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From the Baltimore Sun

The Pilgrims Of Palomas: A Sun Follow-Up

Home beckons for crab pickers

A season that began clouded by visa problems ends happily

By Chris Guy
sun reporter

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FISHING CREEK // Five months after coming to this marshy village on the [Chesapeake Bay](#) to take jobs picking crabs in a processing plant, Trinidad Tovar Tovar and a dozen other workers headed home to Mexico yesterday, their luggage bulging with trinkets, souvenirs and new clothes.

Despite the dreary weather, the mood was festive as the women watched their barrel-chested boss load their huge black canvas bags into a crab truck, part of a caravan that would ferry them to a Greyhound bus in Salisbury. They teased Virgil "Sonny" Ruark, saying they would pack him, too, and take him along to Palomas, a place he has only read about.

"Of course, I am glad to be going home," said Tovar Tovar, 46. "I can see my grandson. He is walking now, and I have bought him tiny sneakers. I know it will be warm at our home. We do not have this cold rain."

The women arrived here, belatedly, in June after Congress passed emergency legislation to fix a problem in a visa program that was keeping them and hundreds of other seasonal workers from jobs in U.S. industries that have come to depend on their labor.

Since then, they have worked eight to 10 hours a day, five or more days a week, prying fluffy white meat from mountains of steamed crabs. Paid up to \$3 a pound for their work, the women have earned at least \$6,000 each during the season, money that will support their families for the coming year.

Yesterday morning, was a blur of happy anticipation for Tovar Tovar and her housemates. Friday was their last day of work; many of their bags were packed a week ago and stashed in every available corner of the three-bedroom house they have shared since June.

The women, who range in age from 22 to 46, finished off a breakfast of hot dog omelets and tortillas ("just to clear out any leftovers in the refrigerator") and scrubbed the place that they rent from their employer, Charles H. Parks Co., during the season.

Tears and hugs

Although most had bus tickets that will keep them traveling together until they reach Laredo, Texas - where some will go on to Palomas and others to the Durango region -- there were hugs and a few tears yesterday morning as they piled into a 12-passenger van.

In the San Luis Potosi region and in much of Mexico, scarce jobs rarely pay more than a few dollars a day. The Dorchester County processing plants offer \$300 a week, money that will more than pay for necessities in Mexico in the months ahead. Anything left over usually goes toward additions or improvements to the workers' modest houses in the remote Sierra Madre Oriental mountains.

Workers in Palomas take the only work they can find, trimming and bagging corn tamale wrappers, which pays less than \$10 a day.

Since 1990, a temporary U.S. visa program known for its citation in the law, H2B, has linked workers with seafood companies, landscapers and other American businesses that depend on foreign workers to fill seasonal, low-skill jobs that most Americans eschew.

Last winter, the owners of about 25 processing plants in Maryland stood at the brink of losing their workers in a tangle of federal immigration red tape. Worried workers waited to hear about jobs they had come to depend on.

The temporary visas allowing the workers into the country were about to be squeezed out when the program reached its limit of 66,000 workers nationally.

Maryland seafood processors - who said they would go out of business without the workers - lobbied Congress and won an 11th-hour reprieve when Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, a Democrat from Baltimore, won a two-year extension for the H2B program. That means the workers know they can come back next year while hoping that Congress figures out a permanent solution.

"Our workers don't really understand why their jobs were on the line," said Jay Newcomb, who runs the Phillips Co. processing plant on Hooper Island. "They've always done the straight and narrow when there are millions of illegals in the country. They come here legally for work, go home when the visas are up and then come back the next year."

Plant operators say they have seen something that looked a little like serendipity this year, despite the early struggle to maintain their access to workers.

In an ordinary year, processors and workers probably would have been idle when cold weather in the spring limited the crab catch. But workers who usually would have arrived in April or May were delayed until mid-June by the congressional maneuvering and started work just as the harvest improved.

Abundant harvest

Better still, processors say, the fall harvest was abundant enough that some plants were steaming and picking crabs through the past month and paying overtime of up to \$3 a pound for pickers, who can sometimes pluck 30 pounds or more of the prized meat during a shift.

State crab experts had predicted the abundant crop Maryland watermen brought in, based on the large numbers of baby crabs they turned up during the Department of Natural Resources annual winter survey.

"We had a month and a half of cold weather [in the spring], as if it was Mother Nature's way of saying it wasn't time for crab season yet," said Jack Brooks, whose family owns J.M. Clayton Co. in Cambridge.

Pickers such as Tovar Tovar hope they will be summoned for jobs in May, which would give them a month or more of wages beyond what they earned this year.

"I want to come back and work again next year," said 22-year-old Selsa Tovar Tovar, a distant relative of Trinidad Tovar Tovar's who worked her first summer here. "I learned that the best part of the job is when the crabs are heavy. It is the same work for a little crab as a big crab. The best crabs are the heavy ones, so we make more money."

By late fall in any year, the crab pickers are tiring of the work. Many are nursing cut and calloused hands. They soothe the cuts with a constant layer of petroleum jelly.

Viviana Guevara Tovar, who celebrated her 22nd birthday in September, has left her parents and 13 brothers and sisters (ranging in age from 19 to 40) back home and traveled to Hooper Island for four summers.

After earning the money that helps her family with everything from groceries to a new stereo, she is looking forward to the big family dinner that will welcome her home.

"No mas cangregos" (No more crabs), Guevara Tovar shouted. "Sometimes, you cry a little and say, 'I can't do this any more.' But I am used to it now. Everybody is happy now."

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For previous articles about Maryland's crab pickers, go to baltimoresun.com/mdcrabs.

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