

Hardship: It follows the migrant farmworker

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By RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Hardship: It follows the migrant farmworker

I spent part of the summer visiting the camps of migrant farmworkers, the people whose energies each year stock our national larder to overflowing. They are a likable clan — friendly and hard-working, yet desperately poor. What I keep remembering is the terrible fragility of their days: how the slightest mishap, the tiniest ripple in their routine, could overwhelm them.

Consider the Cruz family — wife, husband and six children — whom I interviewed in their two-room quarters at Gilcrest, a farmworker camp some 40 miles north of Denver. There is a domestic tale, having to do with washtubs and soap and a need, in the grimmest of circumstances, to keep clean. But it also has to do with isolation and powerlessness. In the dust of migrant camps, all the elements — the abstract as well as the homey — tend to get scrambled.

For much of the year the Cruz family lives in Brownsville, Texas, but each summer they pile into their pickup and ride to Colorado. There Hector Cruz works with a hoe in the sugar-beet fields that surround Gilcrest, weeding and thinning for wages that amount to \$35 per worked acre. In a good week Cruz and his hoe can render about seven acres of Colorado soil weedless. But it is hot, dusty work, and the rows of young beet plants can seem infinite, marching in parallel ranks toward a point where earth touches sky. Each receding aisle presents Hector Cruz and his fellow workers with a foretaste of tomorrow's weariness. For the sake of their souls, migrant workers cannot afford to gaze too



Braceros, farmworkers from Mexico, line up for lunch.

long at the horizon, where their future awaits them.

Sometimes the older Cruz children work in the fields, too; the extra money they earn helps keep the family supplied with two essential sources of energy: gasoline and food. But Hector's wife, Estella, stays in the camp with the younger children. For four months, from June through September, the fences of Gilcrest are the boundaries of their lives.

"What do the children do all day?" I asked Mrs. Cruz.

"They run around outside. They watch TV."

"And what do you do all day?"

"I clean," she said, pointing to a broom by the door. "And I wash. Mostly I wash clothes. They get very dirty in the fields. I have to wait my turn at the tub." The camp provides two small tubs for the 120 residents. All day and through part of the night the women are at the tubs.

One afternoon, working at the washboard, Estella Cruz ran out of soap. She

called to Roberto, her 15-year-old son: "Go to the store, and get a bar of soap" — a simple instruction that turned out to have complex consequences.

Roberto's problem was deciding how to get to the store. Migrant camps are customarily built on sites convenient to the work but inconvenient for the workers. Gilcrest is

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no exception; the nearest store is in LaSalle, six miles down the road.

As Roberto saw it, he could walk the 12 miles or he could risk a quick ride in the family pickup. Being an adolescent, he made the wrong choice, and before another hour had passed, he found himself in the LaSalle police station, facing charges of speeding and driv-

ing without a license.

The truck, a policeman told Hector Cruz that evening, had been "impounded"; in fact, it had been returned to the local used-car dealer from whom Hector had bought it the previous summer and to whom he had been making regular \$15-a-month payments ever since. It is a measure of the farmworkers' status in such towns that the LaSalle police instantly assumed the Cruz truck was ripe for repossession.

Eventually with the help of an attorney from the Rural Legal Aid office, the judicial knot was cut; Roberto got a suspended sentence and the family got back its truck — but not before Hector had lost several days wages attempting to reclaim boy and wheels.

For the Cruz family the price of all this was about \$100, or 3 percent of their annual income. If they thought about it later, they might have considered it part of the rent — a routine penalty imposed upon families, so careless as to run out of soap, and so poor as to suffer the unlikely consequences.

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