

Carrying the Crosses of Christmas

by J. James DeConto

"There was no room for them in the inn"

As you drive south on Route 18 across the northernmost swath of Allegheny County, North Carolina, you'll encounter a roadside sign, "Welcome to Sparta, N.C." If your eye catches the sign, you probably won't have time to notice two drab, gray buildings that lie just beyond this welcome. Potholes mar the driveways. Empty beer cans, cigarette packs, fast-food wrappers, and even an old car battery litter the grounds. Electrical wires and television cables run in and out of windows, some with torn screens, broken glass, or crinkled black garbage bags where the glass once was. When I called about renting an apartment there for me, my wife, and two daughters, the landlady said the complex would not be suitable for us, but for the same price—about \$400 a month—she could rent us a single-family house with a yard.

Upstairs in one of the buildings, three Christmas tree workers share a single bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. Like many of the men and teenage boys who travel far from their families to cultivate and harvest North Carolina Fraser firs—the Cadillac of Christmas trees—these three have found shelter, but not much hospitality. They cram into single-wide trailers or basement apartments, two or three to a bedroom and a few more in the living room, often at \$50 a month per person. Consuelo Hall, a Colombian who hears the workers' stories at her popular market and taco bar, tells one eerily similar to the Advent story these workers help Americans to celebrate: A fellow Latina literally considered moving her family into a barn to escape the claustrophobia of living in the same house with a group of male farmworkers.

Another woman, whom I'll call Carmen, lives in an old farmhouse with her partner and several of his male co-workers surrounded by evergreen fields. She says the house is very old, but has few complaints save for the airborne pesticides that sometimes make it hard to breathe inside. "I say my husband, 'Maybe if I asleep you can bring me to the hospital,'" she says. "I felt really bad." Because he provides the house for free, this farmer pays \$6 an hour. Others pay \$7 an hour for greenhorns and up to \$12 for the most seasoned veterans who've worked in their fields a decade or more. A recent court decision exempts the growers from paying overtime, though workers typically put in 50 to 70 hours a week, enabling them to send money home to their families in Mexico.

"Christ suffered in his body"

On a mountainside in neighboring Ashe County, a dozen Mexican men wield 18-inch knives and pairs of snips, shaping hundreds of Fraser firs into that classic Christmas cone. From the roadway far below, dressed in sweatshirts or flannels and jeans, they look like finger puppets of red and blue mistakenly conscripted into a massive army of toy soldiers. They circle each tree, oscillating their blades from behind their ears down toward their knees, lopping off stray branch ends to carve the perfect Christmas tree. The seedlings are ready for harvest in seven to 10 years, and they go wild if they're not trained to look prim and proper with annual trimming from age 3. Unless rain keeps the men from their work and their wages, they trim hundreds of trees, working 10 hours a day, every day but Sunday, through the summer and early fall. With an errant swing, the razor-sharp machetes sometimes cut into their knees, and the repetitive motion of trimiando, as they call it in Spanglish, leaves every new recruit with sore forearms.

The hardest work comes during the harvest season that runs through November and early December, when the trees are shipped to market. Mexican men—and some women—often work 70 or more hours a week, carrying hundreds of Christmas trees a day from their beds to the trucks that haul them. Some trees weigh more than 300 pounds, and even five men have trouble snaking them through the rows of tender trees waiting to be cut in subsequent years. Back and forth they walk, over hillside fields that span hundreds of yards. The hardest work comes when their bodies are the most weary. After feeding the trees through bailing machines, as the sun sets, the workers must lift them onto trailers, staggering under the

weight of the heaviest trees. As the pines pile up on the flatbed trucks, the workers have to heave them higher and higher, until the packers, standing on 10-foot stacks of evergreens, start to pull on the trees while more workers push them upward from the ground.

Harvesting would be hard on the balmiest of May days, but, as veteran worker Felix Alvarez says, in late fall "it's extremely cold in these mountains.... I used to get really sick, that I missed two or three weeks of working sometimes." Low temperatures in November and December range between 20 and 30 degrees. The workers find little relief from the cold over the course of eight- to 14-hour days spent outdoors, and frequent illness is common. "You know the cold takes a toll on a person who's working outside all day long," says Dr. Georgia Latham, a physician who provides discount services to Sparta's Hispanics. "When people live in very close quarters, communicable disease in general is much more prevalent."

More worrisome for the workers is the long-term effects of handling pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers. Experts disagree on the impact of agricultural chemicals on the overall health of the region, but even North Carolina State University extension specialist Jill Sidebottom, who downplays the risks for the general population, acknowledges "the people who would be most at risk are those with the most exposure—those who are applying the pesticides." Though they now understand the danger, experienced farmworkers like Alvarez worry about the long-term effects of having worked with potentially lethal pesticides without the safety equipment now required by law.

"Carrying his own cross"

A devout Catholic, Carmen begins to cry as she considers the parallels between her life and the biblical story. Not only did she cross the desert for new life in a land of plenty, but once there, she bore heavy trees on her back, just like the man whose birthday we celebrate at Christmas. As she tells of carrying 200 Christmas trees a day across a distance as long as a large shopping plaza, her thoughts turn toward the sad irony of the immigrant experience: Mexicans are willing to do the backbreaking work that no else wants to do and on which American society depends, yet their illegal status makes them outsiders who live in fear.

"Latin people come here for (do)ing the hard work," she says. "It's very hard work, too hard work."

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