

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

THE REV. NOEL MCGRATH

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

The city of 3,813 (many more in the harvest season, when the Mexicans come through to do the work) has quite a few success stories, and if you pass through for more than a minute, people here will be happy to tell you about them.

Maria Sanchez, whose parents used to work in the fields, is the new PTA president. She works in the police department.

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

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

That's the good news.

This is the bad:

When the city fills up for the harvest and coyotes dump out their human cargo at the church doors — disoriented men with swollen feet, thirsty from days of border crossing — there are not nearly enough places for them to stay, and so they sandwich into rickety trailers and houses that literally lean with the wind.

Some men — hundreds of them — report to heavy-handed crew bosses. They earn paychecks they cannot read. They prop chairs against refrigerator doors to keep them closed, so their food won't spoil. They ride in unsafe vans to jobs in distant places, and when they get in accidents, which they frequently do, given the condition of the vans, they give the hospital assumed names.

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

The trailers are cramped. The roofs leak. The floorboards bend.

The little girls, with no place to play, keep their secondhand dollhouses not in fancy bedrooms but in bathrooms.

"Come," one says, "I will show you."

And there, by the rusted sink, in a tiny bathroom where the plumbing smells and the tub leaks, is the wonderful big home of her imagination.

Arriving, 'they are just totally lost'

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

Tucked deep into the lush groves of Indian River County, this sweet citrus spot 90 miles south of Disney has an ever-so-sleepy reputation. But in terms of modern labor trends, it is fully up to date: The place is full of cheap Mexican labor.

Fairness calls for a disclaimer here. Not everybody is miserable. Just the opposite.

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

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

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

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

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

The church secretary, Carolina Cardona, keeps a file drawer full of papers and notes documenting the stray workers dropped here by coyotes. She writes down the name of the volunteer who gives them shelter or drives them to the bus station, so they can move on to a town where they might know somebody.

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

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

"That's exactly right," says Joel Tyson, the former city mayor.

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

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

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

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

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

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



Migrant housing provider: World War II veteran Frank Clavelin (above) owns Frank's Trailer Park in Fellsmere. A typical trailer at Frank's is pictured at left. The city shut down the park a year ago for code violations. "It was a bit of a mixed blessing," says a local clergyman. "After it shut, a lot of people had nowhere to go."

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

But if he works for a scoundrel — well, that is another story altogether.

At the tail end of the last harvest season, in a small white house with sky-blue trim, a picker, Juve Ronquillo, sipped lemonade.

"It is a great pressure until you pay off your debt," he said. "Once you do, your life is better."

"But until then, you are an owned man."

Or woman.

'How, God, will I pay the rent?'

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

That person will say, "OK, it will just take a minute," and they will mean it.

If your guide is Marta Gracia, a family support specialist for the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, she might sprinkle in some personal information on her tour.

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

Gracia's parents came from a small pueblo. "In 1967, there was a rumor that if you had a baby in the United States, your whole family could become legal."

"So my mother got pregnant in Mexico, then got a visa, like a shopping visa, and then she crossed the border and had me. Everybody in my town in Mexico was getting pregnant at that time, just so they could come to McAllen, Texas, and have

a job well done."

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

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

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

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

Now everything is OK. Except her husband, Teodoro, is sick.

"Still, he must work to support us," she says. "Sometimes there are no good choices, just existing."

Good people ease the misery

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

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

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

They will read to the elementary children struggling with English. They will tutor adults on the fine points of ordering from McDonald's (so as not to embarrass their all-American teens). They will even write grants to the wealthy John's Island Foundation so that the adult education center next to the church can purchase a bank of computers and several nights a week the town's poor migrant women can bend over them — learning office skills.

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

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

"Everybody knows these people are here illegally, performing a job no one else will do. Yet look how they must live. There is no justice to it at all."