

Chapter 1: The Invisible Army

It's February in Mexico. Sixty-year-old Domingo Álvarez boards a bus in Aguascalientes, a small state in the very center of the country. In about six hours, he'll arrive at the US Consulate in the city of Monterrey. There, he'll complete his application for an H-2A temporary seasonal work visa, authorizing him to perform agricultural labor in the United States for the current growing season. Once his papers are in order, Domingo will board another northbound bus for a much longer ride, crossing the border at Laredo, Texas, then proceeding to a labor camp in eastern North Carolina. He'll live there until November, missing nine months of birthdays and other family events. This is nothing new. He's been at this for twenty-six years.

Domingo's kids were all younger than five when he began going away for work. Now, they're in their thirties. Those kids have seen Dad grow heavier over the years. Even though he does manual labor for a living, as a supervisor of other workers, or *mayordomo*, Domingo spends much of his time sitting in a pickup truck, transporting workers between fields, or watching others do most of the repetitive bending and lifting. Many of the calories he consumes remain unburned in his body, which makes his seat on the bus feel just a bit narrower each year.

As a veteran H-2A farmworker, Domingo knows well what it's like to ride that bus for nearly three days straight twice a year. So he never forgets to pack his *rompecabezas de enredo*. These entanglement puzzles, each made of two pieces of bent wire, cord, or other scrap the player must separate, are great for killing time. They don't take him all that long to solve; he made each of them himself. But they give him ideas for new ones, and he likes to offer them to other H-2A farmworkers on the bus. He doesn't get as many takers as he used to—most everyone has a mobile phone nowadays—but he brings them just the same.

Julio Molina can barely remember a world without a mobile phone in everyone's pocket. He was a child of eight when the iPhone came out in 2007. Now at age twenty-three he has a child himself, just one year old, and an obligation to support his new family. He boards his bus in March in Chiapas, the southernmost Mexican state on the border with Guatemala. It will take him nearly two days just to reach Monterrey and another one or two before arriving at his North Carolina labor camp.

Unlike Domingo, Julio can't bring his favorite *pasatiempo* on the bus. His beloved guitar will stay in Mexico. So he plays and sings as much as he can in the days leading up to his departure. One can picture him building up muscle memory in his fingers and vocal cords, hoping it will still be there when he comes home in November. Julio does pack his favorite athletic gear, including a brand-new Fila baseball cap and Under Armour shirt. They adorn his trim body perfectly. He could be a model. With his musical talent, good looks, and sharp mind, Julio could probably make a living any number of ways. But he knows one can make good money *ir al norte por contrato*. And he has another reason for going north, this one having nothing to do with money and one he keeps to himself.

At forty-two, Arturo López is neither a veteran H-2A farmworker like Domingo nor a new guy like Julio. But he's become a regular H-2A, boarding his bus to Monterrey now for the eighth time. Solidly built and always clean-shaven, he lives in the Mexican state of Veracruz, an elongated region of mixed geography and climate that hugs the Gulf of Mexico. The youngest of Arturo's three kids is seven. The oldest, fifteen. At those ages, they feel Dad's absence every day. In the weeks leading up to his annual departure, Arturo spends as much time as he can with his kids—taking them to and from school, visiting relatives, and driving them to their favorite park in a town about six miles away from home. His ten-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son still love the swing sets and slides there. His fifteen-year-old son is too old for the playground attractions but still loves the extra time with Dad. Unlike his siblings, he can still remember a time before Arturo went away for the better part of each year. For the younger two, it's been like this forever.

At the park, all three kids know their dad will be leaving soon. Sometimes they ask how long he needs to keep going away. Other times, they simply tell him not to leave. He always smiles, explains as best he can why he must *ir al norte*, then gives them an extra push on the swing. In April, he says goodbye to his family, boards the bus, and goes away. Arturo appreciates that his seven-month absence is shorter than that of other H-2A farmworkers. What he appreciates most is the pay. Doing year-round farmwork in Mexico, Arturo could keep his family from going hungry, but that's about it. Any hope of upward mobility—school supplies for his kids, helping out relatives from time to time, saving for retirement—requires more than farmwork in his home country. So he thanks God for this opportunity. What he can earn doing farmwork in the United States for seven months would take more than eight *years* in Mexico.

Domingo, Julio, and Arturo are among the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, mostly men, who leave their families each year to perform authorized seasonal crop work in the United States. In 1987, the first year of the temporary nonimmigrant H-2A visa program, the United States certified forty-four positions for work authorization. By 2014, that number had grown to around one hundred twenty-five thousand. That's roughly the size of Mexico's army, it turns out. But that numerical coincidence did not last for long. By 2022, the number of H-2A visas had nearly tripled, to a whopping three hundred seventy thousand—the population of Cleveland. This growth rate shows no sign of slowing. So we can expect more and more workers, mostly Mexican men, to leave their wives, children, and parents for the better part of each year to do some of the hard work that needs to be done here.

Growers say US workers won't take these jobs, forcing them to bring in foreign labor. Others disagree, saying there would be plenty of US applicants if workers were treated better and paid more, which growers say they cannot afford to do. The debate rages on. Meanwhile, the uncapped H-2A program lets growers bring all the farmworkers they want from other countries, provided they reimburse workers' transportation costs and follow a number of other such rules. So that's what growers do. When the work is done, growers send their workers back home.

For many years, no state received more H-2A farmworkers than North Carolina. That began to change around 2012. Now, a majority of H-2A farmworkers can be found across five states: Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina in the Southeast, and California and Washington in the West. The growth in California and Washington has been especially sharp, with their numbers growing more than 1,000 percent over just the past ten years.

A sizeable H-2A workforce is a relatively new thing in those other states. Here, the program is beginning to show its age. Many of North Carolina's H-2A farmworkers have been at this for decades, and many of our labor camps, which H-2A employers are required to provide at no cost to their workers, are decades overdue for repair. And our state legislature, long known for opposition to the advancement of worker rights in any industry, has had more time than other states to sharpen its elbows in its perpetual battle with farmworker advocates, keeping our farmworkers' rights to a bare minimum.

Beyond its long history as a major employer of H-2A farmworkers, North Carolina has other reasons that make it an especially good place to peer into this federal program. Our agricultural roots run deep here, thanks chiefly to tobacco, a crop whose production is especially dependent on manual labor. Today, it's our leading crop, just as it was nearly four hundred years ago. And no other state comes even close to producing more of it.

The nation's largest single employer of H-2A farmworkers is here. Year after year, the North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA) hires almost ten thousand H-2A farmworkers, or roughly one-third of the state's total H-2A labor workforce, acting as a co-employer alongside a member grower. The NCGA story is an insightful one.

North Carolina is also the only state with a long-standing labor union created especially for H-2A farmworkers. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee, or FLOC, made history when it signed a collective bargaining agreement with the NCGA in 2004, entitling all NCGA farmworkers to union benefits. The union is struggling nowadays, for reasons both within and outside of its control. Still, like a boxer with a bloodied face who refuses to cede a fight, FLOC remains standing. Anyone curious about how unionization might help the H-2A farmworker could do worse than to know the story of FLOC.

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