

A Crew Leader's Story

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RAFHAEL GUERRA, a crew leader, who lives in McAllen, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, supervises a group of migratory agricultural workers. As their leader, he arranges transportation, makes commitments with employers, and performs a myriad of tasks to keep his workers happy. For 8 years he and his crew have worked in fields from Texas to Michigan.

The nucleus of his crew is his immediate family of seven persons, five of whom are workers. He supplements this group with relatives, friends, and other family units. The group ranges in number from 12 to 39, including the nonworkers.

Although Guerra's itinerary has not changed greatly since his first migration, a drastic change has occurred in his method of obtaining job information. On his

first trips he had only hearsay information about the locality of available work and the scheduled harvesting of crops. He arranged for jobs as he and his crew drove through various sections of the country. When harvesting was completed in one area, the crew moved into another with no assurance of work and little information about crop conditions. This method involved long costly periods of unemployment during which the group had to be transported, housed, and fed.

The picture is now considerably brighter. Prior to leaving for his first job, Guerra has a fairly accurate knowledge of where he is going, what he is to be doing, and for whom he is to work. Employers have committed themselves to hiring him before he leaves the Rio Grande Valley and a work schedule has been

developed which provides him with almost continuous employment. Should a period of unemployment unexpectedly develop, Guerra has people working for and with him to provide other work or to direct him to a nearby area where he will be able to obtain work for his crew. This change has occurred partly through Guerra's experience with employers in the various States, partly through his reputation for providing hard-working, reliable hands, and partly through the efforts of the various State Employment Services. The Annual Worker Plan, with its advance planning and job commitments, has been a contributing factor in Guerra's ability to secure a complete cycle of jobs.

One Crew Leader's Story

The story of Rafaël Guerra's 1959 migration is representative of a majority of crews moving each year from the Rio Grande Valley to other sections of the United States for work. Guerra owns and operates one truck in which he transports the members of his crew, their families, their bedding, their kitchen utensils, and extra clothing. When the crew is too large for one truck, other workers follow in automobiles. Guerra derives a large part of his income from this truck. He usually is paid by an employer to haul the harvested crop from the field to the processing plant at so much per load.

The Kent County Pickle Company in Michigan wrote Guerra a letter in May saying that he and his crew would be needed again to hoe and harvest pickles. Simultaneously, the local office of the Texas Employment Commission in McAllen received an order from this company requesting that the office farm personnel explain to Mr. Guerra this year's conditions of employment. A company representative came to McAllen the latter part of May, following an itinerary approved by the central office of the Commission. Accompanied by a local TEC man, the company representative contacted all crew leaders who normally work for this company to arrange for this year's migration.

When the company representative talked with Guerra, he learned the approximate size of the crew and discussed conditions of the crop and the rate of pay offered. He also told Guerra the company would advance money so that the crew could meet traveling expenses and would provide insurance for the group while they were enroute.

Guerra then visited the local Texas Employment Commission office and, through the Annual Worker Plan, secured a commitment from an Ohio employer to pick tomatoes when the Michigan work was completed. He also obtained a commitment from a west Texas employer to pull cotton.



FPR Eleazar Garza (right) and crew leader Rafael Guerra discuss the Annual Worker Plan schedule for 1960.



Harvesting tomatoes.



Rafael Guerra's permanent home in McAllen, Tex. →

Guerra then began to assemble his crew. In addition to his immediate family, there was another family group composed of six workers who had migrated with him in 1958. Five workers were recruited from among friends, and other relatives provided three more workers.

Off for the North

As soon as school closed, Guerra assembled his crew of 18 workers, 3 children, and 1 woman who served as the cook for the group. All could be transported in Guerra's truck. When the group arrived in Michigan, they learned that they were 3 weeks early. The employer, interested in the crew's welfare, but also determined to have the crew available when his work began, obtained a job for the crew picking strawberries in a nearby community. During this 3-week period, Guerra and his family earned from \$35 to \$40 daily. Individual crew members averaged approximately \$7 daily. The efforts of the employer in finding a "fill-in" job strengthened the already strong ties between the crew and the employer and made Guerra's return trip in 1960 almost a certainty.

Although other crops were available in which his crew could have made more money, the workers prefer to work with this employer because of the assurance of employment each year. This crew likes to work in the hoeing and harvesting of pickles. Guerra has worked for this employer for 7 years and now receives additional pay as a supervisor.

When their first assignment was completed, Guerra and his crew moved to Ohio as scheduled. He contacted the local office of the Ohio State Employment Service and learned that the employer to whom he had been tentatively scheduled had not raised his wages as had other employers in the area. The Ohio agency rescheduled him to another employer who was paying a wage rate prevailing in the area. On this job, the crew members were paid 10 cents a hamper for picking tomatoes, plus a 2-cent bonus if they completed the job. Each crew member averaged \$10 a day. Guerra was paid for supervising the crew and for hauling the tomatoes to the shed.

Good Treatment

Guerra says that he and his crew were given excellent treatment by both the employer and the Employment Service. Employment Service personnel contacted him two or three times weekly to see how he was doing and if the crew members were happy in their job.

Prior to the completion of the tomato harvest on September 22, the west Texas employer notified Guerra that the cotton crop had been practically destroyed by hail. Without future employment, Guerra and his crew decided to return home. However, during an overnight stop at a rest camp in Sikeston, Mo., a representative of the Missouri Division of Employ-

ment Security offered him a job picking cotton. The crew remained in Missouri for 4 weeks but because of bad weather picked for only 1 week.

Because of dwindling finances and discouraging weather conditions, the crew returned to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and disbanded. A Missouri employer wrote to Guerra asking him to return to finish picking but Guerra decided it was impractical to do so.

This brief outline of one crew leader's migration and the problems encountered and overcome is representative of many crews who migrate annually from the Lower Rio Grande Valley to other States.

Once Home, the Crew Scatters

Guerra was asked upon his return home why he did not work regularly with his crew as there were vegetables and citrus crops to harvest during the months he spent in the Valley. He said the primary reason he did not operate as a crew leader in the Valley was because of the difficulty of holding a crew together. Workers are quick to join another crew working in other crops or in more productive fields. He also explained that some of his workers will not do "stoop" labor while at home. Some obtain work doing odd jobs in nonagricultural work, some work in canneries and packing sheds, some women do no work at all. One woman member of last year's crew is presently working in a variety store.

Guerra himself works as a rough carpenter or a rough painter and also uses his truck in any job he may locate. He handled only one 15-man crew cutting spinach for 3 weeks between October 1958 and May 1959.

During the years of his migratory work, Guerra has also worked with a crew in Arizona, Kentucky, and Arkansas. His crew has also worked on cherries, onions, and celery.

A Crew Leader's Responsibilities

Guerra feels that basically he has three primary responsibilities to his crew members: (1) to provide them with as much continuous employment as possible during their migration, (2) to provide them with good, safe transportation, and (3) to attempt to obtain the best pay possible for his workers as well as for himself.

In addition to these responsibilities, he checks and approves the housing facilities before he accepts a job for his crew and assigns sleeping quarters to his crew members. He also sees that his crew members receive medical care. If the crew member is unable to pay for this care, Guerra pays for it and collects from the member later. During the first week of a migration, it is usually necessary for Guerra to obtain groceries for his crew. He does this by advancing them money which is later repaid after several weeks of employment.

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