

Grass is greener in St. Louis

By Linda Lutton — Special to the Post-Dispatch

Sunday, Sep. 02 2007

Part 1 of 2 • One village has become a company town — with the company 1,600 miles away.

La Esperanza, MEXICO — Surrounded by strawberry fields and rows of corn, the small town of La Esperanza is a postcard from rural Mexico. There is the plaza, the church. There are the tile-roofed homes, the bougainvillea flowers spilling over walls, the teenage boys on horseback.

And there is the landscaping recruiter from St. Louis.

He comes in February. For years now, an American with a buzz cut — an employee of Fenton-based Top Care Lawn Service Inc. — has stopped in La Esperanza to fill out his employee roster and help men here get visas to work legally for Top Care.

Last February, after visiting this town and others across Mexico, he returned with 150 men signed up to work.

Most have spent the past months mowing lawns and planting flowers in the St. Louis area.

"I guess the government told the company to get only legal people," said Andrés Salomón, 29, explaining why recruiters would travel 1,600 miles to hire him and others from this town, which lies about 120 miles southeast of Guadalajara. Salomón is now in the St. Louis area in his sixth season as a guest worker.

The landscaping industry in St. Louis is rapidly being staffed by foreign laborers who enter the United States on a temporary visa for nonagricultural workers, known as the "H-2B" visa. Many of those six- to nine-month jobs start at \$8 an hour — slightly above minimum wage in Missouri, but a ticket out of poverty in Mexico, at least for the season.

More than 100 St. Louis-area lawn and landscape companies were authorized to bring more than 2,700 workers last year, up from about 1,000 in 2001, according to the Labor Department. Almost 400 people also were authorized to work in other industries last year.

Those figures represent the total visas authorized, not the actual numbers of workers that came. Some companies may hire fewer than they are authorized to bring. The number of workers that actually arrived in St. Louis was unavailable.

SAFER WITH VISAS

Over the past nine years, as U.S. employers' appetite for H-2B workers has grown, La Esperanza has become a town of guest workers. It's difficult to find a woman here whose husband, son or father isn't working "on contract" somewhere in the United States. And each year, it seems, there's another company importing workers from La Esperanza.

About 80 men from La Esperanza, a town of 1,129 people, work as St. Louis landscapers; others are guest workers in Nevada and Indiana, and on a separate program in Canada. But the primary destination is "San Luis," a fact made clear by the Missouri-plated pickups rolling slowly over La Esperanza's stone roads.

"It's better now that they go with a visa," says Irma Zárate, Salomón's mother, voicing a sentiment heard everywhere in town. The most common alternative — crossing illegally into the U.S. — has become more difficult, dangerous and costly because of increased border security. "What are my worries when Andrés goes with a visa?" asks Zárate, who runs a small grocery store in town. "None!"

La Esperanza's history as a town of guest workers can be traced to immigration raids on St. Louis businesses in 1997. A handful of men from La Esperanza were already working for St. Louis commercial landscaping firms — many illegally — when the raids hit.

Supervisors at Top Care asked workers to find friends and relatives back in Mexico who'd be interested in coming to St. Louis on guest worker visas. Rafa Delgado, a native of La Esperanza, was in charge of making the list.

"They gave me the chance to sign up as many people as I wanted," says Delgado, now a salaried supervisor for Loyet Landscape Maintenance — and in his ninth year as a guest worker.

"From there, we've signed up more and more people," says Delgado.

In La Esperanza, it's hard to say which is growing faster — workers' interest in obtaining the visas or companies' appetite for workers. Each year, St. Louis-area lawn care companies have petitioned for more workers. In addition to Top Care and Loyet, Brake Landscaping and Lawncare hired guest workers from La Esperanza this year.

Loyet's work force is composed primarily of guest workers, according to Delgado. The only employees who live permanently in the U.S. are "the people who enter things into the computers — the superintendents and the secretaries," he says.

To qualify to bring in guest workers, employers must demonstrate annually that they cannot find qualified workers residing in the U.S. So far, this provision has posed no threat to the guest workers' jobs; most from La Esperanza are so certain of their positions from year to year that they leave clothes and cars in St. Louis while returning to Mexico to reapply for another temporary visa.

SECOND GENERATION

Sitting on the concrete patio outside his family's house in La Esperanza, days before he's scheduled to pick up the red, white and blue visa that will be stamped into his Mexican passport, 19-year-old Fernando Echavarría imagines what St. Louis will be like.

The work with Loyet Landscape Maintenance: "Not too hard," he supposes. Life: "It'll just be a lot of work and then straight back home," he says. Weekends: "You go to the (grocery) stores, no?"

Fernando's father has worked in the U.S. since Fernando can remember; he's now a St. Louis landscaper on a guest worker visa himself. For years, a kitchen magnet of the Gateway Arch has been stuck to the Echavarrías' refrigerator in La Esperanza.

Like many here, Fernando's father tried to get his son signed up as a guest worker as soon as the boy turned 18. Since he was 9 or 10 years old, Fernando thought he'd probably end up working in the United States. Still, he says, he wouldn't have gone now if it hadn't been for the guest worker visa, because crossing illegally seems too risky.

Fernando already has worked at about the only jobs there are in La Esperanza: laboring in corn and strawberry fields. The going wage for field work here is about \$12 dollars a day. Picking strawberries — the region's main cash crop — pays just under \$1 per 5-gallon bucket. Occasionally someone pays Fernando to nail shoes onto a horse — that brings in \$2.30 per hoof.

The wages might be enough to get by on if the work were steady and if nothing out of the ordinary came up, says Adán Cárdenas, the representative of the town's communal land owners and a local leader in the national farm workers union.

"But there's not always work," says Cárdenas. "Sometimes there's only enough strawberries to fill two buckets" in a day. That's barely enough to buy beans and tortillas needed to feed a family for a day, he notes.

Building a house, buying a pickup or starting a small business are dreams that come true only by heading north.

"The Mexican countryside has become a factory of migrants," says Rodolfo García Zamora, a development and immigration researcher at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas. Families unable to make a living from their small plots of land see greater opportunities in the U.S. than they do in the cities of their own country.

Even the handful of people with nonfarm jobs trade them for a guest worker visa to St. Louis. Abraham Chávez, an auto mechanic with a steady job in the nearby city of Zamora, was making about \$85 a week, more than triple the region's minimum wage. He's now in St. Louis, one of 260 guest workers that Top Care was authorized to bring this year.

La Esperanza feels like a company town — except that the company is 1,600 miles away.

Having the guest workers "benefits all of us, even those of us who don't go," says Rosa Bermúdez, 34, who hawks cosmetics from a tote bag she carries with her constantly. It's stocked with perfumes and lipstick, lotions and roll-on deodorant that she sells for \$1.20, often to women with husbands or fathers in St. Louis.

Few here seem to have considered what would happen if the unimaginable happened — if the visa program were canceled, or if Top Care or Loyet or Brake decided to turn to some other town — or some other country — for its workers.

If they had any forewarning at all, "the workers would just stay in the U.S.," guesses Fernando.

"God forbid it," says Zárate from behind the counter in her store. "Can you imagine all the people who would risk their lives trying to go illegally? It would be a crisis."

Freelance journalist Linda Lutton lives in Mexico, where she writes about migration and culture.