

# THE REAL COST

U.S. taxpayers spend billions of dollars on a swelling underclass. But thousands of would-be laborers pay even more dearly.

The Real Cost  
Resource ID # 5642



**19 dead in a tractor-trailer:** Laura Almanza (left) grieves over the grave of her husband, Hector Ramirez Robles, during his funeral this spring in central Mexico, Ramirez, Texas. In May, the three men were buried side-by-side on the same afternoon in a cemetery along with two neighbors, brothers Roberto and Serafin Rivera Gomez, were among 19

smuggled migrants who died after being locked in an airtight tractor-trailer in Victoria, Texas, in May. The three men were buried side-by-side on the same afternoon in a cemetery outside of their hometown of Pozos. **PAGES 6-8**

## Florida's fruit and vegetables come with a hidden price tag.

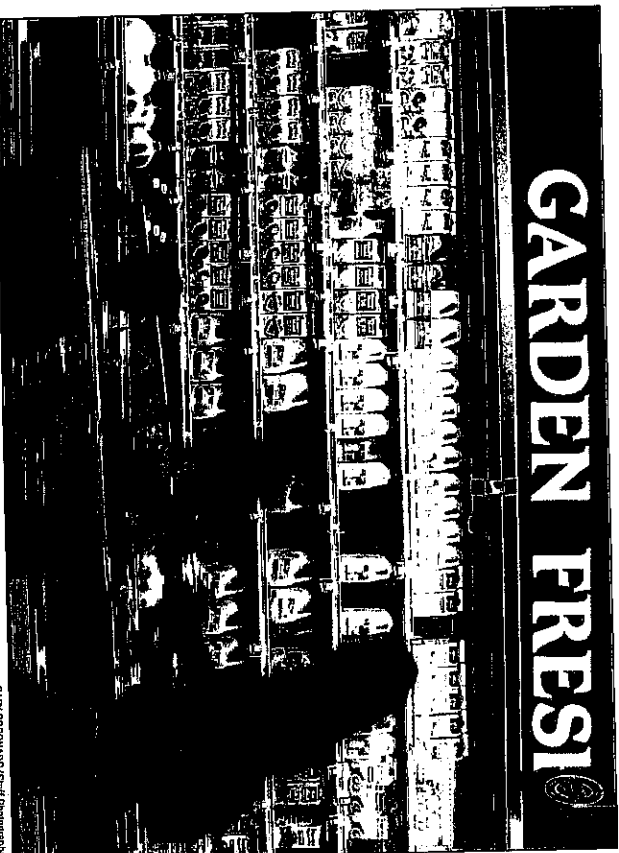
Illegal, desperately poor Mexicans and Guatemalans harvest Florida's rich crops but get precious little for their backbreaking labor.

But there is a price to pay. Many migrants eventually settle here, mired in a life of poverty. They need health care, education, welfare. And for some, taxpayers foot the bill.

Florida growers say foreign competition is too fierce and profit margins too narrow to raise workers' wages.

Machines could harvest Florida's famed citrus in 10 to 15 years, leaving thousands without jobs. Attempts to help farm workers must pass through Tallahassee, where key politicians are closely tied to the agricultural industry.

But all else pales beside the human cost: Rugged wooden crosses scattered across the Arizona desert. Nineteen dead in Victoria, Texas, in a single day. They are dying to get here. Dying in search of a job — and a decent life.



**Price check in the citrus aisle:** Some varieties of orange juice in the supermarket are fruits of the labor of undocumented migrants hired for low wages. Their continuing impoverishment places a heavy financial burden on social services, public health and public safety. **PAGES 2-3**

The guest visa, a legal, bureaucratic route to Florida's groves and fields, is generally the road not taken.

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Lawmakers' ties to Big Agriculture stymie many legislative reforms to benefit farmhands.

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We're still suffering under the Edward R. Murrow syndrome,' says one Florida tomato farmer.

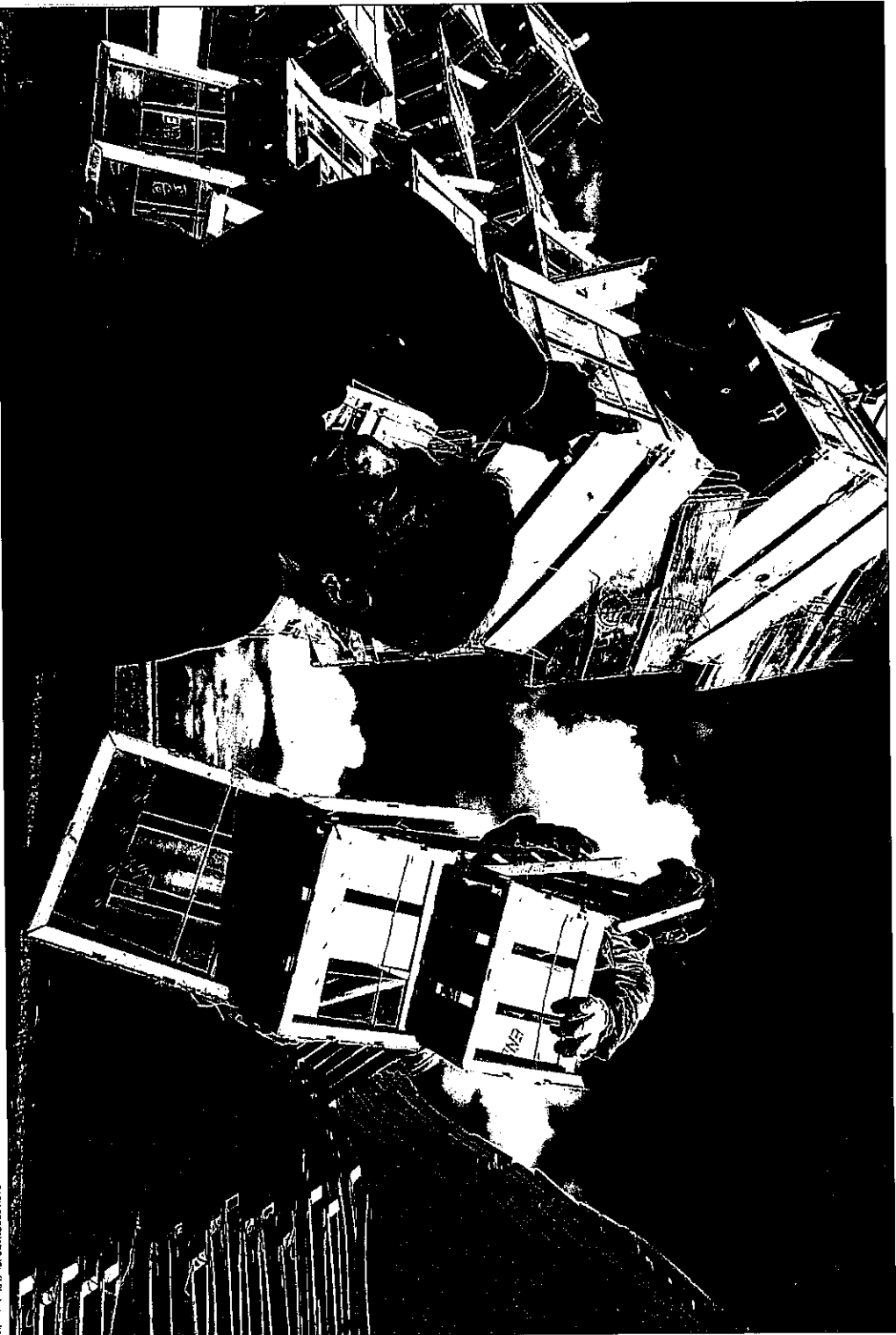
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**THE REAL COST** | A swelling underclass

'If any other U.S. industry used business practices that caused long-term social costs on this scale . . . Congress would hit them with an impact fee or regulate the practices out of existence.'

JOSEPH A. KINNEY, labor consultant



Field greans for the Frost Belt: A farm worker in Palm Beach County hauls crates used for packing endive lettuce during harvest last month. For Florida's growers of citrus, tomatoes,

melons, vegetables and nursery plants, the grueling work of migrant labor helps to generate an annual economic impact of \$62 billion.

CHUCK CORONADO/Staff Photo/SPR

# That glass of OJ is squeezing back

*Huge hidden costs of cheap labor are borne by welfare agencies, schools, hospitals, police — you.*

By JANE DAUGHERTY  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Cheap labor puts fresh-squeezed Florida orange juice on millions of American breakfast tables every morning.

Cheap labor picks the giant crimson Plant City strawberries, glossy bell peppers and juicy melons, not to mention the picture-perfect Indian River grapefruit so popular in Japan and Europe.

But cheap labor also generates significant hidden costs, costs that one national labor expert says are so staggering that an 8-ounce glass of fresh orange juice that retails for 42 cents from the carton really costs Florida taxpayers a whole lot more.

The migrants who pick Florida's oranges are generally paid only 3.5 cents per half-gallon of fresh juice typically selling for \$3.39 in supermarkets. Growers contend they can't pay more because of narrow profit margins and competition from Brazil, where pickers, including children, are paid even less.

Meanwhile, the rising invisible costs of cheap labor to harvest our crops are being shouldered by welfare programs, schools and hospitals required by law to treat anyone with a serious illness.

Many immigrants, legal and illegal, receive help from food stamps, infant and maternal nutrition programs, free and reduced-price school lunches, local health departments, churches and voluntary agencies. They increase demands on public safety programs and the criminal justice system. They require publicly paid translators and teachers of English-as-a-second-language.

Florida is among six states that receive the most immigrants, along with New York, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois and the No. 1 immigrant destination, California, where the National Academy of Sciences has estimated that immigrants' use of social services and schools costs every California household \$1,200 a year in additional taxes. The academy projected the total cost to U.S. taxpayers for services to immigrants at \$15 billion to \$20 billion a year, while their economic contribution is pegged at \$10 billion.

Harvard economist George Borjas served on the National Academy panel. An economic adviser to former California Gov. Pete Wilson, Borjas wonders whether Florida's cost per household for immigrant services may now be approaching California's.

California has Silicon Valley and more high-tech industry, more manufacturing,

more very rich people to bear the costs," Borjas said.

In places like Palm Beach County that have huge agricultural holdings that draw migrant laborers, the impact on local taxpayers is even greater because there is no other large industry and most of the costs of services to immigrants — public education, health care, law enforcement — are borne by local governments.

Public and private agencies in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties spend at least \$21.5 million a year on immigrants, according to a survey by *The Palm Beach Post*. And that doesn't even include medical care, medicine, food and income assistance programs.

For example, the Palm Beach County School District gets \$2.1 million in federal money this year to help educate 7,400 children of migrant workers. The district spends another \$5.5 million to help students whose native language is not English. In Martin County, the schools spend \$4.5 million on ESOL classes for children, plus \$1.2 million for English and high school equivalency classes for adult immigrants. In St. Lucie County, public schools spend \$5.7 million on ESOL and another \$800,000 on programs for immigrants and their children.

And in Lake Worth (pop. 35,133), where nearly one in every three residents is an immigrant, city officials are furious because they say the U.S. Census failed to count many undocumented immigrants, depriving the city of much-needed federal grant money. A special code enforcement team cracking down on shummy conditions has stumbled into numerous shabby houses and apartments crowded with migrant farm workers, sometimes 10 to a room.

Mexican border to labor in Florida's fields don't want to attract government attention for fear of being deported. Thus, in their first years here, only a very few apply for help.

In fact, the Department of Labor says that 1,404 migrants interviewed in 2000 for its annual farm-workers survey were less likely to sign up for welfare programs than 10 years ago. Only 6.6 percent used food stamps in 2000, compared with 18 percent in 1993.

Laura Mullins, a director at the Farm Workers Coordinating Council in Lake Worth, attributes part of that decline to higher eligibility requirements enacted in 1996 that, for instance, imposed a six-year residency requirement for food stamps.

"Fear is a big factor when they first get here," said Mullins. "If they're undocumented, they won't want any contact with authorities. It is also difficult for them to access services because of language barriers, but ultimately, if they are eligible for services, they'll use them."

Borjas and other labor experts say the California experience proves that as they become more familiar with the American system, migrants who have lived here for several years will begin to take advantage of it and receive services. And because migrants are so wretchedly poor, he warns, they will remain in poverty even when they become permanent residents and move on to other jobs, creating a new underclass that will increase the tax burden.

Unquestionably, migrants are some of the hardest-working people in Florida. Yet for their labor, they get only 3.5 cents per half-gallon of Florida orange juice, according to a *Palm Beach Post* analysis of detailed production cost figures provided by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

With the average farm worker in the U.S. making about \$7,500 per year, according to census figures, paying laborers an additional one cent a half-gallon would lift many farm workers above the federal poverty level.

But, "we're not likely to see any increase in wages paid to Florida citrus workers in the near future," said professor Fritz Roka, a University of Florida agricultural economist. "There are plenty of workers willing to work for the current wages. . . and the 2003-2004 citrus forecast indicates the harvest will be the largest in more than 10 years, which will glut the market and likely bring citrus prices

## Citrus industry is second to nurseries

Florida's top agricultural commodities, by percent of total receipts.

1. Greenhouse/nursery 23.8%
2. Oranges 17.1%
3. Cane for sugar 7.6%
4. Tomatoes 7.4%
5. Dairy products 5.2%
6. Cattle 4.9%
7. Potatoes 3.1%
8. Broilers 2.9%
9. Grapefruit 2.7%
10. Strawberries 2.2%
11. Chicken eggs 1.6%
12. Sweet corn 1.5%
13. Tangelinas 1.4%
14. Cucumbers 1.3%
15. Watermelons 0.9%
- Other\* 16.4%

\*Includes peaches, cabbage, honey, blueberries, avocados. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

John Thomas of Thomas Produce Co., the state's biggest vegetable grower, says he can't afford to cut his margins any more. "Our margin is down so low," Thomas said. "It's a tough business and it's getting tougher all the time."

Most consumers know little about the dilemma posed by farmers' profit margins vs. the migrants' struggle for survival.

Most taxpayers are also unaware of the involuntary burden they carry, said Borjas, himself a Cuban immigrant. "Unless you are unemployed and having to compete with immigrant laborers who drive down the wage scale, the losses are more diffused among the rest of the economy. Joe Six-Pack is hurt, but he doesn't realize how much it's costing him."

Joseph A. Kinney, a labor consultant who has frequently testified before Congress about injuries to workers, agrees.

"Agriculture in Florida, California and Texas profits hugely from migrant laborers. But those large companies and the farmers who sell their fruits and vegetables to them don't have to pay the hidden costs incurred by the exploitation of those workers, most of whom remain in the U.S. long after they stop working in the fields," See COSI, next page



## Some hidden costs of migrant labor

A Palm Beach Post survey of local agencies in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties found nearly \$21.5 million in services to migrants. The total is likely to be much higher because hospitals and health care agencies say they cannot break out their considerable costs of treating the laborers.

### PUBLIC SAFETY AND CIMES

- Palm Beach County's 911 emergency dispatch center
- \$90,000 a year for interpreters
- Palm Beach County's court interpreting services
- \$605,241 for fiscal year 2002
- Palm Beach County Sheriff
- Increased Hispanic officers from 115 in 1967 to 157 today
- St. Lucie County Sheriff
- Has hired 25 Spanish-speaking and three Creole-speaking deputies
- St. Lucie County courts
- \$20 to \$30 an hour for Spanish and Creole interpreters

### Lake Worth

- Loses thousands of dollars a year in federal and state money because 15 to 30 percent of its population — undocumented immigrants — weren't counted by the U.S. Census, according to Mayor Rodney Romano

■ Hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on police, code enforcement and other services to immigrants. In 1994 alone, city estimated its immigrant explosion cost the police department \$220,000, since then, immigrant population has grown.

### EDUCATION

- Palm Beach County School District
- \$2.1 million from federal government to help educate 7,100 children of migrant workers
- \$5.6 million a year to help students whose native language is not English
- Palm Beach County Migrant Education Program
- \$300,000 a year for education and job training for 150 migrants
- March County School District
- \$4,510,288 for its 1,264 English as a Second Language students
- An estimated \$1,166,837 an adult education programs for migrants
- \$220,000 for summer program

for migrant students

### HEALTH

- Quantum Foundation
- \$150,000 for two-year health care delivery project in Mexican community
- \$147,150 for Senior Staffee and Project Hope, three-year public health education program for Hispanic children
- \$150,000 for mobile mammography services for women in minority neighborhoods
- \$213,000 for 60 months of Spanish language Planned Parenthood outreach
- \$300,000 for three-year hospice information and care for Hispanic and black seniors

### SOCIAL SERVICES

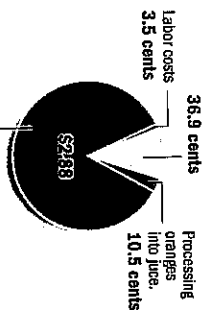
- United Way of Palm Beach County
- Almost \$200,000 a year to seven agencies providing a variety of services to migrants, including \$117,490 to Farmworker Coordinating Council of Palm Beach County, also funds a variety of other agencies that serve migrant farm workers.



GARY CORNWALL Staff Photographer

## Where your \$3.39 goes

Farm workers get 3.5 cents of the \$3.39 retail price of a half-gallon of Tropicana not-from-concentrate juice.



Packing, refrigeration, shipping, marketing and advertising, plus profit for processor and retailer. Source: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

and Consumer Services. For Florida's growers of fruits, vegetables and nursery plants, cheap migrant labor helps generate a positive annual economic impact of \$62 billion.

With agriculture second only to tourism in Florida, Commission of Agriculture Charles Bronson predicts that the trend is for consistent economic growth. "My vision is simple," Bronson said. "Get the 'fresh from Florida' label in front of the consumers."

But to do that requires a mostly unseen army of farm workers with a social cost equally invisible to consumers. The fresh produce these mainly Hispanic workers pick may well be sold with the premium 'fresh from Florida' label, but the workers themselves are more likely to be fresh from the dire poverty of rural Mexico, Guatemala or El Salvador.

Borjas, who has studied the impact of immigration for two decades, warns that many of the farm workers' families will be mired in poverty for generations, supported largely by taxpayers. Sawyer Pierre, a Haitian-American who works in Belle Glade and Immobilee advising migrants of their legal rights, concurs.

"I have seen as many as three generations who can't escape the poverty," said Pierre. "The cost of living keeps rising faster than wages. They work hard for 20 years, and still they can't escape."

It's an old problem with a new face. Since the 1980s, most Florida farm laborers have been immigrants; about one in 20 were in the U.S. illegally in 1988. But the demographics have shifted from large numbers of Haitians, Jamaicans and Mexicans, many with families, to almost all Hispanics: Mexicans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans, mostly single men who send part of their wages home.

The Inter-American Development Bank reported in October that money sent home to Mexico by immigrants working in the U.S. this year will soar to \$14.5 billion. Only oil exports draw more foreign money into Mexico.

Today, eight out of 10 Florida farm workers are in the U.S. illegally, according to the nonprofit, nonpartisan Urban Institute, which studies immigration demographics and public policy.

The cheap labor syndrome is not confined to agriculture. Some of the migrants who came in the '80s and early '90s have moved to non-farm jobs. Some left for construction jobs in Georgia and the Carolinas. In South Florida, hotels, motels and condos in Naples and Marco Island use minivan drivers to pick up Haitians and Mexicans in Immokalee to work as beach resorts and dishwashers in low-wage resorts.

Others who have studied the progress of immigrant families fret over the future of migrant children.

The Urban Institute found one in five children in the U.S. — and one in four low-income children — live in an immigrant family. In Florida, it found 28 percent of the children of immigrants in 1999 had no health insurance; 43 percent live in families who have difficulty affording food.

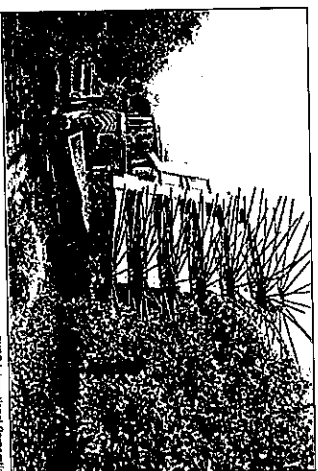
Philip Martin, a University of California-Davis economist, frames the issue this way: "Permitting Mexican farm workers to enter the U.S. helps to hold down farm wages and thus food prices. The immigrants are eager to come, the farmers are eager to employ them, and because of their presence, Americans have more money to spend on non-food items."

"What is the trade-off? Some of the Mexican workers settle in the U.S., and they and their children are encouraged by low farm wages to move to urban areas to improve their lot. If they and their children succeed in urban labor markets, then the U.S. immigration problem of giving opportunity to the poor of other countries is repeated. If they do not, then rural poverty in Mexico becomes rural and eventually urban poverty in the U.S."

And the number of immigrants continues to rise: 13 million have arrived in the U.S. since 1990, as many as 500,000 a year entering illegally. The Census Bureau, in fact, reported that in 2000, the foreign-born population exceeded 31 million, or about 11 percent of the population. If the trend continues, the foreign-born population will double by 2050.

With their exploitation, the hidden costs begin to grow and feed the cycle of dependency because these bitterly poor new arrivals assimilate more slowly than earlier immigrants. "If any other U.S. industry used business practices that caused long-term social costs on this scale, Congress billions of dollars a year. Literally would hit them with an impact fee or regulate the practices out of existence," labor analyst Kinney said. "But who's going to make the argument Poor farm workers who came from worse poverty across the border who are here illegally? The consumer who piling up profit? The consumer who appears to be getting bargain-priced fruits and vegetables because they can't see the hidden costs?"

"This is Big Agriculture's dirty little secret: They're still engaged in the shameful labor practices the typical American consumer believes ended decades ago. The reality is these workers will be trapped in poverty. Taxpayers of Florida, California, Texas, New York and the other states that absorb most of agriculture's throw-away people will pay the price for decades more."



OASO International Corporation

No hands: The Freedom Series mechanized harvester of OXBO International Corp. has been put to use in some citrus groves.

*Mechanized pickers collect the sugar cane. Is citrus next?*

## Machine harvests steadily growing

by JOHN LANGRISH and JANE DAHERTY Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

AVON PARK — A super-sized tractor thrust what looked like a giant hair-brush deep into the branches of an orange tree heavy with ripe fruit.

The driver pushed a button and the long-armed sprindles whirled around, knocking oranges off the tree and into a mechanized cart below.

The experiment caught the attention of nearby migrant farm workers picking oranges by hand, the way Florida citrus has been harvested for 150 years.

"They are trying to make machines that will take our jobs from us," laughed Leonardo Perez, 27, of Veracruz, Mexico. "But the machines damage the fruit and the trees. They aren't as good as us."

Asked about the possibility of being replaced by such a gizmo, he shrugged. "We'll see what happens."

Mechanization in Florida agriculture is not a sci-fi fantasy. Just ask the thousands of sugar-cane cutters who as recently as 1990 worked Florida fields and have now been entirely supplanted by machines.

In fact, Fritz Roka, the premier expert on Florida's citrus mechanization efforts, says "at least 50 percent of the state's groves could be harvested by machines in 10 to 15 years."

Already, 17,000 of Florida's 666,000 acres of commercial groves are mechanically harvested, said Roka, an assistant professor of agricultural economics at the University of Florida research center in Immokalee.

But mechanization has limits. Citrus meant for sale as fresh fruit must be treated delicately so it won't bruise. But citrus destined to become juice can be harvested by machines, rougher than human pickers.

"That's 88 to 90 percent of the crop in Florida," said Roka. "In time, one worker running a machine will take the place of 10 workers." That would reduce the number of citrus pickers in Florida from about 25,000 to a few thousand.

Mechanization, says Roka, may allow Florida to better compete with other countries like Brazil where labor is much cheaper.

But two factors hinder the march to mechanization. Some of the machines being tested shake the tree trunk and catch fruit after it falls. But the fruit is difficult to shake off and the process risks damage to trees, endangering future harvests.

Valencia oranges present an even greater problem because one crop ripens while the next year's crop is already in bloom on the same tree. The industry is trying to develop chemicals — "absorbent" sprays — that will cause mature fruit to fall more readily.

One prime reason for the delay is the cost — up to \$1 million for each machine. And the trees must be uniformly pruned — "skiered" — to accommodate the new technology.

"The cost will be about \$100 to \$150 per acre," says Roka. "It will take two, three or four years to recoup and since the market price (of citrus) has been low the last few years, a lot of growers haven't

been ready to make the investment."

Machines already are used to pick carrots, potatoes and radishes. But other vegetables may be too delicate.

"I think we're looking at a far horizon, before the majority of citrus is harvested by machine," said Squire Smith of Eagle Lake, president of Florida Citrus Mutual, a growers' organization with some 11,000 members.

Even farther down the line, experts see possibilities that really seem like science fiction.

"There is work being done in robotics," says Roka. "Improvements in computer technology and imaging technology make it possible to envision a robot who can reach out and pick the right fruit."

Meanwhile, other faces at work could change the face of Florida's most famous crop.

Congress is considering legal status for 500,000 farm workers, mostly from Mexico, who entered the U.S. illegally. The bill is endorsed by the United Farm Workers, most of Big Agriculture and a broad spectrum of politicians ranging from liberal Democrats (Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., is a co-sponsor) to conservative Republicans led by Sen. Larry Craig, R-Iowa. It allows illegal farm workers and their families now in the country to qualify for permanent residency after a certain period of work. Also, it makes it easier for farmers and other employers to hire foreign workers for agricultural jobs.

"Citrus from Brazil with its cheaper labor and production costs, has already cut into the Florida market. But growers here fear a virtual takeover if battles on imported citrus are lifted. If that happens, Americans may be drinking orange juice made by Maguari, a popular Brazilian company, instead of frozen Minute Maid. But it will be much harder for the Brazilians to compete in the "not from concentrate" (NFC) product pioneered by Tropicana, which is more difficult and expensive to transport.

Florida and Brazil are both battling citrus-killing diseases. Florida is waging an aggressive war on citrus canker and, as Roka put it, "If the thing spreads to folk and Indian River (counties), we're talking about losing entire operations." Meanwhile, Brazil is battling the even more lethal, more stubborn, Sudanese death disease, which has the potential to damage or kill 85 percent of its crop.

If Fidel Castro falls and democracy emerges, Cuba could become a competitor in vegetables. Cuba is so close that it could get vegetables to market here when they are still fresh.

But the greatest long-term threat to Florida agriculture may be even closer to home — the boom in Florida real estate. Development continues its inexorable march through what was once farm land. "Especially in the northern part of the state and along the coast, it's the economic reality," says Smith. "The land is becoming more valuable from a development standpoint than an agricultural standpoint."

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said Kinney, former director of the National Safe Workplace Institute, a nonprofit think tank funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the March of Dimes and Joyce foundations.

"Our national immigration policy is to look the other way as long as undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans keep streaming into the U.S. to do the backbreaking labor to harvest the fresh stuff that winds up on our tables," said Kinney. "But would you buy it if you knew that glass of Florida OJ will wind up costing \$5 when you factor in those hidden costs? That's a realistic ballpark figure when you add up how long these workers will be trapped at the bottom of our economic ladder."

Meanwhile, social and community costs for services for illegal immigrants continue to mount.

Earlier this year, Luis Jimenez, a Guatemalan severely brain-damaged in a car crash in February 2000, ran up over \$1 million in bills at Martin Memorial Medical Center — fully one-tenth of the nonprofit hospital's annual spending for charity care.

After more than a year, hospital officials said Jimenez, 31, a penniless landscaper and former migrant farm worker left with the mental capacity of a child, no longer needed acute hospital care.

Jimenez was spirited out of the hospital shortly after dawn July 10 and flown to a rehabilitation facility in Guatemala City where officials promised he would receive proper care. He is now living with his ailing mother in a rural village without his prescriptions.

The Jimenez case is not rare. A janitor here illegally spent 17 months in the same Martin County hospital where he ran up a bill of \$560,000, before he was sent home to Jamaica.

The Jimenez case caught the attention of U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, R-West Palm Beach, who asked the General Accounting Office to study the costs of treating undocumented immigrants in U.S. hospitals. "We need to remedy this problem before we can no longer afford to take care of Americans," Foley said.

The mounting costs of treating immigrants like Jimenez already have prompted some Arizona emergency rooms to close their doors. Hospitals in Texas have passed costs of medical care for undocumented immigrants to local taxpayers. And the American Hospital Association estimates the national cost for illegal immigrant hospital care at "millions, possibly billions," with no precise figures because hospitals do not keep records on immigration status of patients, said Carla Luggero, an AHA lobbyist.

In addition, Boris, of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, says employment of immigrants has caused the shift of roughly \$160 billion from the paychecks of low-skilled American workers — many of them minorities — to the profits of businesses who employ cheaper migrant labor.

In Florida, agrishusiness is a prime beneficiary of that economic shift through the employment of migrants as \$1,000 farm workers, mostly migrants, in a peak harvest week, according to the state Department of Agriculture



# In Capitol, reform hits stony ground

*A pesticide safety bill is doomed by personal grudges, feudal protocols and lawmakers' ties to Big Agriculture.*

By CHRISTINE STAPLETON  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Rep. Marty Bowen — a major player in Florida's mammoth agricultural industry — swears she is just as interested in protecting workers' rights as in protecting fellow growers' profits.

But Bowen, R-Winter Haven, a wealthy citrus heiress who chairs the House Agriculture Committee, is also a grower whose company has been accused of violating farm-worker labor laws.

Bowen became a director and vice president of Bowen Bros. in her family's grove business — in 1991, while the company was enrolled in a lawsuit brought by Florida Rural Legal Services. Fourteen farm workers at Bowen Bros. sued claiming the company and the farm labor contractor it used failed to keep accurate records and pay workers on time, transported workers in unlicensed and unlicensed vehicles and housed workers in substandard housing. The company argued it was without knowledge of how the contractor treated the workers and shouldn't be held responsible. The company settled the suit in 1992. Bowen did not return phone calls about the lawsuit.

But that lawsuit was not the first time Bowen Bros. had been charged with violating farm-worker labor laws. In 1986 the Department of Labor found that the company allowed a farm-labor contractor to illegally transport and house workers. The company was not fined.

Bowen comes from a large agricultural family in Polk County that owns other citrus-related businesses. In 1991, Bowen replaced James Shulford, her uncle, on the board of Bowen Bros. Inc. Shulford went on to create Bowen Bros. Fruit Co. Inc., also in Winter Haven, which was fined \$1,275 in 1993 for using an unregistered farm-labor contractor, and again in 2001 for failing to disclose employment conditions to workers. Bowen has no interest in that company.

Bowen, who likes to remind people that she began her career with mental jobs in the groves, dismissed any suggestion that she fails to protect the rights of farm workers.

"My father is a very strong believer in knowing where your dollar comes from," she said in a recent interview. "We know what it takes to produce a product in the agricultural field, and obviously we need these workers."

But to farm-worker advocates, Bowen's delicate dual role as gatekeeper for farm-related legislation and target of farm-worker complaints illustrates the problem agricultural workers face whenever they want anything from Tallahassee.

Agriculture — the business that contributes \$62 billion to Florida's economy every year — also contributes millions of dollars to the campaigns of farmers seeking office and politicians who pass the laws that regulate that industry.

The investment — about \$35 million in statewide races in the last eight years — pays off. Half of the 14



DANIEL HULTS/PHOTO EDITOR

Rep. Marty Bowen: The House Agriculture Committee chairman is a wealthy citrus heiress. She says her conservative supporters elected her to pare down regulation, not create more.

members of the House Agriculture Committee are growers. Florida's agriculture commissioner, Charles H. Bronson, is a rancher. And when the largest pool of agricultural donors — the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association — recently held its annual convention at the Ritz-Carlton in Key Biscayne, the governor and the chairs of the House and Senate agriculture committees all made appearances.

Sen. Nancy Argenziano, R-Crystal River, chair of the Senate committee on agriculture, summed up her attitude toward government's role in the industry when she accepted the FFA's Lawmaker-of-the-Year Award: "The essence of freedom is the limitation of government."

When compared with Big Agriculture's gifts, contributions from farm workers and advocate groups are almost nonexistent.

"It's David and Goliath," said former state representative and now West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel. "In politics — always — whoever has the money is the one who has the power. That's just the way it is."

Take the case of House Bill 1293, sponsored by Rep. Frank Peterman Jr., D-St. Petersburg, a Baptist preacher-turned-politician and the farm workers' strong ally in Tallahassee. Peterman said it took him a few years to understand how powerful agriculture is and that diplomacy is everything.

"An influential agricultural representative can make a statement about how a certain policy might hinder the industry, and the machine begins to turn," Peterman said. "If you're going against that machine, you better have some armor on."

Peterman figured he wouldn't need any armor because House Bill 1293, which required growers to provide workers with precautionary information about pesticides, was just a reannouncement of a similar bill that had passed unanimously in 1994 but expired or "sunsetted" in 1998.

"It was already on the books," Peterman said. "I was like, guys, look, this is stuff we should be doing without even thinking twice. Let's take care of some health issues for

human beings."

But Bowen said she was at a loss to see how the bill would translate to safer working conditions. Federal regulations already spell out safety procedures. Peterman's pesticide bill would only create a state law that mirrors an existing federal law, Bowen complained.

Pointing at a bookshelf lined with Florida law books, Bowen said her conservative supporters elected her to whittle away at regulation, not create more.

"Look at these statute books," she said. "I would love to see some of them disappear."

The life of a farm worker bill is not easy. There are unwritten rules, long-standing grudges and feudalistic customs to consider when dealing with "the ag boys," veteran farm-worker lobbyist Karen Woodall said.

Woodall, who has been lobbying for farm-worker issues for 23 years, realized there were "all kinds of weird dynamics" going on when the pesticide bill was assigned to five different committees. The more committee hearings, the more hoops to jump through.

Woodall saw it as retribution for introducing what she dubbed "the slavery bill." That bill would have given workers the right to sue a grower in state court when the contractor middleman cheated workers on their pay. The bill's nickname infuriated the industry.

"There's an unwritten edict that you're not allowed to pass more than one positive thing in a session," Woodall said. "So, we had a routine bill and an extremely controversial bill. There was no reason for the pesticide bill not to pass. They retaliated on the pesticide bill because of the slavery bill."

Not true, says Butch Calhoun, the chief lobbyist for the largest grower organization in Florida — the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association. Calhoun has shaggy hair, pointy-toed boots, a deep Southern drawl and an unforgiving memory. It is his responsibility to make sure that pro-ag bills get written, introduced, properly massaged and passed and anti-ag bills get stopped.

As for the pesticide bill, it wasn't so much that Calhoun opposed the bill's content as its sponsor, Peterman. Overall, the "ag industry doesn't have a problem with the pesticide bill," Calhoun said. But Calhoun has a big problem with Peterman.

Calhoun's grudge goes back a few years, when Peterman introduced a bill that prohibited employers from deducting money for tools, housing, clothing and picking sacks from farm-worker paychecks. As Calhoun remembers, the "bill wasn't going anywhere" and then the FFA stepped in and helped pass it. Afterward, Calhoun remembers Peterman ripping the farmers in interviews with reporters.

"When a Baptist preacher lies..." Calhoun said, twisting his head to the side, raising his eyebrows. "You don't get bills passed by pissing people off."

When Peterman introduced the pesticide bill this year, Calhoun was

## Farmers make up powerful committee

Half the 14 members of the House Agriculture Committee are farmers or have worked in agriculture. Combined, they have raked in nearly \$480,000 in campaign contributions from agribusiness. The other seven members — who have no ties to agriculture — have received a cumulative \$64,000.

**JOE SPRATT**, R-Salting, former chairman of the committee  
Industry contributions: \$148,491  
Occupation: Development

**Sponsored:** Controversial 2001 bill permitting the experimental storage of untreated water, including farm runoff, in 300 aquifers near Lake Okechobee.

**DWIGHT STANSEL**, D-Live Oak  
Industry contributions: \$78,075  
Occupation: Farmer, businessman, nurseryman. Stansel grows tobacco and lumber and raises poultry on 800 acres in Suwanee County. In 2002, Stansel earned \$178,528 from Dwight Stansel Farm and Nursery in Welton.

**RALPH POPPEL**, R-Titusville  
Industry contributions: \$76,442  
Occupation: Manufacturing/Fleet-On-Boat Trailers. Former citrus owner. Sponsored: Bill repealing counties from duplicating state, federal or water management district regulations pertaining to agricultural lands.

**GREG EVERS**, R-Milton  
Industry contributions: \$57,665  
Occupation: Strawberry farmer and small businessman  
Sponsored: 2001 bill to shield farmers' operational records from

**Senate committee and contributions**  
**J.D. ALEXANDER**, R-Winter Haven, member of Senate Committee on Agriculture and grandson of Ben Hill Griffin Jr.  
Industry contributions: \$70,683  
Occupation: Citrus grower, Bryan Paul Citrus, Labelle and Seacrest Highland Groves, Lake Wales

**PAUL A. DOCKERY**, R-Lakeland, member of Senate Committee on Agriculture  
Industry contributions: \$52,916  
Occupation: Insurer, citrus and cattle  
Sponsored: The 2003 Ag Lands and Practices Act, which bans counties from passing laws pertaining to growers when other regulations apply.

ready. Actually, there wasn't much he had to do because, as Calhoun remembers, Peterman didn't push the bill. No one visited the committee members or chairs, Calhoun said. And Calhoun wasn't about to help.

"I can't educate them on how to pass a bill," Calhoun said. "It's not my job."

Argenziano, head of the Senate committee, which did pass the pesticide bill, agreed with Calhoun: "They probably didn't work it as they should have. Learning the process can be very frustrating."

Bowen also blames Peterman. As for the "anti-slavery" bill, which would have effectively barred the defense that Bowen's company used in 1991, just the mention of it makes her cringe. The slavery bill never made it out of Bowen's committee. Late in the session, she offered to sign the necessary paperwork to allow it to skip her committee so it could reach the floor faster, but by then, it was too late. Even if it had been taken up, its chances would have been slim, she said.

"Slavery was done away with in this country in 1865," she said. "It's not that I wouldn't hear it. I asked the sponsor to come and see me and talk about it, and he never did."

Rep. Richard Maschek, D-DeLray Beach, is a committee member who spent most of his adult life in agriculture, growing ornamental plants. The "anti-slavery" bill doesn't seem

public scrutiny in an effort to encourage reluctant growers to comply with environmental regulations, such as proper handling of fertilizers.

**MARTY BOWEN**, R-Winter Haven, chairman of the committee  
Industry contributions: \$56,619  
Occupation: Citrus grower. In 2002, Bowen earned \$135,000 from her interests in three groves, \$89,000 Bowen Bros. Inc.; \$65,000 J-L Citrus; less than \$1,000 Jacoby Tucker Grove Co.

**RICHARD MASCHEK**, D-DeLray Beach  
Industry contributions: \$40,395  
Occupation: Agriculture. Retired as general manager of Mazzanti Farms.

**BAXTER TROUTMAN**, R-Winter Haven, cousin of U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris and grandson of citrus and cattle baron Ben Hill Griffin Jr.  
Industry contributions: \$21,600  
Occupation: Citrus grower (122 acres in central Florida) and director of the labor staffing and transport companies operating in Florida, Georgia and North Carolina.  
Sponsored: Bill creating a third-degree felony offense for breaking or damaging a fence used to contain animals.



**Bronson gets most money**

Of all Florida politicians, Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson gets the most money. He runs the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, which regulates the industry.  
Industry Contributions: \$564,175  
Agriculture ties: \$1 million partner in a cattle ranch in St. Cloud

fair because "the farmer has already paid somebody," he said. Still, Maschek knows field workers are always at "the short end of the stick."

"It's hard, and it shouldn't be that way. But I'm not sure the farmer should be responsible for something that occurs somewhere else," he said. "It's a bad situation, and I'm not sure how to handle it."

Peterman has refuted the pesticide bill. He and Bowen still haven't talked. However, the lawyer behind the bill did talk to her.

Tania Galloni, of the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project, waited patiently in the lobby of the Clewiston Inn last month for a chance to ask Bowen about rescinding the bill for a hearing in the upcoming session. Bowen explained she had "issues" with the bill. She complained that Peterman hadn't personally come to her.

"[And] he comes and talks to me..." Yale Galloni — class of 2002 Yale Law School, *summa cum laude* Bryn Mawr, fluent in Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese — said the 60-mile drive from her office in Lake World to talk to Bowen was enlightening. Galloni had thought she understood the process for getting a bill passed. If's the politics she didn't understand.

"It may be the 'issues,' but it sounds like it's personal," Galloni said. "She said, 'You need to come to me.'"

*Staff writer Jim Ash contributed to this story.*

## U.S. 'guest worker' visa a pitted road not taken

### More are illegal now

H2 visas are issued to foreign workers so they can work legally in the United States. Many immigration experts see visas as part of the answer to the worst some migrant worker situation that sees hundreds die every year trying to sneak into the U.S.

But very few U.S. firms that employ migrants, including in Florida, use H2 programs.

According to Tom Canabuate, a diplomat at the U.S. consulate in Monterrey, 66,379 such visas were issued in Mexico in the last fiscal year ending 24,946 H2A visas for agricultural workers and 41,433 H2B visas for other jobs. Only 2,423 of the total number were for work in Florida.

So why not use H2 workers, especially in agriculture?

"Employers have always insisted that H2A is too much of a hassle, makes too many demands on them," says attorney Greg Schell of the Migrant Farmworker

The percentage of migrant farm workers who are in the United States illegally has grown in the last decade.

Workers here illegally

1993 62.8%  
2000 66.6%

Source: Labor Department's National Agricultural Workers Survey 2000

SNAP GRAPHIC

### Justice Project

The program requires employers to pay workers' travel expenses into and out of the U.S. and to pay a wage commensurate with that of Americans working in the industry. Employers also must provide free housing for employees.

But employers aren't the only ones who have problems with the H2 program.



**LIANE WHITES**  
Staff Photographer

### A legal way to the U.S.:

Outside the U.S., Consulate in Monterrey, Mexico, Ana Dierling, a recruiter for Labor Solutions in Denver, waits for her workers to get their visas. The H2 visa — or temporary "guest worker permit" — allows Mexican laborers to take jobs in the United States.

"There have been awful abuses of H2A workers over the years," says Schell. The visas allow a migrant to work only for the employer who sponsors the visa. If the worker is abused in any way, he can quit, but must leave the country. Many quit with abuse, including cheating on wages, rather than report their bosses.

This year, efforts have been made to

amend the H2 program. Republicans and Democrats in Congress, as well as growers and farm workers, reached an agreement that would streamline the H2 process. Wages will be frozen for three years, but workers will be able to take employers to federal court. The agreement could be voted on in Congress by early next year.

— Reported by John Lanzetta and Christine Sogkova





LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

**A patriot in the fields:** Women pick tomatoes in a field outside of Wimauma. For one laborer, the Stars and Stripes serves as sun protection. Some of that appreciation may be due to those Florida farmers who take pains to treat their field hands fairly, handling the thing and payrolls themselves and even offering benefits packages.

## Growers — long stigmatized — step up to weed their image

By CHRISTINE STARPLETON  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

To be a farmer in Florida is to be a hostage to 54 minutes of black-and-white film broadcast 43 years ago.

"We're still suffering under the Edward R. Murrow syndrome," says Jay Taylor, a tomato farmer whose family owns 14 farms in Virginia and Florida that employ more than 1,000 workers. "The *Harvest of Shame* is still on our backs."

Even though Taylor was in kindergarten and half the state's population hadn't been born when the documentary aired in 1960, farmers throughout the state — regardless of their crop or size of farm — still feel they all get lumped into the same mold: the merciless, profit-driven hand barn.

"That's why our family has tried so hard to get as far from that as we possibly can," Taylor says. His farm, like many in the state, has given thousands of dollars to migrant farm-worker charities. It provides grant housing for its workers, handles its own payroll to ensure field hands are paid on time and transports workers only in safe, company-owned vehicles operated by licensed drivers.

And they are not alone. A Duda & Sons, based in Oviedo with fields in Belle Glade, offers its workers — including migrants — free medical insurance, free day care, free transportation, a 401(k) plan, sick-leave and vacation time, holiday pay, life insurance and housing.

"We don't want to be viewed as an exception to the rule," says Susan Howard, Duda spokeswoman. "There are others."

Drew Duda, a 43-year-old fourth-generation farmer, has no memory of *Harvest of Shame*. But he does remember the 1970 redraft that revisited conditions in Belle Glade, quoting Duda family members.

"I watched my father's reaction, he was horrified," Duda recalls. "To take one or two and say all the apples in the basket are that way just isn't fair."

But the industry remained mum.

"At that time, the industry went through the ostrich syndrome," Duda says. "We just didn't reply."

Even today, many growers are reluctant to admit there's an image problem, says Ray Ghiner, spokesman for the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, the largest grower organization in the state. "They're numb to it. It's been going on so long."

Farmers are not good self-promoters. Their good



**Drew Duda:** A Duda & Sons offers free medical insurance and other benefits to field hands.

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**'Anytime you have abuses, it's because the farmer has abdicated responsibility to a contractor. Every employee should get a check from the farmer.'**

JAY TAYLOR  
Tomato farmer

deeds often go unsung. The EFVA recently held a silent auction at its annual convention and raised \$73,000 for the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, which provides day care for children. No major Florida newspapers publicized the donation.

The EFVA also offers classes on handling journalists and earlier this year published an article in its monthly magazine on how to talk to reporters.

Some farmers, like Taylor, are now speaking publicly about changes that need to be made. Streamline the H2A guest worker program and encourage farmers to handle their own payrolls, rather than turn over that responsibility to a labor contractor, Taylor suggests.

"Anytime you have abuses, it's because the farmer has abdicated responsibility to a contractor. Every employee should get a check from the farmer," Taylor thinks the solution to the illegal work force is simple: Make the workers legal.

"The only way to figure out how many illegal employees are in the fields is to have an amnesty," he says. Let them become legal.

No one knows exactly how many problem growers and contractors there are, but the EFVA recognizes that we have to take a more aggressive approach. "Part of the problem is the growers themselves," Ghiner says. "There's been a tradition of not interfering with each other's business. But the responsible farmers need to educate the other brethren in the industry who are presenting a bad image."

"There are some bad actors out there, but it's not indicative of the industry," Ghiner says. "It's really a very small fraction."

But the bad press hurts, especially for farmers who treat their workers fairly.

"It's embarrassing to be at a social event after one of these stories, and everyone looks at you, like you're a shuntard," says Taylor, who also sits on the Florida Housing Finance Corp., which awards grants for low-income and migrant housing. "It's a very complicated labor market. In the end, there's no way we can mistreat an employee and make money."

## In their own words

### MIGRANT WORKER: *Cayetano de Jesus*

"I make 45 cents for picking a 32-pound bucket of tomatoes," he says, which is 1.4 cents per pound. "But when I go to the store, I pay sometimes \$2 for a pound of tomatoes."

De Jesus says he has no idea what labor contractors make, "but since they are my bosses, I assume they make more than I do."

As for growers: "I've never met a grower. There was a guy who told me once he was an owner, but I'm not sure. He spoke Spanish, and I don't really think he was."

De Jesus knows who the buyers are — Publix, McDonalds, Tropicana. He sees them of the profit is theirs. He does know that at all levels "bosses" say they can't afford to pay more.

Asked how the system could be improved, he shrugs. "I guess only the president of the United States could change all this."



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### LABOR CONTRACTOR: *Jan Pablo Flores*

"It's always the contractors and growers who get blamed for bad conditions, and it isn't like that," says Flores. "The price paid to pickers for large tomatoes has stayed the same for about 15 years, but it has stayed the same to contractors as well. Inflation has been maybe 3 percent per year, so we've seen prices go up 45 percent or so and we make the same rate."

As for growers, "They have to pay to prepare the land, laying the plastic, tilling the tomatoes, fertilizing, picking, handling, packing . . . and they have to clean the land at the end. They have a lot of overhead."

He says large buyers — such as supermarkets — also would have trouble raising what they pay growers. "You do that, and foreign countries will have their product in here and undersell you."

Flores called for better inspection of work sites to end abuses of workers. He says some contractors cheat workers out of hours. Some of his own employees told *The Post* that Flores is guilty of that as well, but he denies it.

He figures the only way workers will earn more is if consumers agree to pay more in order to improve the lives of migrant workers. "I'll tell you this, these people work harder than any American in the U.S."

### GROWER: *John Thomas*

"There should be an organized effort to allow people to sign up and come in to work in this country," says Thomas, 83, who came to Florida in 1945, when land "was very, very cheap."

New Thomas Produce Co. is the largest vegetable grower in the state, with 13,000 acres in four counties, including Palm Beach.

"You have farmers selling to developers now," he says. "You can count Florida tomato farmers of any significance on your fingers."

Thomas relies on contractors to hire pickers, and, in the wake of labor violations, a Thomas compliance supervisor monitors those contractors' payrolls and practices.

"It's a tough business . . . The labor force is changing," Thomas said. "We worked at keeping as many Americans working for us as possible. (Migrant labor) was a fill-in thing in the beginning, and pretty quick it became the main source."



### PROCESSOR: *Tropicana*

"Some of the abuses in the employment of migrant labor certainly trouble us," says Tropicana communications director Kristine Nickel. "We are working with our own growers to prevent abuses."

Tropicana took notice after U.S. District Judge K. Michael Moore sentenced three citrus contractors to lengthy prison terms last year for enslaving migrant workers.

"We believe our growers have good intent in terms of how workers are treated, but we are investigating," says Nickel, who notes that Tropicana, which buys a third of Florida's citrus, does not own groves and does not employ pickers.

State and federal laws prohibit the abuses that surfaced in the 2002 case, "but it seems that the feds and the state don't have the resources to enforce the laws . . . We are not police in terms of the migrant issue."

Nickel said Tropicana has a clause in its contracts with Florida growers that says if a grower is "implicated in migrant labor abuse," Tropicana "would suspend our contract with them."



### AGRICULTURE COMMISSIONER: *Charles Bryson*

"A lot of people are acting as if the farmer is the one causing all the problems . . . We have to come up with a national solution, we know we have to do that."

The 54-year-old rancher and former GOP state senator says the best way to protect workers "is to give them the papers to start with."

"The problem we're having, quite frankly, a lot of the people are so afraid of being sent back that they're not willing to come forward and let us know what's going on. We know we have to protect those who are trying to make a living in this state. We don't handle labor issues . . . because that's not our purview . . . If our people think there is a violation that's not in our jurisdiction, we'll contact the appropriate agency."

### FARM WORKER ADVOCATE: *Lucas Benitez*

"The worker carries all the weight of the system," says Benitez, 27, a leader of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers who shared the 2003 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for exposing slavery.

"The contractors are the immediate employers of the workers, but don't care what the workers make, only what they themselves make." He says that is, in part, because contractors have also seen little or no increase in pay in years.

"As for the growers, they are only interested at harvesting at their lowest cost and they don't care about the human cost. They don't care if there is slavery. Most times, growers don't even know their workers."

But Benitez says the greatest responsibility for low wages and no benefits lies with large buyers, in particular restaurant chains, such as Taco Bell and McDonalds, and supermarkets. "These industries have not taken the responsibility to know the conditions of the workers who supply products to their businesses."





Roberto Rivera Gamez



Serafin Rivera Gamez

**Pursuing a lead on field work:** The brothers Rivera were family men, serious sorts, the townspeople of Pozos, Mexico, remember. The two homebodies, neither drinkers nor drinkers, set out for the farm fields of the United States believing it was their responsibility. They could not provide what they wished for their families by staying in their and Mexican town.



PAUL J. MILENTZ/S&P PhotoGraphic

**'I was so scared when he left':** Marta del Carmen Rico struggles for composure after the death of her husband, Serafin Rivera Gamez. He left for the United States shortly after the third birthday of his daughter, Kimberly (near left).



PAUL J. MILENTZ/S&P PhotoGraphic

A small town in grief: Mourners accompany the funeral procession for three of 19 would-be migrant workers who died after being locked in the back of a tractor-trailer in May.

# Sealed trailer in Texas pays in widows' tears

*Three family members from Pozos, Mexico, died trapped in an airless semi on their way to Florida fields.*

By CHRISTINE EVANS  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

POZOS, Mexico — In the end, they come home. They come home, many do, because they have wives and children here, dependents who need to send their men north in order to survive, but who pine for their return nonetheless.

They come home, many, to touch a child's cheek, or to bury parents worn out from work, or lack of it. They come home to put tin roofs on tiny concrete houses, or to help a younger brother open a grocery.

They come home to buy a ragged parcel of land with American dollars they carried back in the cuffs of their pants; or to pay the school tuition for a particularly promising child; or to buy a toilet bowl for the family outhouse.

Yes, it's true, they come back for the plumbing. This — all of this, the plumbing, the house, the children, the education — is precisely the point.

You go to make a better life, and you come home to live that life — except sometimes you don't.

See FUNERAL, next page ▶



**Proud father:** A family photo shows Hector Ramirez Reches holding his son Hector Isaac Ramirez Almanza at home in Pozos, Mexico. Hector was 33 and the father of four when he made the fatal journey north.



PAUL J. MILENTZ/S&P PhotoGraphic

Mourning her late husband, Hector, Laura Almanza holds her 10-month-old son Hector Isaac, who suffers from a respiratory ailment. The family had believed money for medicine would be one blessing of Florida farm work.





No stranger to grief, the widow Gamez bears loss with grace: Adelina Gamez, 75, lost two sons in the Victoria, Texas, catastrophe in May. The family matriarch once had

15 children. Years ago, she lost five daughters to illness when she had no money for medicine. Around her is the family home in Pozos, Mexico.

PHIL L. WALLACE/Staff Photographer

## 'As a Mexican mother, you find yourself hoping your sons will go to the United States. You also find yourself praying they won't go.' — ADELINA GAMEZ

### ► FUNERAL from previous page

Sometimes you come home the way the brothers Rivera came home, after "the tragedy" in Victoria, Texas as it has come to be called, for lack of a more powerful word. How do you describe the discovery of perhaps 100 people or more — uncounted men, women, children from Mexico and countries farther south — stuffed and suffocating in the back of an airless tractor-trailer rig?

What do you say about the 19 deaths? About the 5-year-old boy found in his father's arms?

How do you talk about it without trivializing it?

"Write all the words you want," an old woman here says. "But you cannot describe the way it is for us."

It was, we know, the trip from hell. Five men from Pozos and many others from elsewhere traveled up this vast country's heart to the border, where they relied on "coyotes" — or, in some cases, their own footwork and faith — to cross. Then, in safe houses at the very tip of south Texas, they waited for instructions about how best to move away from the border and deeper into the state.

At some point, they stopped being human beings and became simply cargo, no different from the tomatoes they had come to pick.

The brothers — Serafin Rivera Gamez, 32, and Roberto Rivera Gamez, 28 — had good reason to go on this trip. It was simply this: Not going seemed riskier.

The road north was, they knew, at once dangerous and indispensable, a chance at death, yes, but also a chance at life.

So they told their families goodbye, and they packed their things, and they left. And then, days later, their sister, Maria Francisca Rivera, living in Florida, received their last phone call. It came from Harlingen, Texas.

Serafin told her they would be moving through Texas soon, in a truck headed for Houston. He had hoped for a small truck, filled with just five people, but the smuggler changed the plan.

He and Roberto would be going with scores of others, in the back of a crowded tractor-trailer rig.

This worried him.

It worried Maria Francisca more.

She said, *It's dangerous. The truck will have air holes and air conditioning.*

Later, from the TV news and the rumor mill, the family in Pozos would pick up bits and pieces of the last terrible hours: The doomed migrants had tried to send distress signals to passing motorists. They broke through the metal. They pushed a tail light and waved a handanna through the hole.

One passenger even managed a cellular call to 911, but, unbelievably, it went unheeded when a Spanish-speaking dispatcher was not on hand to translate.

The truck driver, Tyrone Williams, since arrested, ditched the rig in a Texas crossroads town called Victoria. When at last sheriff's deputies, tipped off by a truck stop cashier, finally opened up the back, the people tumbled out.

Some were dead, some were dying, and some — the lucky ones — vanished like ghosts into the dark savanna.

This is the story of Victoria, Texas, and it is the story now too of Pozos.

The children here can tell it to you by heart, though they would rather not.



FRANK TILLEY/The Associated Press

**Sense of death in Texas:** Texas criminal investigators collect evidence from the tractor-trailer found abandoned in south Texas on May 14. As many as 100 men, women, children from Mexico and countries farther south were discovered suffocating in the back of the airless rig where they had been packed. Nineteen people died.

"I was so scared when he left for the border," says Maria del Carmen Rico, 30, once Serafin's wife, now his widow. It is the day after the funeral and her long hair falls forward with each sob.

"When he left, it hurt inside my heart."

**Pozos a place of arid beauty**

The people of Pozos filled the streets for the funerals of three dead men, the brothers Rivera and their neighbor, relative by marriage, Hector Ramirez Robles. He went with them, and like them, he did not come back alive.

This is a place of arid beauty, where green and brown mountains rise from the clay earth as if God himself had pushed them with his fingertips. In the dry hills that surround the larger city of Juvenalia Rosa, a set-back-in-time kind of place where you occasionally see a pig being walked down the street on a leash, the pastel churches offer hope when the hand does not.

The Rivera brothers had poor men's résumés, with empty places where their schooling might have been. Instead, they went to work as boys, pulling corn and plucking weeds, then learning to run a hand plow behind a mule in the hard dry hills of their home state, Guanajuato.

But you need rain in summer to harvest vegetables in winter. And sometimes the rain does not come. This is one reason so many leave. And it is the lack of rain, too, that can hurt the specialty trade so many in this town take up — well-digging, the occupation for which Pozos is named.

If you are a well-digger, you go out to other towns, even other states, and get on with a boss who will pay you to dig deep into the earth so that other people might drink from your labor. Serafin and Roberto had such jobs. But the trouble with wells is, you need water, and lately the land has parched.

Still, family members said, the brothers might have made a living if only their boss had paid them. Often he didn't, and they had to track him down to get their \$10 for the week, or whatever small sum he owed them.

They had tired of that.

They wanted to build more rooms onto

their tiny houses in the family compound. They wanted medicine for when their mother became ill. They wanted — now this was an almost unimaginable dream — to educate their children past grade school.

That is why they set out for the States and the Florida farming town of Wimauma, where their sister, Maria Francisca and her husband, Lucio Leon-Gametz, had made a good life, with legal jobs and school for their young daughter.

They were serious sorts, the brothers Rivera, not drinkers or drivers, more like homophobes, and so once they left, people here predicted they would certainly succeed — their mother most of all.

The brothers were devoted to Adelina Gamez, a widow of eight years and, at 75, the family matriarch. She is a woman so tiny and well-weathered — yet dignified — that you imagine she just stepped from the pages of a Mexican travel guide.

Adelina had 15 children once. She lost five daughters years ago when illness swept the pueblo and she had no money for medicine.

Now — her two sons. In the shadow of the simple family camp, where the dead brothers' painted their small homes in cheerful pinks and blues, Adelina Gamez draws a tissue from the pocket of her checked apron.

There is pain in every line of her wrinkled face. "As a Mexican mother," she says, "you find yourself hoping your sons will go to the United States."

She pauses. "You also find yourself praying they won't go. As a mother, it is hard to know what to hope for."

**Speechless in grief and shock**

On the day Cecelia Gamez found out her husband was dead, she was three months pregnant.

She and Roberto already had a 3-year-old son, Juan, and it was for his growing family that Roberto wanted to earn U.S. dollars to expand upon his small house.

When Cecelia learned the news, she took to bed immediately, in the home of her devastated parents, and on the dusty

streets people said she could not talk at all for all her grief and shock. They prayed for the baby inside her.

Serafin, the older brother, had children, too. His son, Alejandro, 8, was his greatest pride. He bragged about the boy, and spoiled him, and played with him, and when he crossed the border, he had in mind that he would save money to educate his son so that the boy, when he became a man, would not have to cross some day himself.

Serafin was a veteran of the border; this was his second trip. The first time he went, in 2000, he stayed two years, working every job he could find, for good bosses and bad, until he returned just before Christmas last year to see his family, which included a new daughter.

When he left again with Roberto and Hector, that daughter, Kimberly, had just turned 3. It was her dream to have a birthday cake.

He told her, *Not this time, little one. But I will find a job when I reach the United States, I will find a job and send the money, and then your mother will buy a cake for you.*

When Kimberly heard her father had died in the country across the border, she clawed at her eyes in her grief, damaging one so badly she had to wear a patch.

Anyone who says the children of Mexico get used to their dadless crossing cannot have witnessed a thing such as this. Serafin's widow, Maria del Carmen, stares quietly at her wedding ring, and when she talks about what happened, she cannot stop crying.

She does not know what she will do now to keep the family going, but because she is Mexican, she is tough and she will find a way.

On the street around the corner is the family Hector left behind. The Ramirez clan and the Rivera clan are related by marriage, and so their lives in this simple and beautiful town are entwined, now more than ever.

Hector was 33 and the father of four when he crossed, and when his wife, Laura Almanza, found out his name topped the list of the probable dead, their 10-month-old son, Hector Isaac, had just taken ill with a respiratory infection.

It would have been good to get him to a specialist, she says, but at 500 pesos — 50 dollars — that was an impossibility. And so, the day after the three men were honored and then lowered into the ground, Laura made her rounds, trying to collect enough pesos from friends and relatives to pay for a trip to the regular doctor.

And if she collects it?

"That will take care of one problem I have, just now... but not all the others to come."

Her daughter, Maria Guadalupe wears eyeglasses and the prescription changes frequently, so there will be that continuing expense.

Her husband had taken out a loan to open a small grocery in front of her little house with blue shutters, and now there is a great sum to pay back.

So much in life is unknown. One day, she fears, her only son, Hector Isaac, will grow up and do what many men here must do: cross.

"I will sit him down and say just three words. *Don't do it.*"

### We have been born to migrate!

In the end, they come home.

On May 23, a Friday far too bright for

See FUNERAL, next page ►



THE REAL COST



PAUL L. MILITZ/Starr Photographer

**A daughter without her dad:** Kimberly Rivera Rico, 3, stares out the front door of her family's Pozos, Mexico, home. The bright bastles of the residences belie the desperation of the people. Kimberly lost her father, Seranin Rivera Gomez, in the Texas disaster in May. He left shortly after pledging to send money so she could have her great desire, a birthday cake.

When Kimberly heard her father had died, she clawed at her eyes in grief. Anyone who thinks Mexican children get used to suffering hasn't seen this.

# 'More work, and a fair way to cross'

► **FUNERAL** from previous page  
the occasion, the people mourned the man who chased the dream and lost.

The wakes went on all night, with guests resting in bright plastic chairs in the rustic courtyards of the families, and then the first of the services began in the small church here, and the parish priest tried to find the right words to comfort not just the families but all the people who had lost men in earlier trips, and also those who surely would lose them in the migration to come.

*Hemos nacido para ser peregrinos y, por lo tanto, para morir*, the priest said. *We have been born to be pilgrims, and therefore to die.*

The church fell silent as the people listened, and after the service, many traveled the 10 kilometers to the city cemetery in Juventino. A caravan of cars and trucks and old station wagons marked *funerales* accompanied the three bodies in their coffins, two white, one black.

At the cemetery, where tall white

monuments pressed into the sky, the sunlight caught the chapel cross, casting a shadow in precisely the place the pallbearers walked.

Three men, one dream, a thousand mourners, that's how it was that day.

In a small dank chapel, the white-robed priest sprinkled holy water and said the words he thought might help — but what do you say to God at a time like this? The widows fell over the coffins and wailed so hard the echo bounced off the walls and out to the crowd huddled in the courtyard.

Everybody came that day, young, old, ill, crippled, new mothers with babies to breast and grandmothers in aprons carrying fruit and water.

Everywhere you could hear the soft murmurs of toddlers as they played with bright pink soda straws; you could see the American flags emblazoned on Old Navy T-shirts worn by fashionable young girls; you could chat with the moms who carried Mickey Mouse bags but had never been to Disney. Then, when the pallbearers were

ready, the children of the town climbed up the cemetery stones to peer over the scalloped, red brick wall and down into the large hole where the bodies would go.

Under the bright sun, amid the press of 1,000 bodies, the grieving families watched the boxes lowered one by one into the same hard earth that does not easily give up her crops.

Again, the widows wailed and fell, and again the town's tough young men wiped away tears as their girlfriends held them by the shoulders.

The young girls with long hair came and laid flowers on the graves, and they would keep coming until it was too dark to see and their mothers worried they might trip on the rubble in the dry field.

The next day's papers would say that more people from Guanajuato chase the dream than from any other state in Mexico.

The papers would say even older people are going now, even educated people, because they can't get work at home. What happened, the papers and the

people would then ask to the the talk of a loosening border, a more humane crossing? What happened to the notion that if a person wants to better himself, there ought to be a way?

Here in Pozos, and in the city of Juventino, and in the state of Guanajuato, and in all the states beyond, the papers would be full of how Mexicans hope for a change in American policy regarding the people who chase the dream to pick the food that lands on the dinner tables in the great U.S.A.

"When you talk to Mr. Bush," suggested Guadberto Leon, the brother-in-law of Hector Ramirez, "tell him we need more work, and a fair way to cross. Tell him that for us."

"Tell him we do not want to die any more."

It might be a complicated matter, but on this day, with the funeral lingering, the widows wails still audible out on the dirt streets, it seemed very simple to the people who had just tossed their flowers on three fresh graves.

SUNDAY

**USED AND ABUSED:** How migrants live in Florida

Locked up, cheated out of pay, robbed of their names, stacked 10 to a room.

MONDAY

**HOW THEY COME:** Desperate journey

Driven by poverty, a crossing that can kill, a broken dream.

TODAY

**THE REAL COST:** Fresh from Florida

A favored industry, a society burdened, a deadly cycle.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

For nine months, *The Palm Beach Post* explored the roots of modern-day slavery. Reporters and photographers traveled to desolate 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.

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