

Memories remain rooted in the fields

Editor's note. This is the last of a three-part series on migrant farm workers from Texas. As a child, the author traveled with his family to work the fields, and he recently retraced those trips to compare.

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GRAFTON, N.D. — It is 10 p.m. in the Red River Valley, but it is still light enough outside to see the as-yet unlighted street lamps silhouetted against the red western sky where the sun has set half an hour before.

Looking out from my motel window, I can see across miles of seemingly endless prairie as it stretches toward Canada, broken up only by the straight rows of trees planted at half-mile intervals to keep the dirt from blowing away.

A few blocks from where I am staying is a building housing the Metropolitan Federal Savings and Loan Association. Deaconess Hospital used to be there. I was born there 37 years ago.

But I did not come 1,700 miles to commemorate my birth. I came to do a story about migrant workers and prairie sugar beet farmers in this part of the valley — and about how it has changed since my family was last here.

The main highway through this community of 8,300 is U.S. 81. If you go north on it you'll be in Canada in less than an hour. Head south and it'll take you to Laredo in a couple of days.

But just nine miles south on 81 you'll be in Minto, a small, mainly Polish community. Five miles more and you'll come to Walsh County Road 19. It is paved

now. Take a right there and on your left, not too far from that intersection, you'll find what used to be the Ed Moorewood farm.

That's where my folks and their seven children were living the summer I was born.

They were hoeing sugar beets, thinning out the plants to give the surviving plants room to grow. My parents were migrants, and I guess I was also, for I came "up North" with them for 17 years.

Migrant. A strange word. In the 25 years my family spent going north to follow the crops, I don't remember anyone among us referring to ourselves as *migrantes*. People actually use that word now, in talking about themselves.

I think it was LBJ's War on Poverty, with migrant programs, that put the word in the vocabulary of migrant people. Before that, we simply identified ourselves as those who came north.

The story is that my mother set down her hoe when she came to the end of the row, was driven to the hospital where she had me and then went right back to pick up where she had left off.

That isn't true, of course. She got a couple of weeks' rest before and after she had me.

The doctor asked my mother if she wanted a boy or a girl, and although she spoke no English, she understood the question and answered she wanted a boy. Her last four had been girls, and I guess she was ready for a change.

My name would be Armando, she told the nurse who asked her. She should have

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known she'd never get away with that.

You see, my oldest sister, Maria Luisa, was already 17. A strong-willed person, she was embarrassed her mother was still having babies.

However, once I was born, she decided to make the most of it. But although I was OK, my name wasn't. She went to the hospital and had my name changed to Juan Ramon, after a Mexican movie star.

I was baptized a few weeks later, at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, a tiny church in an equally tiny town named Ardoch, another Polish community a few miles from Minto. My godparents were a couple who lived across the street from us in Texas. They were also at the Moorewood farm that year.

When we arrived at the church, the priest took out an old phonograph and played a recording of "Jalisco." Condescending, perhaps, but more than likely it was just his way of paying tribute to our heritage.

Later that Sunday, more Mexican music blared outside the small houses at the farm. Somebody brought a guitar, another person an accordion, and families from other farms came to help celebrate my baptism.

There had been little to celebrate that year. Shortages of everything from coffee to meat brought on by the war effort had made life more difficult than usual. My mother was forced to make only corn tortillas because no lard was available for flour tortillas.

When my mother went back to work, Mariana, 8, took care of me, 3-year-old Dora and my youngest sister, 16-month-old Carmen. She fed us Pet brand evaporated milk in Buck brand soda pop bottles capped with rubber nipples. When

the milk failed to placate Dora, who was always crying, Mariana would simply hold her, and cry along with her.

That was 1946. It was three years before that — 40 years ago — that my family made its first trip north. That year there were only eight of them. Carmen was born a year before I was. The first trip took them to Wisconsin, near Fond du Lac, also to hoe sugar beets.

They went with the Trujillos, another family from Crystal City and paid a contractor to take them in the back of his truck. After they were paid for their work, my father and Don Placido Trujillo pooled their money to buy a 1927 Studebaker, a big black machine with solid fenders that were to prove useful later.

Only my parents, Maria Luisa — then 14 years old — and 12-year-old Delfina worked. Alejandro, 9, Norberto, 7, and Mariana did not work, but they usually went along and stayed in or near the car. Month-old Dora was looked after by all of them, and she spent a good portion of her first months lying on the back seat of that Studebaker.

When the work was done there, the Palomos and Trujillos followed another family south to a place, which today is probably a suburb of Chicago.

Nobody seems to remember the town's name, but there were a lot of airplanes taking off and landing at a nearby airport. Delfina spent a lot of time watching the planes until one day the farmer came by and told her he wasn't about to pay her to watch airplanes all day.

She joined the others in the car.

It is a mystery how the two men managed to buy the car. They spoke almost no English, and their interpreter was Maria Luisa, who had only completed the fifth grade. But they did buy it, and they were proud of the Studebaker — it gave them independence.

There was one slight problem, though: The car could not hold all 16 members of both families. Some of the children were

assigned to the third family's car, but even then there were two people left over, so Luisa and the oldest Trujillo girl rode on the front fenders of the Studebaker, holding on to the headlights.

That worked fine until it started to rain. Then they too were crowded into the other family's car.

In Illinois, they shared a one-room shed with a bunch of rats, and my mother worried that she would wake up one morning and find they had eaten Dora.

From Illinois, they went back to Wisconsin, to "top" the sugar beets — separate the thick stem and leaves from the beet with a machete. When they finished there, it was October. By then, my father and Don Placido had come to a disagreement over the use of the car and my father sold him his share and moved up to a 1929 Chevy, which took them back home to Crystal City.

This time there was plenty of room — even enough for an electric heater Luisa had insisted they buy to heat up the house in Texas.

When they arrived, my Uncle Melecio marveled at the fact that on the very first trip North, not only had they made enough money to buy a car, they had also bought an electric heater.

That car and electric heater were to be the first of many items that were bought with money my family earned up North. Crystal City always has been a virtual economic wasteland during the summer after the winter and spring crops are harvested. To have stayed there would have surely meant no heaters, no cars and no food.

We could have, of course, moved permanently to a Northern city where my parents could have found year-round work, but those were cold and hostile places to people like my parents who had already made one traumatic migration, from Mexico to Texas.

As hard as migrant life was, it allowed them to be close to their homeland, to

their people for part of the year.

With the exception of one year, we continued going North — mostly to North Dakota — until 20 years ago when only four of us made a final trip to Wisconsin where we worked weeding the mint fields.

Even after that, however, we continued going to California several more years. But California is West, not North and it doesn't really count, especially since we lived in regular houses and apartments, and we worked indoors in canneries and packing sheds.

The last two years I went to California, I went alone. Everybody else was married and my parents were too old. That last summer, 1963, marked the end of a quarter-century of migration.

It had started with eight apprehensive people crowded into the back of a truck for eight days as it rolled across the country's Midwestern plains. It ended with my racing home — alone — across the Western deserts, smug in knowing my life as a migrant had ended forever.

And yet, here I am again. I have spent a week driving around, poking here and there, trying to determine what it is about this flatland that for 20 years has beckoned me to return. In the morning I will drive 30 miles to the closest airport, in Grand Forks, and fly away. I will go back to my hometown and report what I found to my parents, sisters and brother.

Yes, I will say, there is still a certain amount of romanticism attached to migrant work, but no, you don't really want to do it over again — you just think you do. Come back if you want to, but make certain you don't have to.

I have read numerous horror stories about migrant life but, perhaps because I didn't come looking for them, I didn't find them here. To be honest, even the worst-case situations I remember don't qualify as horror stories in my mind.

Maybe it's because we tend to think of horror stories as what happens to others.