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New Migrant Trails Take Latinos to Remote Towns

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The journey that took me and seven migrants from the borderlands of South Texas to a chicken factory in the Ozarks was not an isolated adventure.

It's been made by at least 1,200 workers at the Hudson Foods factory in Noel, Mo., and repeated by many thousands more at poultry plants in Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi and North Carolina. Just about anywhere there's a menial or dangerous job to be done — the Southern Pride catfish plant in Greensboro, Ala., the IBP slaughterhouse in Storm Lake, Iowa, the Opryland Hotel in Nashville — Latino migrants have been sought out to do it cheaply and with little fuss.

"Tons of people are being recruited to these little towns up North, basically to do the dirty work that the locals won't," said Nick Flores, director of the U.S. Department of Labor's wage and hour division in San Antonio. "It's not high pay and there's little protection, but they do it because it's better than nothing."

For decades, Latino migrants have been making similar treks to the farmlands of California and Texas, brought north to perform back-breaking chores at a wage that most Americans find demeaning. The "chicken trail" reflects just how many other jobs now fall into that category. At slaughterhouses and packing plants, on construction crews and maintenance staffs, tasks that once seemed to offer working-class security to a local population have become the migrant farm work of the '90s.

In the process, these new migrant streams have carried Latino laborers to some of the unlikeliest corners of small-town America, remote hamlets in the Midwest and Southeast with few resources to accommodate their new neighbors. Noel (population 1,169) doesn't even have a traffic light or an ATM. Yet almost overnight, it's been forced to grapple with vexing, big-city issues: bilingual education, overcrowded housing, racial tension, illegal immigration.

"This isn't just a temporary phenomenon," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies. "It's a new process that's planting seeds of immigration in rural areas, many of which haven't experienced immigration in a century or more."

Within their respective fields, both Hudson Foods Inc. and the labor recruiting firm it uses, B. Chapman & Co., are considered upstanding enterprises – certainly more reputable than their fly-by-night competitors. Yet their partnership still raises a complex set of questions about the line between opportunity and exploitation.

If workers on the economic fringes are being matched up with jobs, isn't that, in and of itself, a worthy endeavor? Or do Chapman and Hudson have a greater obligation to the people they send north? What about their responsibility to the community at the end of that road? Who is paying the price and who is reaping the rewards?

As it turns out, Chapman and Hudson have similar questions about each other, as well as about Steve Holland, the owner of the crumbling resort that houses the new hires. When pressed, they all point fingers, Hudson at Chapman, Chapman at Holland, Holland at the migrants themselves.

In the end, even the American consumer is dragged into the fray: To what extent does our appetite – a seemingly insatiable hunger for chicken nuggets and boneless breasts and Buffalo wings – drive the poultry industry's furious pace?

THE RECRUITER

Steven "Bo" Chapman, the 37-year-old point man of B. Chapman & Co., was chewing a Butterfinger when the gringo he'd hired two months earlier walked through the door. He mumbled, offering a nod of recognition.

But when it was explained that he'd sent a reporter up to the Hudson Foods chicken plant, Chapman's face lost its welcome.

"This is my living," he said.

That was almost the end of our conversation, except for two revealing details Chapman shared about his background.

He said he'd grown up in San Diego, where he worked as a carpenter, helping build hundreds of homes along Interstate 5. His construction business, however, was no match for the cheap labor flowing north from Mexico. Eventually, Chapman said, he couldn't compete anymore, underbid time and again by Latino work hands.

The second biographical note: His dad was a U.S. Border Patrol agent. He'd been stationed at Chula Vista and Terminal Island, before retiring from the agency as a deputy regional chief. Bo had a keen sense of the economic pressures that rule the border – laws of supply and demand that, instead of resisting, he chose to facilitate.

"I put people to work," Chapman said.

Then he deferred to his mother, Barbara "Peanut" Chapman, who started their recruiting business a decade ago. She was sitting in the living room of her majestic stone

and wood cabin in the heart of Texas' Hill Country, explaining how she traveled to trade fairs and convention halls until she had amassed a hefty list of employers desperate for employees.

"There's probably 1,500 companies in the food industry alone that need our help," she said. "We could work ourselves 24 hours a day if we wanted to."

Instead, she rejects most of her prospective clients, demanding that they arrange for housing before she'll even consider providing workers. No law requires it and few employers want the hassle, but "it's the right thing to do," she said. "It's our conscience."

After being contacted by Hudson, she and her son visited Noel, where they made a videotape to show future job-seekers. She acknowledged that the old Ginger Blue hotel was far from pristine, and conceded that it'd probably deteriorated even more since last filmed. But she said it was less her fault than the owner's.

"If Steve Holland isn't living up to his end of the contract, it makes it look like we're lying to the people," she said. "But he's the guilty party."

She didn't deny that chicken work was a grind – "cold, wet, repetitive and boring" – but insisted that at \$6.70 an hour, it represented a leg up for a largely unskilled, often illiterate labor pool. Unemployment in the Rio Grande Valley is about 18%, more than triple the national average.

For each worker sent north, no matter the length of stay, the Chapman family receives \$175 from Hudson Foods. "By the time a company comes to us, they don't care what it cost," Peanut Chapman said. "They just want somebody there – a body."

THE EMPLOYER

The Hudson empire, which is headquartered about 30 miles from Noel in Rogers, Ark., boasts 14 facilities in 11 states, more than 10,000 employees and \$1.4 billion in annual sales for 1996.

But the company's always had a soft spot for the Noel plant. Purchased in 1972, it was James T. "Red" Hudson's first venture, a symbol of his rise from humble Ralston Purina feed salesman to CEO of the nation's seventh-largest poultry producer.

The Noel plant, however, is also a symbol of the epic changes that have swept the chicken world. Twenty-five years ago, the U.S. poultry industry produced about 3 billion broilers annually. Today the number exceeds 7 billion. Once a modest little country factory, the Noel plant has been asked to crank out chickens at a rate never before conceived.

To meet that demand, Hudson began expanding in Noel, until recently the firm's only fresh, store-ready broiler division. But there was nobody to operate the new machinery.

Entire production lines stood idle. Orders were turned away. Live chickens had to be sold off to competitors. Hudson estimated it was losing more than \$1 million a year.

If it had been feasible to move the plant to a more populated area, “we would have done it in a heartbeat,” said Vic Woodruff, director of human relations at the Noel facility. Instead, he was given the task of drumming up 450 new workers – and in a region of the Ozarks with such a burgeoning economy that even McDonald’s and Burger King offer \$100 signing bonuses.

Woodruff said he went to the local unemployment office, hoping to obtain a roster of everyone receiving benefits and solicit them directly. Not a chance. He contacted job fairs and temporary agencies, Indian reservations and even prison work-release programs. Finally, he turned to Chapman.

“Believe me, if we didn’t have to use a recruiter, we wouldn’t for another minute,” said Woodruff, who also offers a \$300 bonus to employees who refer a friend. “It was the last resort.”

After paying to bring so many workers to Noel, the company wishes more of them would stay. Critics contend that just the opposite is true, that the industry uses migrants to undermine wages and disability claims – “to chew people up and spit them out . . . instead of making the working conditions more humane,” said Larry Norton, a Texas Rural Legal Aid attorney.

But Hudson insists that the only one benefiting from high turnover is Bo Chapman, who it suspects of deliberately sending vagabonds with no intention of putting down roots. “His incentive is to get his fee,” said Mark Scott, the day-shift personnel manager. “If he staffs our plant, he could staff himself out of a job.”

That’s not to say the company hasn’t found advantages in its new Latino hires, who’ve eagerly tackled a job that, even Hudson admits, isn’t always pretty.

“I’ve never seen a group of people more anxious to work,” said Barbara Zahm, the plant’s housing coordinator.

“I don’t know why, but they’re very good with their hands,” said Alan Tyson, the corporate chaplain who spearheads Hudson’s employee counseling and outreach efforts.

“Or else,” said Woodruff, “they may just be more willing to work with pain.”

Hudson rejects any insinuation that its imported employees are stealing American jobs. The company tries to weed out undocumented workers and has vowed to cooperate with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which fined the firm \$20,625 in 1992. But Hudson maintains that such crackdowns are a charade. It welcomes any U.S. resident to show up today and start work.

“The fact is there’s a large number of jobs that very few citizens in the U.S. want to do, but they’re there and they need to be done,” said Larry Landrith, Hudson’s corporate director of human resources. “One of the social goods the poultry industry provides is employing people who would otherwise have a great deal of trouble getting employed.”

To remedy Noel’s housing crunch, which is aggravated by an archaic sewer system, Hudson spent \$2 million on new construction this year. That paid for 20 spanking-clean duplexes on the outskirts of town, now home to about 105 employees. But that still leaves at least 135 workers dependent on the Ginger Blue.

“We’re in the chicken business, not the real estate business,” said Terri Mallioux, manager of corporate communications.

THE LANDLORD

In its heyday, the 81-year-old Ginger Blue was a classic, an Elk River hunting lodge chock-full of antiques and handcrafted furniture. But it was gutted by a previous owner who auctioned off the fixtures piece by piece. Steve Holland and his family bought it for \$220,000 and reopened in 1994.

As the last of the tourists were leaving that fall, Hudson Foods asked if he’d be willing to house some of the firm’s new hires. Instead of boarding up for the winter, Holland would be guaranteed a minimum occupancy of 40 tenants. Their rent, \$45 a week, would come from their paychecks.

He agreed. “Who’s going to be the bottom of the ladder if I’m not?” asked Holland, who sold hickory chips to barbecue stores before buying the hotel. “This gives people a chance to come in and start with nothing. Nobody wants to see that or be involved in it, but it’s necessary.”

Since then, Holland’s resort has become a teeming and often squalid migrant camp, although he does staff it with three full-time maintenance workers. Every day, he said, his renters bust windows, clog toilets, punch in walls, vomit on carpets or kick doors off their hinges. In some rooms, he’s even found goats.

“With these type of people, it’s something you just have to deal with,” said Holland, quick to add that his rowdy tourist clientele hadn’t treated the place much better. “If anybody wants to change it back to a resort and send all these people home, tell ‘em to call me – the is up for sale.”

If the residents of the Ginger Blue were picking crops instead of processing chickens, the U.S. government might have been on Holland’s case by now.

Under federal law, housing for migrants must meet basic health and safety standards. The rules, however, define migrant work only in the strictest terms – temporary, seasonal, agricultural. Poultry work hasn’t qualified for protection, even though the men and women of the chicken trail were clearly migrants in the broadest sense.

All of that may be changing. Federal officials say they're reviewing the entire industry's recruiting and housing practices, which increasingly have come to resemble the techniques employed by fields and orchards.

Although legal details are still being hashed out, "you're going to see us more vigorously scrutinize this phenomenon," said Mike Hancock, a top Labor Department official in Washington.

THE TOWN

Tucked into the Ozark foothills of southwestern Missouri, Noel is neither the company town Hudson wishes it were, nor the vacation spot envisioned by its residents.

The city's mailman, James Carroll, who's been delivering letters here for 20 years, describes the bond between Noel and Hudson as a "love-hate relationship." It's one that's grown stormier, he said, as the chicken plant has evolved from "a little ol' small-town factory" to "a major, corporate-type place with barbed wire and gates and guards that you can't even go into without an appointment."

Hudson is the economic linchpin of Noel. It employs more people, generates more revenue and pays more taxes than any other business in town. Yet the company's contribution isn't all that it might seem. Noel has no property tax, and even if it did, the plant stands just outside the city limits. Its workers do pay sales tax, of which Noel receives 1%. But on paydays, Latino migrants line up at the post office, sending hundreds of dollars in money orders back home.

Hudson, whose waste water practices have come under fire from campground owners, recently paid an \$80,000 fine for discharging high levels of bacteria into the Elk River. It also has made voluntary contributions, helping fund a Little League field, Christmas lights and playground equipment. This year, it combined with nearby Simmons Foods to give \$12,000 to Noel schools.

More important, Hudson's presence has spurred others to invest. Lourdes and Genaro Salas moved up from Fort Worth and bought the old Elk River gas station; they translated the name into Spanish and now their Rio Alce mini-mart, the town's first Latino-owned business, does a booming trade in *norteño* records, pork rinds and tamarind drops.

Up the road, Glen Sanford recently opened Elk River Furniture, a second-hand shop catering to Latinos. "A fellow came in the other day with a petition, trying to run these people out of town," said Sanford, who specializes in easy credit. "I told him, 'Hell, I'd just be signing my own death warrant.' If they wasn't here, I'd have never come."

Still, the presence of so many Mexican and Mexican American workers has imposed new burdens, ones that the community is ill-equipped to address. In the last three years, the number of Latino students at Noel's crowded elementary school rose from 25 to more than 100, forcing the district to take its first stab at bilingual education.

The Ginger Blue, as part of Holland's helping-hand philosophy, takes every new Hudson worker to apply for food stamps at the Division of Family Services. In the last three years, the number of Latinos receiving those benefits jumped from 35 to 375 a month. The county hired two clerks to help process the claims, although neither they nor anyone else in the office speaks Spanish.

Being this far north, there's no Border Patrol in Missouri. The closest post is in Little Rock, Ark., but officials there don't even have their own detention facility. If there's no room at the local jail, agents simply ask the undocumented suspects to leave town. In the last three years, at least 1,314 have been released in this manner.

"I don't have anything against a corporation trying to make a profit – that's what this country's all about," said Carroll, who is also Noel's mayor. "But the way this recruiting business is set up, with everyone contracting with someone else, they can all avoid responsibility and say, 'Well, gee, it's not really our fault.' "

THE TOLL

Chicken was still a luxury, a treat for Sunday dinner, back when Herbert Hoover vowed to put one in every pot.

Now the average American wolfs down more than 70 pounds a year, an astonishing shift in eating habits that's been marked by an equally striking fall in price; adjusted for inflation, chicken costs 50% less today than it did three decades ago. "The poultry industry," Red Hudson once said, "is the greatest example of the free-enterprise system on Earth."

But the appetite of health-conscious consumers isn't fed without a cost. The automation that's allowed Hudson and others to mass-produce chicken has consigned those on the shackle line to repeat a series of dehumanizing, often crippling tasks. Poultry processing ranks as the nation's 16th most-hazardous industry, carrying an annual injury and illness rate of 22.7 per 100 full-time employees.

Critics believe the answer to the industry's labor shortage is not an imported work force, but a better-paying, slower-paced job. "Rather than raise the standards of the industry, many employers have sought to recruit workers who will simply accept less," said Greg Denier, a top official with the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which is in the midst of a nationwide organizing drive.

But given the industry's fiercely competitive nature, even Denier concedes that he must temper his expectations. As a union plant, he said, the Noel facility is almost assuredly better than most. "How far can you push on Hudson when their competitors are worse?" he asked. "Most of the time we're bargaining just for basic human decency."

No matter who does the job – whites, Latinos or, as is most often the case, blacks – poultry processing is still a task that few Americans are willing to stomach. At a certain point, writes University of Iowa law professor Marc Linder, the ability to buy cheap

chicken has turned U.S. consumers into “little Louis XIV’s with enough money to pay remote servants” to do jobs they won’t do themselves.

Last Monday, on a crisp November afternoon, a South Texas bus pulled into Noel with 32 people on board, the latest in a wave of migrants answering that call.

▪ **Last of three parts**

Times researcher Lianne Hart in Houston contributed to this series.