

opinion/editorial

Depth reporting project rewarding and exhausting

Last March, the UNL School of Journalism embarked on a depth reporting project to enrich the understanding between the United States and Mexico. After months of research, students and professors packed their bags and left for all parts of this country and Mexico to gather first hand news. The result of exhausting and rewarding work went into the journalism school's Depth Report Number 14.

My chance to travel to Phoenix and investigate the living and working conditions of undocumented workers was enticing.

And it was heartbreaking. Some cry out that undocumented workers are living off the U.S. welfare system, pay no taxes, send their children to our schools and in general, mess up our economy.

These people may throw out huge statistics that say undocumented workers, mostly Mexican citizens, are infiltrating and living off Americans.

And some statistics are cold. Mexico has an unemployment rate of 40 to 50 percent. People need jobs to survive and taking a chance to cross the border illegally seems to be little sacrifice.

I visited the Goldmar orange groves in Phoenix, owned by Arthur Martori and Robert Goldwater, brother of U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, R.-Ariz.

In these fields, undocumented workers who are mostly Mexican males, harvested oranges and lemons.

They lived like animals in the fields. There was no water to wash, no drink provided, no outhouse, and not even a place to sleep at night.

We met the workers at the kitchen, a place where they usually gathered to play cards, cook and talk.

The kitchen was bleak. A tarp hung over trees was above a wooden box that served as a cupboard. On top of the box were a few meager staples and cooking supplies.

The kitchen was located near an oil-burning stove that heated the fruit at night when the temperature fell below freezing.

Some live on the ground with tarps overhead to protect them from rain and wind. More fortunate workers take orange crates and convert them into living units acceptable for dogs. The luckier ones have blankets.

At night the men could not go anywhere. They are locked into the fields by their illegal alien status. Sometimes they spent their money on comfort, buying liquor or wears that slick-talking peddlers bring out to the field. Many send their money home and others pay for field prostitutes. Some hold the theory that on pay day, the employers of undocumented workers call the border patrol to arrest workers before they pick up their checks.

The border patrol denies this and so do the employers.

We, as a country which speaks out and believes in human rights throughout the world, must take care of unjust and inhuman living conditions at home.



Illegal immigrant 'problem' should be solved humanely

Illegal alien. Even the term is suspect. Sounds like I'm talking about a criminal from Mars.

But what I'm talking about is the estimated 2 to 12 million foreign born persons who have immigrated to the United States without U.S. sanctions. (There are an estimated 2,500 to 3,500 in Nebraska.)

The most frequent problem that is routinely addressed in the popular press and callously bandied about by politicians in election years, is that undocumented workers deflate wages and raise unemployment. These evil aliens are also blamed with sending American dollars out of this country while taking advantage of our welfare system, coasting their children through our educational system without paying a dime and a myriad of other social ills, including a measles epidemic in Southern California.

Ronald Reagan, that beacon of apple pie and honesty, has suggested that Soviet financial assistance is behind the alien horde, which adds a radical tinge to their image, reminiscent of the early 1900s attitude when immigration rules were amended to allow for deportation because of political beliefs.

This influx of aliens is seen as mostly Mexican and male. The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates from 60 to 75 percent fall in that category. But ferreting out Mexicans is where the money and resources are put, so it seems natural that it is Mexicans who are caught. Many people enter this country from Korea, Haiti, Nigeria, Thailand, Iran and the Dominican Republic. The latter group enter more often on some sort of visa, find a job and just stay. They, not the Mexicans, are more likely to tap higher paying jobs.

Become dregs

Studies show that Mexicans largely fill the menial, underpaid jobs which are the dregs of industrial society. They take the jobs that no one else, at least not naturalized U.S. citizens, want because it pays better for an American to go on unemployment or welfare. An INS study done for the Department of Labor in 1977 surveyed the wages of 506 undocumented workers.

Only 10 reported wages of \$6.50 per hour and over; the vast majority, —375—received from \$2.50 to \$4.49 per hour.

Another study estimated that 40 percent of undocumented workers receive less than the minimum wage, whereas, in 1975, it was estimated that of the total

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American work force, only 3 percent earned less than the minimum wage. And, when you're here illegally you sure as hell can't gripe; the grim reality of being sent back is constantly keeping you in line.

Pay taxes

Undocumented workers are far more likely to pay taxes than use welfare services, according to a survey done in 1975 by the Employment and Training Administration's Office of Research and Development. After a year's screening of Aid to Families of Dependent Children payment recipients in San Diego County—where more illegal aliens are apprehended than anywhere else in the U.S.—they concluded that only 1 percent of the entire caseload were illegal aliens.

Undocumented workers represent a class outside of the law, a class whose human rights are daily ignored, a class which allows employers to undercut the

safety and health acts, minimum wage and full employment policy which U.S. labor fought so long and hard for.

It's a problem which can no longer be tolerated nor ignored. Many states have recognized the problem and have attempted legislation (Nebraska's never go out of committee). But the people I talked to, including Pete Urdiales, director of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission and Miguel Carranza, UNL assistant sociology professor, told me that it is not merely a state problem, nor solely a national problem. It is international. And it is a problem which needs to be looked at humanely and not in a frenzied state of emotional duress.

Can't wash hands

America can no longer wash its hands of world poverty. We are affected by the underdeveloped world. Mexico has a slim resource base, a rapidly growing population, and inequitable pattern of income distribution and 40 percent unemployment. And their unemployed are seeking a share of the economic pie, here. The problems that undocumented workers create—more rightly that governmental policy creates—must be solved by all governments working together.

Carter has proposed an amnesty plan for "illegals" which would grant permanent and temporary status to workers who could prove that they had been here for a set amount of time, beef up border patrol, fine employers who knowingly hire undoc-

umented workers (the spectre of a national mandatory ID card looms—Big Brother sees all, knows...) and provide economic aid and "cooperation" to "source" countries.

Possible restrictions

He has recognized that merely cutting off our borders could pose a potential revolutionary situation in Mexico which would threaten the \$12 billion in Mexican government bonds and \$3.2 billion in private sector bonds held by Americans, and restrict U.S. access to newly discovered resources of natural gas and oil in southern Mexico.

But Carter's plan has been lambasted by most major Hispanic groups. They claim that the temporary resident status violates the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection of the law guarantee, and the Helsinki Agreement, which gives immigrant laborers the same rights and opportunities as domestic laborers.

Plus no concrete provisions are made for economic aid, nor for the fate of those granted a temporary status after it expires. Beefing up the border patrol could lead to an increase in mass, inhumane round-ups, and employment sanctions could lead to discrimination against minorities. Employers would be expected to examine documents and make legal judgments—it would be relatively easy to justify not hiring someone with a Spanish surname.

The problem is immense, a solution far from easy, but it's time that the U.S. take a look at reality and rejoin humanity, humanely.

