escaped and eventually reported the contractors to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), which contacted the U.S. Department of Justice.

Abel Cuello Jr., Bachelo Cuello and German Covarrubias pleaded guilty to smuggling workers and involuntary servitude. On Sept. 20, 1999, Abel Cuello was sentenced to 33 months and ordered to pay \$29,000 in restitution. Bachelo Cuello was sentenced to two years, and Covarrubias was given four years in prison. Both of the Cuellos have since been released.

#### Contractor recruited workers from homeless shelters

In April 1997, a team of St. Lucie County sheriff's deputies, on duty near Fort Pierce, was approached by George Williams, who said he'd just escaped from a house where he had been held against his will and beaten by a labor contractor named Michael Allen Lee.

Williams and other men had been recruited from homeless shelters in central and southern Florida and forced to work picking oranges for Lee. Prosecutors later said Lee often paid his workers as little as \$15 a day. Some of the workers had to work up to 40 a week for cheap wine. He beat them if they tried to leave.

Williams and nine others filed a civil suit against Lee and his business associates, which was settled in January 1999 for an undisclosed amount. In December 2000, a federal grand jury indicted Lee on the criminal charge of servitude. He pleaded guilty and in 2001 he and another defendant were sentenced to four years in prison.

#### 15-year-old girls forced to work as prostitutes

In November 1997, two 15-year-old Mexican girls fled a trailer near Fort Palm Beach and hid in a house.

They said they had been smuggled into the United States by a Mexican family and promised work in the health care industry. Instead, they were forced to become prostitutes, working in a string of trailers around south and central Florida — several in Palm Beach County — that catered to migrant workers. They were warned that if they tried to escape, their family members in Mexico would be harmed.

They were told they had to work off \$2,000 or more in smuggling fees. They were paid only about \$3 per sexual encounter. In at least two dozen other women worked in the brothels with them — some as young as 14. Prosecutors later said the people-smuggling and prostitution racket was run by Rogerto Cadena, originally of Veracruz, Mexico, and about seven family members. Prosecutors accused the Cadena family and its employees of brutalizing women — beating them, forcing them to have abortions, locking a rebellious girl in a closet for 15 days.

In January 1999, Rogerto Cadena pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to 15 years and forced to pay \$1 million to the federal government.

#### Woman smuggled to Florida, kept as personal slave

Collier County sheriff's deputies answered a domestic abuse call in the house of candidate native Jose Tecum in Immokalee one night in November 1999. They found Maria Choz, 20, consumed by a slave.

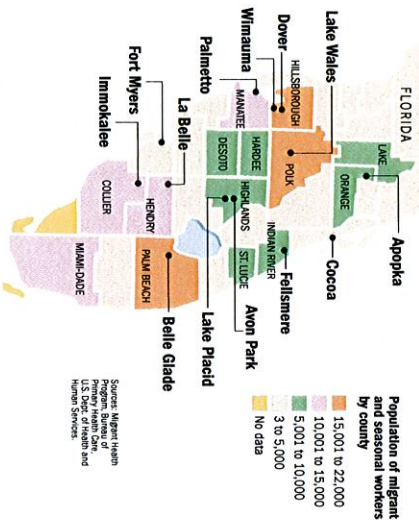
Choz and Tecum were from the same area in Guatemala. Tecum had tried to buy her from her poor family. Choz told police. He eventually raped her and threatened to kill her or her father if she didn't come to Florida with him.

Tecum made her live in the same house with his wife and children and forced her to have sex with him. She was kept in almost all the money she made.

In 2000, Tecum was found guilty of involuntary servitude, kidnapping and smuggling and in 2001 was sentenced to nine years.

### Migrant towns in this series

Nor far from Florida's affluent coasts lie rural towns where foreign farm workers cluster during harvest time, providing the state with the nation's third highest migrant and seasonal population. These towns were among the many that *The Palm Beach Post* visited for this series.

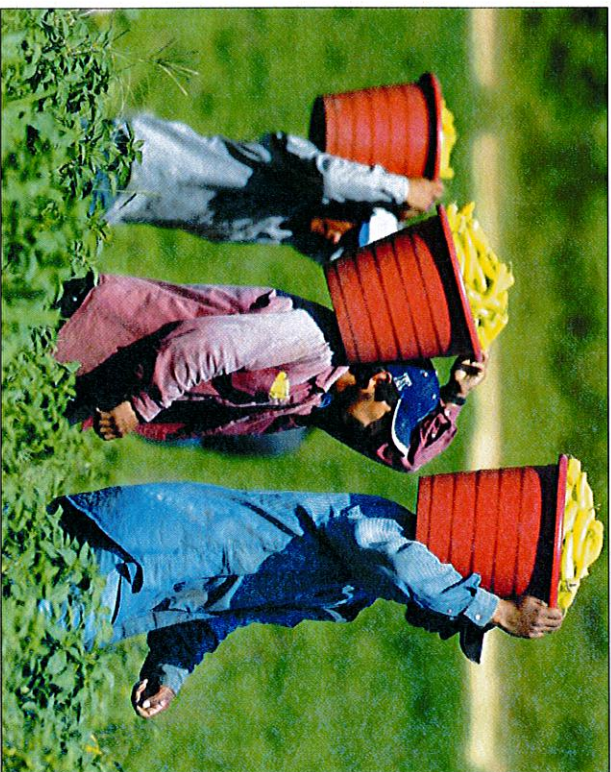


## Slavery is not just the shameful stuff of history books — not in Florida

It exists today, according to both migrant advocates and federal prosecutors. In fact, given the labor system that supplies many of the state's largest groves and farms with migrant field hands, instances of slavery may be inevitable.

Every day, undocumented workers are smuggled into the United States from Mexico, and tens of thousands eventually are transported to Florida. They then must do hard labor to pay off large smuggling fees — at least hundreds of dollars and at times thousands.

In some cases, even when workers are here legally, the money earned is much less than what was promised by labor contractors, and the workers want out. Sometimes, migrants are locked up by contractors and threatened with violence. That, the courts have ruled, is modern-day slavery.



Bearing the burden of poverty: Florida migrant field hands head for a truck with buckets full of banana peppers. Many are undocumented labor system that capitalizes on their illegal status.

## Cocoa farm imprisoned us, women say

By CHRISTINE EVANS  
*Palm Beach Post Staff Writer*

The women of Hidalgo were earth-scratch poor. Their corn grew fitfully in rough patches. Their coffee groves no longer paid to harvest.

And so, one by one, they went to see Florentina, the recruiter who promised jobs in the United States. They signed her papers, though their passports had expired, but optimistic, boarded buses for Florida, the promised land.

They thought, they did not know, they say, that they would be working such long hours for such little pay. Or that, while working for Hydro Age, a gourmet hydroponic tomato farm in Cocoa, they would be locked up at night.

El gatron would put a lock on the gate where our trailers were, and he or a trusted worker were the only ones who had the key. They were in Ponce- Rubio, now back home in Mexico. "If we asked permission, sometimes we could go out, but only between 7 and 8 at night on the weekend. . . . It

was such hard work for such little money.



Norma Delgado

"The boss would say you have to finish your work, no matter how much time it takes, he would find us after hours in our trailers and tell us to do more. The hours were 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

delighted workers from impoverished Mexican towns, smuggled into a migrant labor system that capitalizes on their illegal status.

U.S. Department of Labor's agricultural, guest worker program. The women had different experiences with common themes: Shorted paychecks and long hours, all under the watchful eyes of bosses who made sure they didn't leave.

"After a time, they would not let us communicate with other people," said Rodolinda Garcia Montelange, who to her distress was to be sent to the United States. "My husband was locked up with a key."

Norma Franco Delgado, 24, said she usually received permission to leave the grounds once every weekend, an arrangement she could live with. But she said she resented the seven-day work weeks because the pay was not what she had been promised.

When she complained, she said, the boss told her "the reason the pay was low was that the tomatoes weren't selling the way they expected." Hydro Age, who is named in the suit, did not return several calls for comment. A lawyer for Hydro Age, John Biedenharn Jr., said the company "strongly denies" the allegations in the complaint and intends to vigorously contest them.

Some of the women served out their contracts, and some left. Ponce-Rubio and her sister Ana scaled a fence and jumped into the waiting cars of friends. "We called and told them to help us escape," she says. "They came at night. It was all planned."

Another worker, Maria Eugenia Chavez, said she had her feet in a chlorine solution before entering the work area. "Some of the girls got sores on their feet and itching."

Other workers complained about having to fumigate tomato plants without proper protection. "They would feel sick later," one ex-employee said.

But it was the pay arrangement that bothered Chavez most. Unlike some other workers, she said she never did a pay check. "We realized later that the check stub said the pay was for one week when it was really for two weeks.

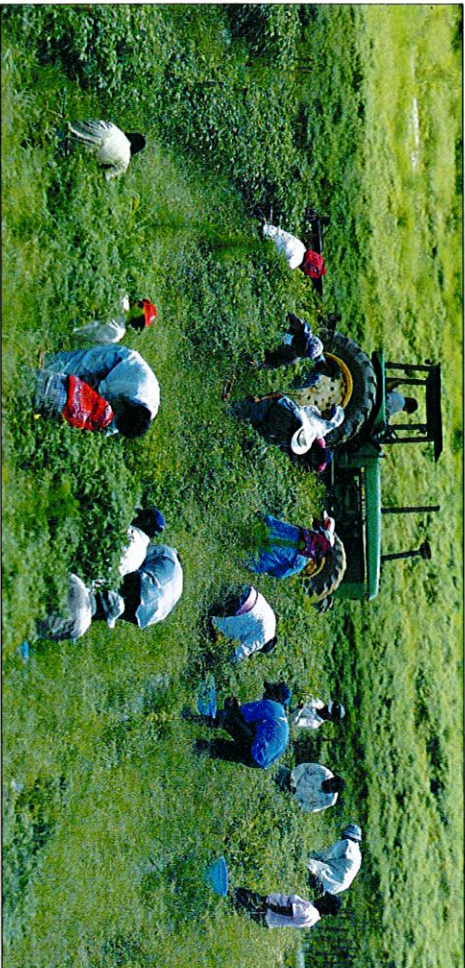
"They were cheating us."





## USED AND ABUSED | A system ripe with fraud

**'The contractors take care of everything. They give you your name, your Social Security number. We don't even fill out an application.'**



Field workers pick peppers in Madison County. Many labor under assumed names and with phony documents.

PHIL T. WILTZ/SAF Photographs

# If it's Tuesday, he's Jose

*In agriculture, there is a wink-wink, nod-nod, and everyone knows: Bogus identities are commonplace.*

By CHRISTINE EVANS and CHRISTINE STAPLETON

Miami Herald Staff Writers

Night in the camp in Indian River County.

Two men lug laundry bags over their shoulders. By day, they pick oranges and by night they do laundry, because their wives are back home in Mexico. Three years they have labored in the United States, and in that time they have grown accustomed to many things: English, Hamburgers. Sore backs at the end of long days.

And this: Answering to the wrong names.

"You get several identities," explains Jose Lutz, who says he is really Ismael Luna. "The contractors take care of everything. They give you your name, your Social Security number. We don't even fill out an application."

"It's a *nombre falso*, everybody knows that. It's just the name they assign you. Sometimes it's your real name, and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's a little like your real name but different in some way."

His friend shifts his laundry bag to another shoulder.

"I have worked as Antonio Diaz," he says, "but these days I am working as Joaquin Ramirez. I think, I need to look at the check to be sure."

That's the name game that is played out each day on Florida's fields. Cuts growers, laborers, field hands, contractors — this is a land of aliases.

Take a man on a shoulder in a field or a camp and ask him who he is, and you are likely to wind up confused. He might say, "Jose, but that is just my work name." Or, "Which name do you want?"

Or even, "I cannot tell you my name. I have gone by so many."

In a way, it does not matter. A worker is a worker, at least in the eyes of the contractor who hires him, and in the eyes of the grower who hires the contractor. "The system, precariously entrenched, blessed by indifference and incompetence, is based on need."

The farmers need their fields picked clean at harvest time. The contractors need workers to fill their vans so they can deliver on promises made to their farmers. The growers need to get their crops in the market, and Guatemala need to send money home to their families.

Although the paychecks of Florida's undocumented farm workers show they pay Social Security taxes, the system is obviously flawed. Sometimes, the pay stub reflects a deduction that is actually pocketed by an unscrupulous contractor. Many undocumented workers toil for years but never receive any benefits.

If the Social Security Administration collects the tax but the worker is here illegally, the money is dumped into a special fund, the Earnings Suspense File. And there it sits.

Since 1997, when the Social Security Administration began collecting withholdings, the Suspense File has received 237 million dollars' worth of reports from wages that totaled \$375 billion.

"We take this very seriously," says Charles Lutz, the director for employer wage reporting with Social Security. "If all starts with bad reporting."

### 'Enforcement is . . . a joke'

The kind of bad reporting is U.S. agricultural culture.

A 2001 study by the inspector general for Social Security examined the W-2 forms of the top 10 agricultural offenders in both California and Florida. The study found that 60 percent of the W-2s featured names and Social Security numbers that did not match, signaling a large number of bogus identities. Two of those employers — which the Social Security Administration will not name — submitted more than 7,000 W-2s with Social Security numbers that had never been issued.

One employer submitted over 900 duplicate Social Security numbers. All this prompted inspector General James G. Hulse Jr. to conclude that the agriculture of Florida is "kind of widespread, but no one is really doing anything" to get the news to some people but not those who labor

Catalina Morales standing before her now. They just happened to share the same name — and, suspiciously, Social Security number.

The real Catalina Morales tucked a large recorder and her small black purse and paid a visit to Dubois, where she says she spoke to Jose Ortiz, an employee who handled paperwork for the company.

"He said, 'I don't know what is happening, but maybe someone bought your papers. He said this happens to a lot of people.'"

At Ortiz's suggestion, she tracked down the other Catalina Morales, who happened to live in the same neighborhood as the real one, she says, first, denied she was working under a false name and number, and then, in a later conversation, admitted it. The impostor said she had been hired under her real name, but that somewhere in the process her identity was switched and she was paid under the assumed name.

Soon after, the real Morales says, a bus driver associated with Dubois knocked on her door and tried to present her with a check for the back taxes.

"We didn't even look at it," she says. "My husband said, 'That is not necessary. You can talk to our lawyer.'"

With a lawyer, the matter was resolved, but not before Morales received a second letter from the IRS — she owed it said, another \$1,000.

### Farmers not 'a police force'

Jose Ortiz of Dubois said he did not recall the unusual case. "We work with so many people. I've been in the office 14 years. That's a lot of paperwork."

Larry Schone, a lawyer for the company, said, "It was an isolated incident." He added that Dubois had cooperated with Florida Legal Services, which looked into the case on behalf of Morales. He declined to comment further.

It is a touchy subject, certainly. According to the 2001 study by the Social Security inspector general, various farmers knew many of their workers were undocumented, but as the report summarized it, "They did not do anything to correct the problem. They did not force it was their responsibility to be a police force." These employers stated they could go

out of business if they asked too many questions regarding their employees' work eligibility," the inspector general wrote.

But what about getting caught? Didn't that worry the farmers?

Not according to the IG report, which noted that "one employer told us it is a business decision and the company will take its chances with the government."

Jay Taylor, owner of Taylor & Fulton farms, a fruit and vegetable grower in Florida and Virginia, says farmers can't win under the competing interests of the law.

On the one hand, we've got Social Security employers and collecting the funds," he says. "On the other hand, we've got the Department of Labor telling us that if we don't accept their identification, we could be held liable for discrimination. We can't single someone out because they look like they were born somewhere else."

It is common knowledge that an aspiring worker who lacks the proper paperwork can get it by trading money or labor to procure a real document, or by buying a lake set of documents, commonly available at flea markets and from drivers who transport field workers. As a last resort — or, perhaps, a lucky break — a worker might find himself hired by a company who has somehow manufactured or forged the necessary identification.

With his papers in hand, the worker is guaranteed a certain measure of job security based on the presumption that the farmer would rather get the crop out than buy himself with replacing workers who do not meet eligibility standards. For, as the government likes to point out, inward Social Security numbers are not difficult to locate. The SSA even offers a program that does just that.

The only catch is, it's voluntary. Employers have to sign up for it, many times, it seems, they would rather not.

Of the 63 million employers in the U.S., only 382 employers actually used the service for the past three years studied by the inspector general.

Even when the SSA catches the offending employers in the act, which it sometimes does, the agency is essentially powerless to correct the situation.

It can send out letters, called "no-match letters," informing deviant employers that the names and numbers of their workers do not match. Usually, this results in protracted correspondence between the employer and the agency but little else.

"Enforcement is not our mission," says Lutz, the SSA director of employer and wage reporting. "It's the IRS. We feed them all the W-2s that come in."

### Background check isn't mandatory

But the IRS hasn't levied any fines, either.

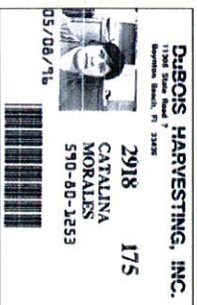
"First of all," says Joseph Brinacombe, director of small business compliance at the IRS. "The authority does not give us a great deal of time for filing a false wage statement is \$50. And under the law the fine must be waived if the employer can prove 'due diligence' in verifying the worker's status."

"The requirements on the employer aren't as extreme as most people assume," Brinacombe says. "There is nothing requiring the employer to do a background check."

One more thing: Not everybody needs a Social Security number. In 2003, it's still possible to gain employment and earn a paycheck without one.

Out at the camp in Fellsmere, a few days after he did his laundry, the man known sometimes as Antonio Diaz and sometimes as Joaquin Ramirez scribbled his pay stub. "By the way," he said, "I have been paid 11 times for this company, but I have never been paid. I just noticed there is no Social Security number on here."

No number — but a deduction. For \$23.55.



**Slapped with a \$3,000 IRS bill**  
Faced with a demand for income taxes she did not owe, Guatemala-born Catalina Morales (above and upper left), a former employee of Dubois Farms, discovered that a later Dubois worker (bottom left) was working under her name and Social Security number.

### Social Security fraud runs rampant

**Social Security gave 96,274 cards** to foreign-born individuals who had improper documents in 2000. In nearly 80 percent of those cases, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had no record of entry for these workers.

**Social Security withholdings on \$375 billion** in wages sit in an Earnings Suspense File because workers who paid those taxes have mismatched numbers.

**60 percent of the W-2 forms** of 20 agricultural firms examined by the inspector general featured names and Social Security numbers that did not match, signaling many bogus identities.





Florida field hands follow their leader, Crew leader Rigoberto Santiago (center) brings his workers to the Garcia Plaza Bakery in Palmetto on Friday afternoons to earn their paychecks. M-

igrants often depend on labor contractors such as Santoyo for almost every aspect of their lives, including jobs, shelter, transportation and pay.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RIGOBERTO SANTIAGO

## Labor contractors control migrants' lives and sometimes commit crimes against them

Worst places . . . are the big cities and Florida

It is labor contractors who have been accused of the most serious crimes against undocumented workers — from stealing wages and Social Security payments to paying workers with drugs, and other tactics.

Over the past decade, slavery cases involving farm workers prosecuted in the U.S. in Florida have increased. In the past decade, most have been in Florida and have involved contractors. In some cases, contractors pay off smugglers who bring workers into the country and then lock up workers or threaten them until they work of those debts.

"Everybody knows that the worst places to go to work in the States are the big cities and the state of Florida," says Leonardo Cava, 25, a migrant worker interviewed in Mexico who was heading to Missouri.

### Labor contractors say they're 'just caught in the middle'

"Everybody blames us," says Juan Pablo Torres, a labor contractor from Laredo, Texas, who was just caught in the middle. "I don't know how most contractors make it these days."

Contractors make their money mostly by operating trucks that gather the crop from pickers in the fields and transport it to packing houses. They are paid by the bin or the ton of fruit or vegetables. Contractors complain that the insurance for those trucks and the buses to transport workers has gone up while their pay from growers has not.

"I pay \$4,800 per year for just one bus," complains Sergio Villagomez, 44, an immigrant contractor. "And I work eight trucks and pay \$2,500 per year in insurance and I don't have any money, but I pay out a lot from 'We, all do.'"

Some contractors pad their income by cheating workers out of hours of pay and also pocketing workers' Social Security payments, say investigators. Greg Schell, an attorney with the Justice Project, doesn't absolve the contractors but agrees that the system is squeezing most of them.

"The contractors are not being paid enough by the growers to pay the workers right," he said. "They are forced to fiddle with the hours. The economics force the contractors to cheat the workers."

Increasingly, contractors are finding another way to increase their take: They smuggle migrants. "Some contractors up north who hire the workers pay off the smuggling fees with almost everything they make," says Flores. "As soon as the debt is paid off, they get rid of the workers

Advocates for migrants say Florida's poor reputation is due, in large part, to the fact that contractors serve as the employers of farm workers, as opposed to direct employment by growers. In Florida, 50.4 percent of farm workers are employed as compared to 20.6 percent elsewhere in the U.S., a federal study states.

"The reason that growers use contractors is to distance themselves," says Raul Barrera of the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project in Florida. "The growers use it as a way to hire undocumented workers and avoid liability."

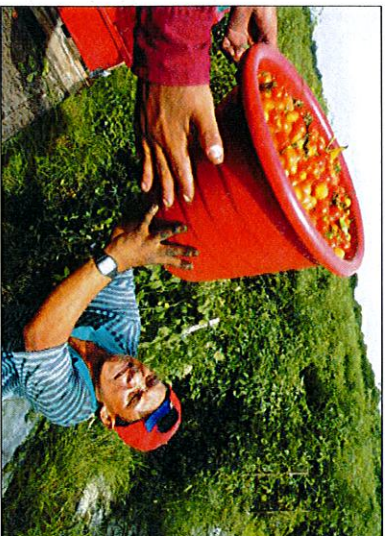
According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in the past four years, Florida labor contractors were cited 916 times for failure to pay wages when due, 464 times for failure to provide state transport licenses, and 442 times for failure to present workers

with proper wage statements, and 431 instances of interfering with federal investigations — among other violations. Most violators drew warnings, not fines. Of 6,035 violations recorded by DOL inspectors the past four years, only 869 drew fines, and the average penalty was less than \$300.

The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation fined contractors another 1,083 times in the past three years and it revoked the licenses of 17 contractors who refused to pay the fines. But Santoyo believes that all the violations have been reported.

"Most of the time, the workers are too scared to report abuses," says Rob Williams, an attorney for the Justice Project. "They keep their mouths shut."

mistakenly are omitted from federal lists of banned contractors. The FBI found eight contracted contractors whose names were on the list but were not. In 1999, Abel Cardillo committed of perjury in 1999 and released from prison this year, and Michael Lee, who confessed in 2001 to threatening and beating workers. — *Reported by Juan Luisquean and Christine Slightfoot*



LAJMS WATCHES/SARF PHOTOGRAPHY  
The handoff: Labor contractors make their money mostly by operating trucks that gather the crop from pickers. Fernando Mateo lifts a bucket of tomatoes onto a truck outside of Wimauma.

## How it works

**Growers use labor contractors**  
to hire most of the bins of thousands of migrants who work in Florida's groves and farms.

**Labor contractors hire the workers.**  
They then control almost every part of their lives. The contractors, or crew bosses, provide workers with jobs, money, shelter and transportation to work and stores. There were 3,671 farm labor contractors registered in Florida last summer. Contractors must pay a \$75 annual registration fee and \$35 to take a one-time test dealing mostly with transportation, insurance and housing issues. Most contractors are Hispanics — about 92 percent — and many are former farm workers.

**Migrant workers**  
are mostly undocumented Mexicans who speak little or no English. They depend on labor contractors for their pay and, sometimes, medical care.



## U.S. obligingly provides fake I.D.

By CHRISTINE SARGENT

Palmetto, Fla. (Special)

Sometimes, undetected aliens get their Social Security cards from the same source you do — your local Social Security office worker.

"It's rare," said Social Security spokesman Mark Lassiter, when you consider there are 65,000 workers in 1,300 Social Security field offices around the country. But one bad employee can do a lot of damage.

In December, a worker in the Arlington, Texas, office was indicted for his role in counterfeiting more than 1,700 cards for \$2,500 apiece. In November, a 43-year-old claims adjuster in the Atlanta office was one of 26 people indicted in a ring that issued 1,900 cards to undocumented immigrants — alone, two Social Security employees in Palm Beach County were charged in two separate cases with processing and arranging delivery for about 400 illegal cards.

On Feb. 11, Walther Velasquez, 38, an employee at a Social Security office in Delray Beach, was arrested after trying to persuade a co-worker to help him process and sell cards. According to court records, Velasquez offered to pay \$1,000 per card to a co-worker to help him process paperwork. Velasquez said he had a source in Boston who would supply him with biographical information to use on the cards. After processing the paperwork, the cards would be sent to a middleman, who would then sell them to a final customer, who would then sell them to a middleman, who would then sell them. Shortly after, Velasquez posted bond, agents searched his apartment on South Dixie Highway in West Palm Beach. As they opened the door, they found Velasquez holding a garbage bag containing a hot dog, a cigar faced with marijuana and the torn-up biographical information of prospective illegal applicants. On a table, the agents found stacks of blank Social Security card applications.

He pleaded guilty and was sentenced in August to 27 months in federal prison.

Four months after Velasquez's arrest, police arrested Sylvia Brito, 31, an applicant processor at a Social Security office in Atlanta. Investigators then tracked her to Atlanta told investigators she had a supplier in South Florida. Detectives tracked his application to the Belle Glade office and discovered that Brito had issued it. Upon checking her records, they learned she had issued 378 cards to undocumented immigrants. Brito, of Greenacres, pleaded guilty and will be sentenced Dec. 30.

A spokesman for the agency didn't know how many employees had been charged with illegally processing applications or how many bogus cards ended up in the hands of undocumented workers. But careless employees are also to be blamed. In 2002, Social Security issued at least 96,274 foreign-born workers with invalid and inappropriate papers were issued Social Security cards in 2001. In nearly 80 percent of those cases, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had no record of entry for these workers.

To deter Social Security workers — who can earn thousand of dollars per illegal card sold — the inspector general has asked for tougher prison sentences. Currently, there is no minimum sentence for illegally selling cards, and sentences range from probation to years in prison. One former employee who pocketed \$120,000 for illegality was fined about 300 cards and paid a \$2,000 fine. Another former employee who pocketed a \$2,000 fine, said James G. Haise Jr., inspector general. He wants Congress to impose minimum sentences or to propose sentences of one to five years in prison for selling up to 50 cards, five to 10 years for 50-100 cards and 10-20 years in prison for more than 100 cards. "Participation in such crimes cannot be tolerated."



**Early risers on the lookout for opportunity:** Migrant workers wait on the corner of Lake Avenue and E Street in Lake Worth before sunrise, hoping to find day jobs picking vegetables on nearby farms or tasks with landscaping

or construction crews. Many of these immigrant laborers have just spent the night trying to sleep on the floors of crowded mobile homes.

## Harvesting alien fields with visions of home

*A married ex-cop picks N.J. blueberries and Florida bell peppers, struggling to amass \$9,000 for land in the Yucatan.*

By CONNIE PILOTO  
*Plus: How a Post-Soviet migrant*

**LAKE WORTH** — The aging van spluttered along the road before coming to a stop between two neighborhoods where men tall in the fields and crowd into tiny old Florida houses to sleep at night.

"Get out and find a place to live," the driver told the small young man who had spent 12 days and paid \$1,200 to make the illegal journey from Mexico to South Florida.

Alejandro Ramirez, 23, hopped out of the van, carrying a knapsack and \$5 in his pocket.

It was 4 a.m. and the streets were empty. At dawn, Ramirez walked door-to-door.

"I just got here and I need a place to stay. I'm here to work."

A group of Guatemalan men, who spoke Spanish, had gathered. Ramirez's plight allowed him to stay. The next day, Ramirez rode an old blue school bus and went to work in the fields of western Palm Beach County.

But there wasn't much work in mid-March. So Ramirez and about 10 others paid a driver to take them north in search of more abundant crops. He spent 28 days in New Jersey picking blueberries, making \$2,100 — enough money to send \$1,000 to his wife in Cancun, pay room and board and pay for a ride back to Florida. By the time Ramirez arrived in Lake Worth, he was broke, again.

At 6 a.m., in the morning, and Ramirez needs to get moving if he wants to catch the bus to the fields. He's living in a shotgun house with peeling pink paint, about a block from the bus stop. He is haggler here, because everyone in the house speaks Spanish. But the two-bedroom, one-half, 1,120-square-foot house built in 1959 is crowded — with seven people living there.

He and three other men share a tiny bedroom lined with mattresses. Ramirez sleeps in the middle — on the floor. A couple, who rent the house and forward the payments to the landlord, share the adjacent bedroom. Ramirez's wife, who works in a factory in the United States, Ramirez has three roommates and the woman pay \$100 a month each for rent. Each paid \$32 for water and sewer in September.

On his way to the bus stop, Ramirez visits a neighbor who runs a takeout service in her house. For \$4, Ramirez gets a tall cup filled with chicken and rice, beans or soup and several tortillas wrapped in foil.

"It's pretty good," Ramirez says. "I'll don't eat out there. I'll pass out. . . I'll die."

With his lunch under his arm, Ramirez joins about 50 other workers at the corner of E and

Lucerne streets waiting for the bus. He climbs aboard and sits in the dark for the 30-minute ride west. It's early October in the field by 7 a.m.

It's his early workday. Ramirez has a job. He knows the number of bell pepper plants. Ramirez gets \$1.65 for each row — about the length of two football fields. Except for a 30-minute lunch break, he works nonstop. He makes about \$11.

Ramirez grew up in a town near Cancun with dreams of becoming a police officer. He graduated from the Mexican police academy in 2000 and married soon after. He worked at the Cancun Airport, patrolled the streets on a motorcycle and investigated traffic accidents. He and his wife traveled together, but he had a family. He had a wife and two young boys, but he had no money on his \$900 monthly policeman's salary. To purchase land in Cancun, near the apartment where his wife now lives alone, he needs at least \$9,000. A slender man with a quick smile, prescription glasses and a wooden cross around his neck, Ramirez has learned to work the system. After arriving in Florida, he purchased a fake Social Security card for \$100 so he could work in the fields. "I just asked around. You can get them anywhere out here."

The card bears Ramirez's name, but the number belongs to a 43-year-old woman living in Toluca, Mexico. Ramirez's wife, who works in a factory, "I don't believe it," the woman said by telephone. "I never give out my Social Security number. I refuse to write it down on forms, so for this guy to steal my number is just crazy." After learning Ramirez was using her number, she reported it to the Social Security Administration office and sent letters to the three major credit agencies.

Ramirez says his dream job is as a cashier or stockman at Wal-Mart or Target.

"That would really be nice," he says with a smile. "I'd be able to help my parents and my wife. But how can I help anyone if I'm barely making \$11 a day?"

But he's been thinking about home and family. He walked to a nearby travel agency and inquired about purchasing an airline ticket: Miami to Cancun, Saturday, Dec. 20, \$388.

"I'd be home just in time for Christmas," he says.

Then, he thinks about how hard it was to make it to South Florida. He remembers the three-night walk in the desert, hiding in the trees so the Border Patrol planes flying overhead wouldn't see him, begging in the Lake Worth darkness for a place to stay. "I don't know what I'm going to do."



**The fruits of their labors:** Ruben Izana (from left), Leonor Ventura and Roque Vazquez, all living in Lake Worth, visit El Marañon in Lake Worth to watermelon in Indiana, series \$800 to his parents in Mexico.

DAVID GOODMAN/Staff Photographer

**What a typical Lake Worth migrant makes**  
 Here's how one man in Lake Worth is able to send \$300 to \$500 home to Mexico each month.

**His budget**  
**EARN:** About \$760 a month, or \$180 to 200 a week.  
**RENT:** \$100, an amount kept low because he shares a home with six other workers.  
**LAUNDRY:** About \$25.  
**CALLING CARD:** \$30-\$40.  
**FOOD:** About \$300.

**FOR BREAKFAST:** Spent about \$2 for milk and snack from neighborhood store before ride to the fields.  
**LUNCH:** Purchased lunch for \$4 from a neighbor — rice with chicken in a large cup and a couple of tortillas wrapped in foil. Usually the women put the items in a large Ziplock and the men put the items in a plastic grocery bag.  
**SNACK:** \$1 for soda from lunch truck in the field.

**DINNER:** \$4 purchased from the same neighbor. Soup, rice and beans and tortillas. They can eat the meals at the dinner table of the neighborhood cook. These mini-restaurants spring up everywhere, including a trailer park the reporter visited. Men wait outside the door and take turns eating inside. Some pay for their food on a weekly basis.

**SNACK:** About \$2 to 3 for juice and snack in the evening.  
**TOTAL COST:** About \$113.



**The ebbing of hope:** Marnita Fuentes is raising six children by herself in an old trailer in Fellsmere. Her children include 8-year-old Arelly (left); Fuentes' seasonal job with a local packing house has kept

her just this side of homelessness. Single women with toddlers scramble to find sitters and pay out-landish sums to lease trailers with an option — they think — to buy.

Staff photos by PAUL J. MUELTE

# ‘Sometimes there are no good choices’

*Fellsmere migrants crowd in squalor, ‘owned’ as chattel until meager wages can cover their debts.*

By CHRISTINE EVANS • Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

FELLSMERE — This small city in the heart of the harvest has 1,000 stories, and if you wander the dirt roads and knock on the doors of the shabby trailers, you will hear them all.

Or enough, anyway, to make you think human beings shouldn't live this way.

Should a little girl have to wear her shoes on the wrong feet because in her filthy trailer — crowded with three families — a needle pierced her knee and two months later she couldn't walk? (Reversing her shoes, her mother explained, helped lessen the pain.)

Should a young mother have to drag a urine bag on a pole behind her everywhere she goes, including work and English class, because she cannot afford the surgery that would eliminate her

need for the bag? (She finally got her operation, for kidney stones, after a well-off patron signed the payment papers.)

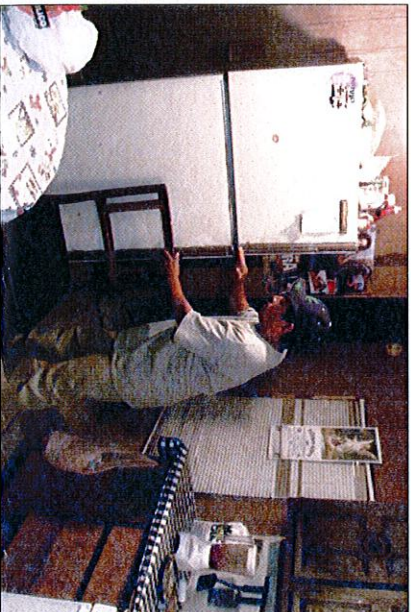
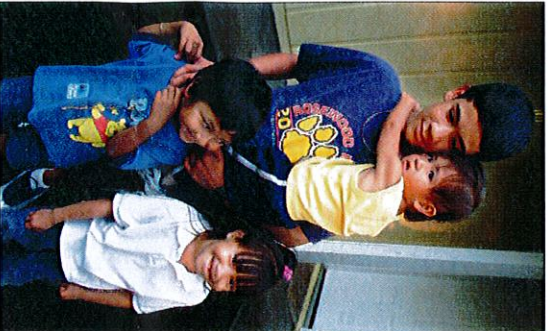
Should a young father with only a Bible and a bicycle to his name have to sleep on the floor of a backwoods shack with no running water and his food for the day — an avocado and a Fanta soda — hung on a peg to cheat the rats? Should his body, every inch of it, every morning, itch with the sting of insect bites? (The price, he says, for being too poor to purchase a bed frame to lift himself off the floor.)

This is Fellsmere, migrant town, and if there is a harder place, good luck finding it.

See FELLOSMERE, next page ►

## Head of the household:

Francisco Garcia, 13, cared for his younger siblings this year after his mother went to the hospital and his father went to jail — on the same day. Manuel, 4, and Manuela, 5, are standing. Francisco holds 2-year-old Juan. Despite his efforts, the youngest boy was diagnosed member found him.



**Stopgap remedies have to do:** Domingo Mariano Hemander props a chair against the refrigerator door to keep it closed. He shares a trailer with six other men and has trouble getting the landlord to make repairs.



## 'I've heard things in confession that would make you cry.'

THE REV. NOEL MCGRATH

► **FELLSMERE** from previous page

Or, looking at it another way, all around Florida there are dozens of other places just like it.

The city of 3,813 (many more in the harvest season, when the Mexicans come through to do the work) has quite a few success stories, and if you pass through for more than a minute, people there will be more than a little surprised to see Mary Sanchez whose parents used to work in the fields in the new FTA apartment. She works in the police department.

There's Jose Magdaleno, owner of the popular Azteca grocery, where he pumps out homemade tortillas and Mexican bread.

Take a drive through town and you will also see the bright, sturdy homes built by Mexicans who came here, settled and thrived.

That's the good news.

That's the bad news. When the crop falls up for the harvest and comes out their human cargo with swollen feet, thirsty from days of border crossing — there are not nearly enough places for them to stay, and so they sandwich into rickety trailers and houses that literally lean with the wind.

Some men — hundreds of them — report to heavy-handed crew bosses. They earn paychecks they cannot read. They prop chairs against refrigerator doors to keep them closed, so their food won't spoil. They ride in buses that are not a special ride, but a regular one to get in accidents, which they frequently do, given the condition of the vans, they give the hospital assumed names.

They bring women and children with them. Or, sometimes, the women and children come alone, crossing rivers and deserts on a prayer. The women look for work in the packing houses, try to find sitters for their toddlers, pay outrageous sums to lease trailers with an option — or so they are promised — to buy.

The trailers are cramped. The roofs leak. The owners park them in places to play keep their secondhand dolhorns not in fancy bedrooms but in bathrooms.

"Come," one says. "I will show you." And there, by the rusted sink in a tiny bathroom where the plumbing smells and the tub leaks, is the wonderful big home of her imagination.

### Arriving, they are just totally lost

Felmsmere is just one part of a great, long state, and yet it stands as a microcosm of all that can go wrong, and right.

Tucked deep into the lush groves of Indian River County, this sweet citrus spot 90 miles south of Disney has an ever-so-busy reputation, but in terms of modern labor trends, it's still up to date. The farms call for disciplinarian harvesters. Not everybody is miserable. Just the opposite.

The old-timers in this pioneer town are proud of its history and traditions, and rightly so. How many places, after all, boast a Frog Leg Festival?

But the other farming towns around the state, this one stands tall on the backs of oppressed labor. Growers in the area rely upon a cheap, illegal, ruthless and frequently oppressed work force to get out the crop.

They did not believe what these people go through," says the Rev. Noel McGrath, the local rector who, in a sign of these confusing, demographic times, speaks fluent Spanish with a delightful Northern Ireland accent.

"I've heard things in confession that would make you cry."

McGrath ministers at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission in the heart of town, the only home some people here know.

The church secretary, Carolina Cardona, keeps a file drawer full of papers and notes documenting the stag workers trapped here by the growers. She has done this for years, a laborer who goes down when shiner or drives them to the bus station, so they can move on to a town where they might know somebody.

Except for the church file, there is absolutely no official record of their existence in the U.S.A.

"Sometimes, they themselves don't even know where they are," the priest says. "They sleep in the woods, then knock on the door in the morning. We take care of them the best we can, but when they arrive, they are just totally lost." "That's exactly right," says Joel Tyson, the former city mayor.

"When the Mexicans first got here, they're at the mercy of the crew leaders. The crew leader will have an awful place for him to stay, and the crew leader will transport him to his job. The crew leader will control his life.

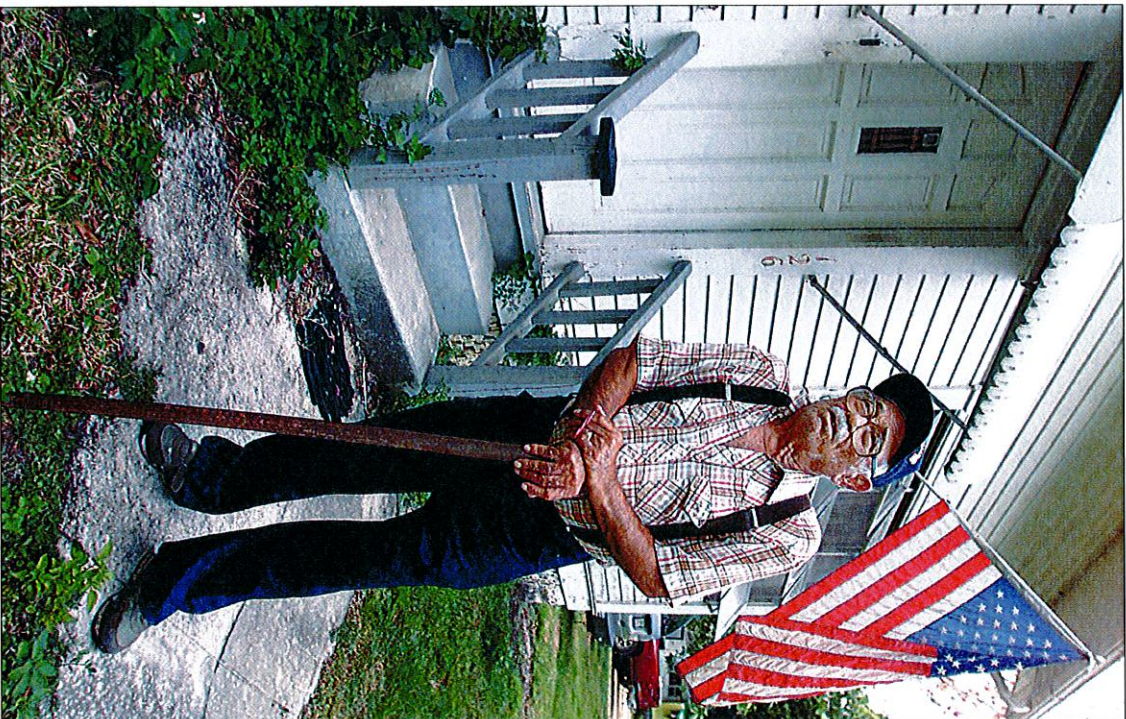
"In essence, it's not a great deal different than it was back in slavery days, or where you're an indentured servant."

Pretty much everybody associated with farm work knows the system. It's no secret. Except when you go knocking on a stranger's door to ask him who is in his fields.

The Mexicans come here with a coyote; they owe that coyote a debt — often as high, these days, as \$1,500. If they cannot pay, a crew leader or contractor will step in and cover the debt for them. Out of course, there is a price.

Now the Mexican who is relieved of his debt to the coyote owes the crew leader. He must work off his debt.

If he's under the employ of an honest man, the buckets of fruit or vegetables he



pickets will be duly recorded, and his debt fairly subtracted, minus a sum to live on.

But if he works for a scoundrel — well, that is another story altogether. At the tail end of the last harvest season, in a small white house with sky-blue trim, a picker, Jive Koinquillo, sipped lemonade.

"This is a great pressure until you pay off your debt," he said. "Once you do, you're free." "But until then, you are an owned man."

Or woman.

### How God will I pay the rent?

To take a tour of Felmsmere, knock on the church door or visit an outreach center and ask somebody to show you around.

That person will say, "OK, it will just take a minute," and they will mean it. If your guide is Maria Gracia, a family support specialist for the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, she might sprinkle in some personal information on her tour.

"My daughter is 12. She says, 'Mom, I want to be like you. I say, 'OK, you can be like me, a hard worker,' a good person. But not my education. I need more education.' And I tell her, 'Honey, I will find a way. I don't care if I have to go back to the fields and pick — I will find a way.'"

Gracia's parents came from a small pueblo. "In 1967, there was a rumor that if you had a baby in the United States, your whole family could become legal. So my mother got pregnant in Mexico, then got a visa, like a shopping visa, and then she crossed the border and had me. Everybody in my town in Mexico was getting pregnant at that time, just so they could come to McAllen, Texas, and have

children."

On your tour, you might also drop by veteran Frank Cavellin's trailer park, notorious in these parts for its antique conditions (and that's putting it mildly). The oldest trailer here is a 1954 aluminum traveler with a picture of Winnetka the Pooch on the front window, and until recently, it was in full operation, housing the pickers who clean our trees. Rumor had it that as many as 16 or 17 people would sometimes pack Frank's bigger trailers, but, as the park manager fairly points out, the Mexicans sometimes arranged that themselves, "to cut down on the rent."

The city finally shut Frank's place down last December, an action that drew the ire of Cavellin and some other people, too.

"It was a bit of a mixed blessing," McGrath says. "After I shut a lot of people had nowhere to go."

Down the road a bit, you will find other families with other stories: the 13-year-old boy who took care of his three younger siblings when his mother was hospitalized and — on the very same day — his father tossed in jail. They were gone two weeks.

Sometimes I would make macaroni and cheese for them, and I remember, said, "Sometimes the kid had eggs, Francisco did a good job, but still, when a parishoner from the mission stopped in, she found the youngest boy deprived."

You might also make the acquaintance of Martha Fuentes, a single mother of six who has teetered on the edge of homelessness for years. In season, she works at a Sun Ag Inc. packing house, and when the last season ended, the company printed a cheery message on her check: "We would like to express our thanks for

a job well done."

She wondered: *How, God, will I pay the rent?*

Claudia Recendez knows what it is like to be homeless, too. A dental hygienist in Mexico, she and her husband crossed desperately after he lost his accounting job for exposing fraud involving a newspaper owner's son. He was blackballed after that, she says. He could not get a job.

It was her worst memory. To get across the border, she had to put her two children into the hands of another coyote. "This woman had documents that belonged to other children. She used those papers to get my children through."

"We were really worried to do that, but our desire to be here was so great, we took this risk."

Now everything is OK. Except her husband, Teodoro, is sick. "I must work to support us," she says. "Sometimes there are no good choices, just existing."

### Good people ease the misery

There are plenty of good people here. These good people will run to the grocery to buy soup and rice for the church food pantry when the lines are too long and the supply too short. They will sit through their closets to find thick, long-sleeved shirts in the crush of picking season so the workers can protect their arms.

They will buy a man a bicycle if he has no way to get to work, give him an old job so he can call his wife in Mexico and so he can call his wife in Mexico.

"How is the new baby?" he will say.

They will read to the elementary children struggling with English. They will tutor adults on the fine points of ordering from McDonald's (so as not to embarrass their all-American teens).

They will even write grants to the wealthy John's Island Foundation so that the adult education center next to the church can purchase a bank of computers and send grant women can bend over them — learning office skills.

The good people notice the misery here, and step in. And if they didn't?

"I cannot even describe to you how bad things would be," says Juan Rodriguez, a psychologist and English teacher who helps the Mexicans here.

Everybody knows these people are here illegally, performing a job no one else will do. I let you know they must be. There is no justice to it at all.







Mario Lopez-Diaz

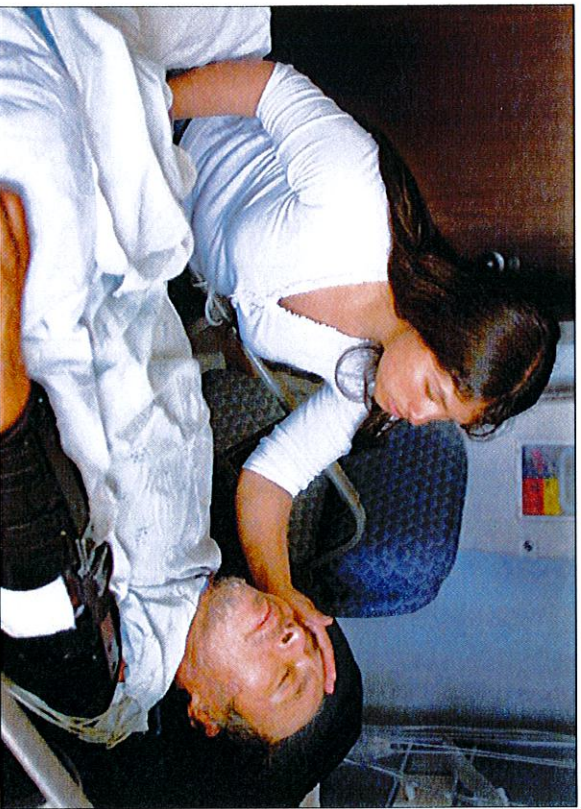
### Injured Guatemalan teen fought, changed labor policy



The boy came from Guatemala, crossed through Mexico, then Texas. He caught a ride to Florida and found work in the pepper fields. A man called Don Juan paid him in envelopes of cash. No pay stubs. Then came the accident in Clewiston. He got bounced from a farm truck; the tires ran over his legs. He lost consciousness and was taken to a hospital. "I kept waiting for somebody from the company to come help me."

employed the contractor who employed the boy. Instead of engaging in a court fight, president Peter Pero promised to overhaul the hiring and handling of laborers. Today, his state-of-the-art operation uses electronic timekeeping and sophisticated technology to count the buckets workers pick. Most significantly, Pero no longer allows contractors to handle payroll. And when workers get paid, the company name is on their checks. Lopez-Diaz still recovering, took a job in landscaping, and now, as he considers his place in Florida farming history, he feels proud. "I helped change something."

—Oswald Evans



PHIL L. MCELROY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Silvia Vazquez comforts her father-in-law, Cruz Vazquez, at St. Mary's Medical Center. He was badly hurt in a van accident.

The Vazquez family

### Accident demolishes family's promising start

The Vazquez family was new to this country and still struggling to pay off a hefty coyote's debt when they found a beat-up trailer to rent in Indian River County. The young women in the family, Silvia and her sister-in-law, Evelyn, took jobs in a citrus packing house. The men, Cruz Vazquez, 49, and his son, Guillermo, found construction work. This spring, they hopped in a labor van to ride to a site. It was full of other men, as labor vans often are.

The van had a blow-out on Interstate 95 near Port Pierce, Silvia said. "The passengers were ejected, and everybody was taken to different hospitals. They flew

(Cruz) by helicopter to St. Mary's (in West Palm Beach). The head injury was bad. He was in a coma. He hurt his leg and arm." Vazquez eventually recovered enough to return to Toluca, Mexico, where he has a wife and children. He had lost much of his memory. "I really imagined the here would be something different," said Silvia, who returned home, too. She has children there, and, in the end, she could not stand the thought that they had little to eat, while she, here, had so much.

—Oswald Evans

Cesar Pascual

### Lightning preys on men in fields

Cesar Pascual kept his eye on the sky as he cut string to the tomato plants in an Immokalee field this April.

A thunderstorm was approaching, but the contractor wouldn't let him or the other 12 workers leave. "We were sharpening the machetes and we could see the storm getting closer," Pascual said. "It was clearly bringing lightning." The storm moved overhead, but Ramiro Rodriguez still refused to order the workers back on the bus.

Then lightning struck. "We saw a lot of light," Pascual said. "The light exploded. When we became aware again, we were on the ground. It burned me all down my left leg. Another guy, it broke his eardrum."

But the worst hit was Gilberto Dominguez Acosta, 42, who was killed. "I was about 2 meters from the guy who died," recalled Pascual. "His hat, his shirt and his pants were all ripped open. Even his boots. His boots were split open in three places. Others tried to help him, but his body was already loose, his eyes closed and he was dead."

—John Landigosa



LUANIS WATERS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER The baby son of Apolonia Jimenez, 22, died beside her in bed in this trailer in Immokalee; the death was ruled sudden infant death syndrome.

Apolonia Jimenez

### Sudden death in an unheated trailer

It was very cold in Immokalee the night little Pablo died.

The baby's 22-year-old mother, Apolonia Jimenez, didn't have money or space for a crib. So Pablo slept with her in the tiny room of an unheated trailer that she shared with six other people.

Early in the evening of Jan. 15, Pablo cried a lot. "I think it was colic," Jimenez said. "Later he felt better, and he went to bed with me."

The temperature dropped according to the Florida Weather Service. It fell to 38 degrees.

"I covered him with a blanket and then with more blankets," Jimenez

said. "I woke up at 2 a.m. He was quiet," she said. "At 4 a.m., I woke up again. I covered him some more. He didn't wake up the way he usually did during the night."

"Finally about 6 a.m. I tried to wake him up, I said, 'Pablito, get up.' I took the covers off him and picked him up. He was pale and stiff and very cold. I realized . . . I prayed to God. I said, 'I'll do anything if he lives, God.' But it was too late." Pablo was pronounced dead in the morning.

The death was ruled sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

—John Landigosa



# Sex slavery, rape await defenseless

## Among migrant women, many sexual assault victims never report it. Immigration might get called.

BY JANE DANIELS  
Reporting from  
Palm Beach for Staff Writers

LAKE WORTH — She was still a newlywed when the attack came. Her supervisor cornered the Guatemalan teenager in a remote field in south Palm Beach County and demanded sex.

The police report is vivid: The man tied her hands behind her back. Shuffled a handkerchief in her mouth to stifle the screams. Forced her to the ground. Pinned her arms. Pulled his pants down. Began yanking at her belt.

He was still fumbling with the stubborn belt when three other men walked up. He pulled the pants down and they started fondling her. She was so terrified, she shriek and went over a fence that would never leave her.

It is a story repeated day after day in the fields of Florida. But, if you can believe the migrants and their advocates, most victims never report it. They fear the police. Immigration might get called, and you know where that might lead.

The case of the Lake Worth woman was unusual because she and her husband mustered the courage to call the cops.

Sheila's Detective Travis Cardinal tried to help, but the woman spoke an obscure Guatemalan language. He took her to Sister Rachel Sena, a Dominican nun working with Guatemalan migrants.

**'I have seen girls as young as 14 who were repeatedly raped by the men smuggling them into the U.S. to force them into prostitution.'**

**MARIA JOSE RETCHER**  
human rights attorney

Sister Rachel remembers a frightened teenager who lived in a rented house in Lake Worth. "We could see she was in shock. We could see she had been raped. The sheriff wanted so much to follow through on the case, but we could not find a true translator in Chuj. All of us were very, very sad about it. Soon after, the lady moved," she said.

"I remember somebody working with the Guatemalan Maya Center mentioned to me that this is so common. She said, 'Oh, Sister. If you only knew how common. . . .'"

Sill, the detective tried. He looked for the suspect, but he disappeared after the rape. Then he discovered that the young woman had been fired, too.

"What I found so disturbing was that she was terminated for being a victim. I was just dumbfounded. What benefit do they have to report a crime?"

But it could have been worse. She could have been kidnapped and turned into a sex slave.

For women attempting to flee the poverty of their homelands, rape and forced prostitution loom large on the list of threats they face in their quest to find work in the United States.

The danger has become so widespread that the U.S. Department of Justice issued a report in August calling trafficking in sexual slaves, including children, forced prostitution and slave labor "a heinous international crime and human rights abuse." The report estimated that 18,000 to 20,000 people a year "are trafficked annually into the U.S." to be enslaved in "commercial sexual exploitation such as prostitution and pornography or labor exploitation."

In South Florida, human rights attorney Maria Jose Fletcher has represented dozens of immigrant victims of sexual slavery and rape through the nonprofit Florida Immigrant Women's Center in Miami. "We've been working on trafficking cases since 1997," said Fletcher. "Many of these cases are heartbreaking because they are so brutal, so inhuman. . . . I have seen girls as young as 14 who were repeatedly raped by the men smuggling them into the U.S. to force them into prostitution."

Prosecuting traffickers in sexual slavery can be difficult, even under the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which provided tougher penalties under federal law, Fletcher said.

"It's very difficult for them to stand up for themselves. They're afraid of the police, of formal education. They are afraid because they are in the country illegally. They are afraid because the raps often destroy the last vestiges of their self-esteem."

This was the case with the young woman that social worker Maria Vega met in Immokalee.

Vega, who works for Catholic Charities, said the girl was "still a teenager when she was brought across into Texas by a coyote. She said he kidnapped her, had sex with her every day for two or three weeks, then beat her up and threw her out." She was so badly beaten, the doctors were forced to remove her womb. They asked her if she wanted to be sent back to her hometown in Mexico. She said, "No, I can't. Ie to some man and tell him I can have children. There's no sense going home. I'm not good for anything back here anymore. . . ."

**USED AND ABUSED**

*Life for black laborers improved after a heartbreaking CBS report on the Glades, but...*

# Load of 'Shame' has shifted

By CHRISTINE EVANS  
Farm, Beaches Post Staff Writer

**BELLE GLADE** — Long before the face of the harvest was brown, it was black. In the old days, the migrant stream that flowed from Florida up through the Carolinas to Virginia and back again depended upon the stoop labor of America's poorest blacks, and some whites, too.

There's was a strikingly hard existence, filled with long days of uncomfortable travel, heavy labor and feather-light pay. The movable workers who picked the best rode in truck beds, jammed together like cattle — maybe worse than cattle — and often entire families went without food and babies without milk. Children went without shelter, all so the migrants could move from place to place to pick the vegetables that landed on everybody else's dinner tables.

This was the migration.  
Its genesis was Belle Glade, Fla.

Life here in the last half a century has changed greatly, at least for farm workers who carry citizenship papers. But to understand how things are now, you need to understand how things were then.

And for that, you need to meet a sweet-tailed boy of 9 named Jerome King, who — quite without wanting — helped to end a racist, and these white folks come to them and start pinning wings on a grown-up King says today.

"The camera crews 'just caught everybody off guard,'" King says.

He is 52, the father of two teenage sons.

He lives in nearby South Bay, in a pleasant house where the walls and tables are lined with plaques marking his boys' academic achievements.

"Not to brag," he says. "But they're both terrific students."

Flash back.

It is 1960, the day after Thanksgiving, and CBS airs what is destined to become a classic: *Harvest of Shame*, a documentary on the tumultuous lives of migrant workers.

Telling the story for the camera is esteemed journalist Edward R. Murrow, who is reportedly seen smoking a cigarette as he narrates and interviews.

CBS producer David Love found Jerome in his tin shack at the local housing authority's Okeechobee camp.

If pictures do not lie, it was not a pretty place.

Jerome's mom, Allene King, 29, in a pleasant house where the walls and tables are lined with plaques marking his boys' academic achievements.

"Not to brag," he says. "But they're both terrific students."



Image from 'Harvest of Shame,' 1960

**His own man:** Jerome King, 52, of South Bay, appeared as a young boy (above) in CBS' famous documentary *Harvest of Shame*. The father of two teenage boys still makes his living as a migrant farm worker, but on his own terms. "Once you get used to it, it's like a walk in the park," he says.

"You've been at it 40 years," he says. "Once you get used to it, it's like a walk in the park."

That might be an optimistic view, but those who know the history of this place note the improvement, which is not to say there isn't room for more. Things have changed "quite a bit," says Hog Jones, 76, from his perch on his breezy front porch. "Of course, some changes develop too slow, in my opinion, it was Jim Crow around here for years."

"We've seen progress — but not enough," agrees Lois Monroe, of the farm worker Coordinating Council, which helps workers here stay afloat in hard times.

One of the big employers here, A. Duda & Sons, a farming conglomerate based in Okechobee, has set an industry standard by providing workers with a wide array of benefits, including housing and a day care center, run by a nonprofit group, on company land. The subject of unfavorable press attention in the 1970s, Duda now has the reputation of being a superior place to work. Unlike many growers, the company says it limits its use of labor contractors.

"We deal directly with our workers," says Drew Duda, a fourth-generation family member and a company vice president. The arrangement, he says, is one where "everybody benefits," since workers come away with an improved situation and Duda is assured a more stable workforce.

A big company like Duda can offer workers benefits some smaller companies wouldn't dream of. For many farm workers, Day after day, migrant workers troop into Monroe's office to tell her "of their

difficulties. She can relate. Her parents picked in the fields, back when CBS came to town.

"My mom and her sister made sure they were never in those pictures. Camera crews came, they ran and hid."

It was the *Harvest of Shame* after all. Nowadays, Monroe says, it is the foreign-born workers — Mexicans and Haitians — who draw the shortest straw.

"Some don't know who they're working for, or what they're making. Some can't read. I try to teach them how to read their paychecks, but it's hard. A lady came in yesterday, and she had all her checks for 20X2."

"She made \$2,124.40 for the year," I said. "How do you live on that?" She said she does the best she can.

Some people would say the year-old Jerome King followed a path of educating America about the plight of migrant workers.

King would not say that himself. "I don't know what America thinks," he says. "I just know what Jerome thinks."

What he thinks is this:

Today, the migrant worker's life can be a decent one, if conditions are right.

It is a hard life for the parents of school-age children.

It is a hard life for anybody who wants to stay in one place.

It is a hard life for anybody who cannot handle grinding physical labor.

Jerome King is raising his two boys up to do something different.

The stoop labor? The endless travel in the backs of rickety vans?

The hunger and uncertainty?

There is a new, brown set of hands to put up with that.



Star photos by CARL COLOMBO

**Rigged reweiler:** Migrant farm workers meet at a loading dock in Belle Glade beginning at 4:30 a.m. Buses will take laborers to the fields. On farms today, it is the foreign-born

**ABOUT THIS SERIES**

For nine months, *The Palm Beach Post* explored the roots of modern-day slavery. Reporters and photographers traveled to destitute Mexican villages, crossed the desert with a smuggler, rode across the U.S. with illegal immigrants, found new claims of slavery, uncovered rampant Social Security fraud and discovered that Florida's famous orange juice comes with hidden costs.

View photo galleries and hear reporters discuss the project at [PalmBeachpost.com](http://PalmBeachpost.com)

**USED AND ABUSED: How migrants live in Florida**  
Locked up, cheated out of pay, robbed of their names, stacked 10 to a room.

**HOW THEY COME: Desperate journey**  
Driven by poverty, a crossing that can kill, a broken dream.

**THE REAL COST: Fresh from Florida**  
A favored industry, a society burdened, a steady cycle.



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