

José Reyes Reyes:

## Winter Farmwork in Western New York

José Reyes Reyes is one of the relatively few farmworkers who work in western New York during the winter. Most farm employment (other than dairy work) in western New York is seasonal—May through October—with the majority of the demand for labor attributed to the harvest of apples, which takes place between late August and early November.

José's situation is also different because historically most farmworkers in western New York have been blacks from the Southeastern United States, Haitians, and Jamaicans. Only during the 1989 apple harvest did workers from Mexico and South Texas begin coming to western New York in substantial numbers. Hundreds of thousands of workers from Mexico are in the United States as Special Agricultural Workers—legalized U.S. residents under a provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. José was a legalized resident before the Act; his wife, Maria Oralia Medina, obtained her legalized status through the Special Agricultural Worker program.

### From Mexico to the United States

José was born in San José de Bernalejo in the State of Zacatecas in central Mexico in 1954. He has three brothers and four sisters, and most of his family still live in Mexico. He first came to the United States in 1971 and worked in Texas and New Mexico, primarily as a day laborer in vegetable and onion harvesting. For a number of years he moved between the United

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States and Mexico and considered himself a not-so-serious migratory farmworker.

In 1975, José married a Mexican-American woman from San Angelo, TX, and eventually settled there, where they had two children, a boy born in 1977, and a girl born in 1982. Unfortunately, they were divorced after 10 years of marriage. Divorce is uncommon and unacceptable in Mexican culture, so it caused considerable anguish—not to mention considerable economic loss.

Having lived in Texas for about 12 years, José returned to his hometown in Mexico after his divorce. He spent 2 years there before entering the farm-

worker migrant stream again. In 1984, he went to Florida to work in the orange harvest. Typically, the Florida orange harvest season runs from October through April and is the source of employment for many migrants during the winter. In Florida, José worked primarily with other Mexicans, and he made new friends, who had an established migratory pattern. Like his friends, he returned to his hometown in Zacatecas at the end of each orange harvest season.

During one of the returns, José met a young woman, Maria Oralia, and after 2 years of courtship they entered the migrant stream together. In 1989, they



*Working through a labor contractor, farmworker José Reyes is able to find consistent employment throughout the year. His situation is different from that of many other farmworkers; for many areas of the United States, farm labor is a seasonal occupation.*

were married. Unlike his migrant friends from Florida, José and Maria traveled to Tennessee rather than California or the Midwest, and they spent most of the summers there, working in the nursery industry. Maria particularly liked nursery work because it was not as physically demanding as other day-laborer work. Depending on the weather, they would leave Tennessee during August or September and travel to Michigan for the apple harvest season. The apple harvest season would last into October, and thereafter they would then go back to Florida and begin the migrant cycle again.

### Settling in Western New York

In 1989, the first year that western New York employed substantial numbers of farmworkers from Mexico during the apple harvest, José, Maria, José's cousin, and two friends went there instead of to Michigan. They worked in the apple harvest under contract to a labor contractor.

One factor influencing the Reyes' decision to live and work in western New York was the housing arrangement for the family. The labor contractor recently had received a loan to construct new housing for migrant workers, and the Reyes family moved into a brand new home. José made a good impression on the farm labor contractor, and at the end of the season he offered José, Maria, and their friend Misa Mendoza work through the winter—mostly pruning apple trees. Having a baby—José Javier, born September 1989—may have influenced José and Maria to stay in New York.



*Maria Oralia Medina has done farmwork in several States, including Florida, Tennessee, and Michigan. She settled in western New York in 1989 to prune apple trees.*

### Typical Winter Workday

José's typical working day during the winter begins at 6 a.m., with breakfast and making the day's lunch. José and Misa, who lives with the family, drive in José's pickup truck to the day's work site. They are paid by the number and sizes of the trees they prune.

The labor contractor selects the work sites, but José works independently. The labor contractor goes to the site the first day and may visit the site again when the work is done at that particular orchard. Mostly, though, the contractor checks with the farm owner by telephone to confirm that the work

has been done to the owner's satisfaction. The contractor provides the workers with the necessary tools, equipment, and clothing to do the job.

José and the labor contractor say that there is more work available than there are people able and willing to do the work. The workday is over by 6 p.m. The Reyes usually spend their evenings at home, watching television or listening to audiotape cassettes of Mexican music.

The labor camp in which they live is deserted during the winter; they are the only residents. José is a quiet person, and it is clear that life in western New York during the winter for the Reyes (or any other people from Mexico) is socially isolated—they have no other friends. Even though José's English is good enough to communicate with almost anyone, the same is not true for his wife and his friend.

José likes what he does—especially because he is basically his own boss once he has been given a task to do. His income varies through the year, but he has aspirations similar to those of most other Americans starting a family.

It is difficult to know whether José will settle in western New York. His decision will depend on whether year-round work is available and also on whether more people from Mexico choose to settle in the area. One advantage of working for a labor contractor is the network of potential employers that the contractor can tap into. This is particularly true of José's contractor, who has deep roots in the area.

Another important factor that will influence the Reyes' decision to stay will be the degree to which the community accepts people from Mexico. Extension agents who work with farmworkers in western New York suggest that the community has a growing interest in accommodating farmworkers like José and his family. Only time will tell.

José is not very different from most other farmworkers, but he is distinguished by three characteristics: He does not drink or smoke, he chose to settle in a socially and geographically isolated area, and he lives in relatively good housing. His situation is similar to that of many farmworkers in that he works for a labor contractor. José recognizes that the labor contractor makes money from his work, and he would prefer another arrangement. His

family's social acceptance by the community during the winter is tenuous at best, and he and his family yearn to be among family and friends.

In many ways the Reyes family is very similar to the other families in western New York—hard-working, family-oriented, serious, and mindful of their responsibilities—but in the small town where they live, they also feel different from their neighbors.



Farmworkers José Reyes and his wife, María Oralia, share a quiet stroll through an orchard in western New York before beginning their day's task of trimming apple trees.