

Former migrants recall the hardships of doing a job that nobody else wants

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of five stories on migrant laborers and the vital role they perform in harvesting crops in southwestern Michigan.

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Isabel (Beth) Galaviz never had a chance to be a cheerleader, go to a senior prom or do many of the other things that young women look forward to in high school.

One of 14 children, Galaviz, a Texas native, spent up to six months each year until she reached age 17 traveling with her parents from state to state in the migrant stream.

"Sometimes the crops would be good and sometimes they wouldn't," she recalled. "You never knew where you were going to be at."

Now married and with two children of her own, Galaviz works as

migrant services aide for the Van Buren County Department of Social Services. She said she is determined that her children will never go through what she did.

"All I know is that I want them to lead a better life," she said.

For all too many children of migrants, however, there are no options available. Making a living frequently must override all other concerns, including education.

"You take the kids and you put them to work because they become a source of income," said Dora Dominguez, an official with the Van Buren Intermediate School District, who has worked extensively with migrants.

One of eight children, Dominguez spent seven years in the migrant stream and is planning on writing a book about her experiences.

"There is no summer vacation," she said. "There are no seasons.

You know that you are going from field to field. You make do and you learn to cope with it, to tolerate it."

For Dominguez, childhood meant spending Christmas traveling from camp to camp, and once being terrified because she couldn't tell a school bus driver where she was staying because she didn't speak English. Yet she never felt abused, she says.

"Each child was required to pull their own weight," she said. "You never felt abused, because everyone was doing it."

Diana Strong of Marcellus, who was in the migrant life until age 12, remembers carrying a bucket of pickles 500 yards for 25 cents.

"It got to the point where my mother really got tired, and wanted us to have a life," she said.

Strong said her mother made her go back to farm work for one week in 1978, when as a teen-ager she be-

came rebellious and didn't want to go to school. During that week she endured mosquito bites because the housing had no screens, dirty bathrooms and cold showers — enough to convince her she didn't want to spend her life working as a migrant.

"Migrants get put down when they come up here, but nobody that's a resident here wants that job," she said.

Despite popular perceptions, there is a skill to picking fruits and vegetables, and farmers try to be selective about the workers they hire, according to Mike Thomas, district horticultural agent for the Cooperative Extension Service.

"The market place demands perfection in product, so the labor has to be very skillful," he said.

Another stereotype, that migrants come into the state primarily to collect welfare, isn't borne out by the facts, according to John Altana, director of the Van Buren County DSS.

Altana said that during 1986, his department opened 4,516 cases involving 16,827 migrants and their children. Of those cases, only 220 were for ADC and 99 for general assistance. The majority were for food stamps (2,662), day care (1,704) and Medicaid (981), and similar programs designed to supplement income.

But one Keeler Township grower blamed the availability of welfare and food stamps for a labor shortage. He said during one two-day period he had 25 workers leave his farm because they didn't want to work.

"I don't care if they're making

\$3.50 or \$9 an hour, they'll walk out," he said, adding that he only has seven workers to harvest 100 tons of tomatoes.

In past years, he said, illegal aliens made up one-third of his work force. He said they were good workers because they could not qualify for welfare. But he said they are in short supply this year because of the new immigration law.

"These people come up here to work," he said.

But as agriculture becomes more mechanized and farmers struggle to contain their labor costs, there is a question of how many of those jobs will be available in the future. Michigan's migrant labor force, estimated at 175,000 in

1980, is now only about 45,000, according to the state Office of Migrant Services.

Sanjuana Marin is now a payments assistance worker for the Van Buren DSS, but spent 14 years traveling with her family doing farm labor. She said the work was hard, and frequently she slept in the back of a pickup truck when housing was not available.

"Not being in school all year around like the other kids was very difficult," she recalled.

Yet, Marin believes she is better for the experience.

"I'm not ashamed of working in the fields," she said. "It was a good experience."

TOMORROW: Housing and health problems.



SANJUANA MARIN



DIANA STRONG



ISABEL GALAVIZ