

Mexican Pickers Dominate Pa. Mushroom Industry

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National Geographic News
Service

KENNETT SQUARE (Chester Co.) — At the end of a long work day, Martin Sabala, 24, relaxes for the first time since 5 a.m. and talks about his 11-year career as a mushroom-picker in rural southeastern Pennsylvania.

"The hours are long and there is nothing to do at night, but economically for me, this is the No. 1 place to make money for my family," says Sabala, whose stonewashed jeans and long hair make him look more like a high-school student than a husband and father.

With tales of good wages, abundant work and "tranquilidad" spinning in his head, at age 13 Sabala followed his own father here from Moroleon, Mexico. His brothers, a cousin and an uncle soon followed him.

More than 80 percent of the Chester County, mushroom industry's 10,000 workers are Mexican; many come from Moroleon, a town of fewer than 50,000 people in the mountains of central Mexico.

Since the early 1970s, Moroleon men have left their wives and

children behind to work almost non-stop for six or seven months at a time in the mushroom camps of Pennsylvania.

Recently, however, the 2,000-mile commutes have begun to ebb. Motivated by loneliness and a 1986 change in U.S. immigration laws, thousands of laborers are bringing their kin north permanently.

Many favor the farms of Pennsylvania, because mushrooms are grown indoors and offer year-round employment. The state produces almost half the nation's mushrooms.

Migrant workers are nothing unusual in Chester County. At the turn of the century, Quaker mushroom-growers employed Italians, who then began to buy their own farms and hire black laborers, who in turn were followed by white Tennesseans and later Puerto Ricans.

In the 1970s, as Puerto Rican workers moved on to other areas and higher-paying jobs, the young men of central Mexico began to replace them.

But the recent settling-in of these Mexican immigrants has created some unexpected prob-



Atonia Sepulveda reads English with a Spanish speaking kindergartner in Kennett Square. Sepulveda, who moved to the state from Puerto Rico in 1968, is a former mushroom-picker who has moved on to teach in Chester County's "Even Start" program for youngsters who don't speak English.

lems in this small community 30 miles southwest of Philadelphia.

La Comunidad Hispana, a local service organization, estimates that more than 200 Mexican families have moved to Chester County in the past year.

In one school district last September, about 40 Hispanic children, few of whom spoke English, showed up unexpectedly for classes. And workers at Project Salud, a health clinic, are seeing an average of two to three new families every week.

Lack of affordable housing in Chester County has caused some Mexican workers to commute from neighboring Delaware. Families double up in trailers and apartments to save money on rent. Single men live in one-story dormitories on the mushroom farms or cram into apartments with as many as a dozen other workers.

"It's a type of homelessness," Sheila Druley, executive director of La Comunidad Hispana, tells National Geographic.

Most of the mushroom-pickers earn the minimum wage — \$4.25 an hour — or about \$1.10 a basket. Bonus pay for every pound picked and 60-hour work weeks help pickers afford cars for themselves and clothing and other goods for relatives in Mexico.

The growing presence of the low-income immigrants has erected an invisible wall between them and many natives of predominantly white Chester County.

"This tends to be a conservative area," says Druley. "There is some discomfort at guys standing around on a corner, seeming to do nothing. Some locals don't understand that many of the workers come from small villages, where they have a kind of plaza to go to congregate and socialize."

But, in a county whose economy depends on mushrooms, everyone agrees that sensitivity toward the Hispanics has grown in the past year.

Two bilingual police officers and a Spanish-speaking dispatcher

have been added to the state police force in nearby Avondale. Several local churches have migrant-ministry programs. A task force of mushroom-growers and community leaders is exploring possibilities for more low-income housing.

Kennett Square, population 5,210, at first glance seems like any other small town in rural Pennsylvania, except that the Hispanic influence is evident: rows of tortillas, jalapeno peppers, and sliced mango at the local supermarket, "leche" and "cafe" on the McDonald's menu.

At Kennett Middle School, teacher Palmira Matos helps newly arrived Mexican students make the transition to American classrooms. Matos herself is a picker's daughter who came to Chester County from Puerto Rico when she was 13.

"I know what my students are going through," she says. "They are battling two evils: not know-

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Hector Bedolla, 31, cuts the stems off mushrooms in Kennett Square. Like many other mushroom workers in Chester County, Bedolla is from Mexico. Along with many of his co-workers, he commutes from nearby Delaware, where housing is less expensive. His family remains in Mexico City.

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