

Northwest



Vital role unrecognized, say undocumented farm workers

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MATTAWA -- By the standards of this fast-growing farm town, Arnulfo Ramirez is decidedly middle class.

He owns his own house, which he lovingly cares for. The rose bushes out front are meticulously tended. And he built with his own hands the elaborate stone, brick and wrought-iron fence that arches over the driveway to his triple-wide mobile home.

He works hard for not much money, paying income taxes, property taxes, unemployment taxes and Social Security taxes.



Farm worker Arnulfo Ramirez, 48, who came to the United States in 1989, is an illegal alien living in Mattawa, a Grant County agricultural boomtown that may now have an unofficial population of 4,000, most of which is Latino. Ramirez's 8-year-old son, Eduardo, left, is an American citizen by virtue of his place of birth.
Paul Kitagaki Jr./P-I

But while Ramirez, 48, contributes plenty to the social welfare system, he gets little back. He can never draw unemployment or Social Security benefits. By nature a community activist, he can't vote. And his five children have little hope of affording college.

That's because Ramirez lives in the United States illegally, more or less permanently. Like most of Mattawa's residents, Ramirez is a Mexican national who speaks no English and has no legal residency status in this country.

Without him and thousands of others like him, the continued growth, diversification and sophistication of Central Washington's agriculture industry could come to a halt.

But there is no official recognition of that crucial role, worker advocates say.

A simmering anger among the immigrants bubbled up into a giant, but peaceful, organized protest demonstration in this Grant County community earlier this month. The same anger, says United Farm

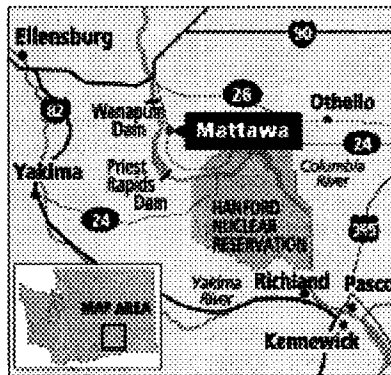
Workers Union organizer Guadalupe Gamboa, may make Mattawa to Washington agriculture "what Detroit is to the auto industry."

Despite his undocumented status, Ramirez has lived and raised a family here for 11 years -- ever since arriving from the southern Mexican state of Michoacan -- and has owned his own home for 10 years.

The family's legal status means four of Ramirez's children, all born in Mexico, are ineligible for most scholarships or financial aid that might make college possible. Legal residency is usually required. Only American-born Eduardo, 8, is a U.S. citizen by virtue of his place of birth.

Ramirez's son Hector, now 20, graduated from high school in Mattawa and wanted to go to college but couldn't for lack of financial aid available to other kids. He also thought about going into the Army but was ineligible for that, too.

"I own a house, I pay taxes, I pay Social Security, one of my kids was born here, but I have no rights," Ramirez lamented in Spanish.



Two Sundays ago, frustration over low wages and lack of legal residency, adequate housing and other rights for Hispanics like Ramirez led to one of the largest farm-worker protest demonstrations ever seen in Washington.

It was a 4 1/2-mile highway march of about 4,000 workers and supporters from the community of Desert Aire to Mattawa, where they staged a peaceful rally in a park. Ramirez and his family took part.

Organized by the Washington state branch of the Farm Workers Union, the demonstration drew sympathizers and politicians from Puget Sound and elsewhere, and the union's national president, Arturo Rodriguez, son-in-law of its founder, the late Cesar Chavez.

It was intended, in part, to call attention to the drive by the farm workers and the national AFL-CIO for federal legislation granting amnesty to undocumented farm workers like Rodriguez who are virtually permanent American residents.

The farm workers want a blanket amnesty program for undocumented workers like that passed by Congress in 1986, which let 2.7 million undocumented individuals become legal residents if they could prove they had lived continually in the United States for at least six years.

Those who came after 1986 without obtaining legal residency are here illegally. Worker advocates contend many have earned the right of citizenship.

"It's not right to profit from these people's labor and at the same time keep them in a position where they have no rights, where they can be exploited," argued Gamboa, Washington state director of the Farm Workers' Union.

Worker advocates contend that unscrupulous growers can exploit undocumented workers, whether by underpaying or otherwise abusing them.

"They don't want to complain; they figure they would lose their jobs," said Jose Ybarra, a state Employment Security Department official who works with farm workers.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates the number of undocumented immigrants at 5 million across the country and 52,000 in Washington. But Gamboa contends the actual numbers are higher.



Francisco Cisneros, 46, who moved to the Mattawa area from Mexico a few years ago, doesn't earn enough money to buy clothes and pay his \$110 monthly rent. He thinks he will go back to Mexico later this year.
Paul Kitagaki Jr./P-I

In the past 25 years, irrigation has transformed the lives of farm workers in southern Grant County, just as it has transformed agriculture around Mattawa, a community of humble, mostly prefabricated homes on a windswept plateau above the Columbia River. It is about 50 miles southwest of Moses Lake.

Between 1974 and 1984, the South Columbia Irrigation District opened to irrigation 55,000 acres of sandy rangeland and sagebrush in the Mattawa area. It turned the landscape into

high-yield apple, cherry, apricot, wine-grape, asparagus and other crops.

Coupled with one of Washington's warmest climates and longest growing seasons, the diversification has meant almost year-round employment for many farm workers who once might have worked seasonally, following the harvest from one community to the next. Workers began putting down roots.

"More and more growers are looking to diversify their crops so they can provide a longer period of employment without a break in employment," said Karen Lewis, an agricultural extension agent and tree-crop specialist in Grant County.

"(Worker) turnover is not good in agriculture just as it's not good at Wal-Mart or anywhere else," she said. And as the crop base diversifies and farming techniques become more science- and technology-dependent, growers look for a smaller but better-trained, more stable, more

permanent work force.

Nowadays a worker in Mattawa might repair irrigation equipment in February, plant fields in March, thin apple trees in April, harvest asparagus and onions in May, pick cherries and apricots in June, prune apples in July, pick various apple varieties from August to October, and prune fruit trees and grape vines over the winter.

Seasonal workers still supplement the local work force when large crops must be harvested quickly.

Jerry Cox, a Mattawa-area apple and grape grower and packer, employs about 30 Hispanics year-round and up to 300 for a two- to three-week harvest. He said the rapid agricultural expansion and new acreage has made Mattawa a focal point of farm workers' union organizing, as shown by the Aug. 6 protest march.

A hamlet of fewer than 300 residents -- mostly white -- 20 years ago, Mattawa today is a farm boomtown with an official population of about 2,000 -- and an unofficial population, some locals claim, of perhaps 4,000.

Local residents estimate Mattawa is 90 percent Latino, of whom perhaps 90 percent are undocumented workers who have fled low wages and unemployment in Mexico.

The illegal workers all have false residency documents, Gamboa said, "and the growers know it and the foremen know it and the politicians know it." But without the workers, the crops wouldn't get harvested.

The human tide has overwhelmed Mattawa, which last year built a sewer system, which is spurring more growth. Many Mexican families live in tiny, shabby, overcrowded house trailers, sometimes two families in each.

Government-subsidized housing is popping up around Mattawa. And the town is in the process of paving -- sort of -- its dusty gravel streets with ground-up asphalt recycled from an Interstate 90 resurfacing project.

Hispanic students have flooded Mattawa's Wahluke School District, where the enrollment of 1,426 has swelled 250 percent in 10 years and grows by more than 100 kids a year. Superintendent Bill Miller said three-fourth of the children come from Spanish-speaking households, and many speak no English.

School officials also must fight a culture in which, for economic reasons, parents believe their children's education ends after the eighth grade because they're needed to work in the fields, Miller said.

It doesn't matter to the school system whether a student is a legal resident

or not. But it can matter to a student who has graduated and wants a college education.

Those born in Mexico "aren't eligible for scholarships, and so that has knocked them out," said Delcine Mesa-Johnson, the assistant school superintendent.

Rich Nafziger, a policy adviser to Gov. Gary Locke, thinks amnesty might have to be the eventual answer to the problem of workers who are illegal but vital.

But he said the ultimate solution is the creation of career ladders for farm workers, as the state now is trying to do, to train and enable them to move into more skilled, higher-paying, agricultural jobs.

In the meantime, there are young people like Ruperto Vincente, 21, an illegal resident who came here from Mexico with his parents and five brothers when he was 15. Like many Mexican youngsters from poor families, he dropped out of the ninth grade four years ago to help his family by working in the fields.

Now Vincente would like to earn a high school-equivalency diploma and go to college to become a computer technician.

But he can't, he said, without a scholarship. And so he works in the asparagus fields and apple orchards.

"After high school," he said, "we're stuck."

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