Los Angeles Times CALIFORNIA'S DUST BOWL

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Photographs by Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times

IN HURON, crews of 20 have been replaced by only a few fieldworkers as farmers struggle to sustain their harvests. Many residents are moving to places where California's drought has had less of an impact

DREAMS DIE IN DROUGHT

For the farmworking communities of the San Joaquin Valley, a third year of little rain puts their livelihoods in jeopardy

By Diana Marcum

REPORTING FROM HURON, CALIF.

he two fieldworkers scraped hoes over weeds that weren't there. "Let us pretend we see many weeds," Francisco Galvez told his friend Rafael. That way, maybe they'd get a full week's work.

They always tried to get jobs together. Rafael, the older man, had a truck. Galvez spoke English. And they liked each other's jokes.

But this was the first time in a month, together or alone, that they'd found work.

They were two men in a field where there

should have been two crews of 20. A farmer had gambled on planting drought-resistant garbanzo beans where there was no longer enough water for tomatoes or onions. Judging by the garbanzo plants' blond edges, it was a losing bet.

Galvez, 35, said his dream is to work every day until he is too bent and worn, then live a little longer and play with his grandchildren. He wants to buy his children shoes when they need them. His oldest son needed a pair now.

Most of all, he wants to stay put.



AS CALIFORNIA'S drought drags into a third year, workers like Hector Ramirez are lucky to find a day or two of work a week. The recent rate was \$8.50 an hour.

But the slowly unfurling disaster of California's drought is catching up to him. Each day more families are leaving for Salinas, Arizona, Washington anywhere they heard there were jobs.

Even in years when rain falls and the Sierra mountains hold a snowpack that will water almonds and onions, cattle and cantaloupes, Huron's population swells and withers with the season.

with the season. These days in Huron and Mendota and Wasco

FRANCISCO GALVEZ, 35, sits on the floor of his modest home as a Mormon missionary speaks with his family. In Huron, religion has sprouted where crops have not.

and Firebagh and all the other farmworker communities on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley — even the permanent populations are packing up.

"The house across the street from us they all left yesterday," Galvez said. "Maybe this town won't be here anymore?"

Since the days of the Dust Bowl, these have been the places where trouble hits first and money doesn't last.

Before the drought moved into Year Three, Galvez paid the rent and bought his children school supplies. When he left for the fields, his wife, Maya, would send him off with a lunch of tortillas and beans and fruit.

It was late afternoon on this April day. He hadn't eaten since the night before.

He was more than a month behind on his \$850-a-month rent, but his landlord had agreed to let him pay a little each week.

The month before, when Maya told him she was pregnant, she apologized.

"She told me she is worried for me because there is no work," he said. "But I told



WITH A DEARTH of hungry workers crowding in to eat at all hours of the day, the Mexico Cafe in Huron has cut back its hours. Since the days of the Dust Bowl, such farmworker communities have been places where trouble hits first and money doesn't last.

her, 'A baby is a happy thing. Don't worry, we'll handle it. I will try. I will do my best."

Galvez's house is ranch-style, three bedrooms. There's a prancing Chihuahua named Mommy and a crate of oranges in the corner — a farmer gave Galvez permission to gather fruit on the ground.

The walls are freshly painted and hung with school class photos and a calendar with scenes of Yosemite and scripture. But some windows are cracked and there's almost no furniture.

The people who broke in on the same day Galvez learned his wife was pregnant took everything, even the beds. They left one wooden chair.

The neighbors across the street brought over a big-screen TV and a soft chair. Galvez borrowed money from his brother in Texas to fix the largest window. His brother, he said, is the type of person who expects to be paid back promptly.

The garbanzo field yielded two days of work. It was now two weeks later and Galvez hadn't found any other jobs. He said the fields are his only choice. In Oaxaca, he left school after fourth grade to work. He's been in California since he was 17, but he is not a U.S. citizen.

Rafael, a man who has worked under

many last names, knows a lot of contractors and used to be able to line up work ahead of time.

But now, in the early mornings, long before sunrise, they go to the parking lot in front of the panaderia where they can no longer afford to buy Mexican sweetbread and coffee. They wait with other day laborers for a contractor to drive up and bark an offer.

The week before the going rate was \$8 an hour, minus \$8 to \$12 a day for a ride in the van to fields 45 minutes away. So many people have fled town that farmers were hurting for workers and the offer on this day had gone up to \$8.50 an hour. Still, Galvez hadn't been hired. He went home when he wanted to be working.

His two youngest girls, a tangle of giggles, played leapfrog in the empty living room. Manuel, 16, the oldest of six children, was in his room studying.

Galvez is proud of Manuel for avoiding the streets.

"He comes straight home from school. He works out, watches TV and stays inside. He wants to join the Navy someday," Galvez said. "I tell the other ones, 'Be like your brother."

Shyly, lowering his head, Galvez recalled that recently Manuel gave him a playful

punch in the arm and they tussled the way they did when his son was small.

"He told me he was proud of me. He told me he wanted to be like me," Galvez said. "I said, 'I don't want you to be like me. You have to be better than me."

By late April, the air held the warmth of growing season.

Water flowed in concrete canals. Precisely set sprinklers sent their spray ch-ch-ch-ing over fields. A high school runner in red shorts stood out against miles of blue-green onion fields.

The illusion of lushness was there. But without the rains, even California's vast system of buying, selling, pumping and moving trillions of gallons of water from the Sacramento Delta to this dry, clay-bottom plain — even pumping so much groundwater that parts of the Central Valley sink a foot a year — wasn't enough to keep Huron working.

The main drag was as sleepy as the stray dogs napping in every shady doorway. Two men in cowboy hats gossiped on a

bench. A daily afternoon poker game was languidly being played in a window booth at a near-empty cafe.

"Only for fun, no money," the waitress said, though there were clearly stacks of bills on the table.

Huron already whispered of the ghost town it could soon be: It has a \$2-million deficit.

Only about 1,000 people in a town with a permanent population of 7,000 are registered to vote, and of those, only some 200 actually do.

No one has declared for the two open City Council seats — including the incumbents. Each week at school, Galvez's children have fewer classmates.

Antonio Chavarrias, a fieldworker, said the drought is different from other natural disasters because it doesn't end.

This is the third year of drought but, he said, just the beginning of the hardships.



WHEN MAYA, Galvez's wife, found out she was pregnant with their seventh child, she apologized. "She told me she is worried for me because there is no work."



FARMWORKERS who once could line up work ahead of time now gather at a local panaderia to wait for a contractor to drive up and bark an offer.

"It's going to get worse," he said. "They're not planting. Think what it will be like at harvest."

Chavarrias came from El Salvador, where, he said, people make \$6 for five hours of work. He supports a 22-year-old daughter and a 20-year-old son going to college there.

"They're in my heart," he said. He hasn't seen them in 10 years.

Galvez is determined that the one sacrifice he won't make for his family is leaving them.

Once before when times were hard, he went alone to Texas to work. He was gone more than three years.

There was another man. He almost lost his wife.

"I lose time with the children. I lose everything," he said. "I don't want to do it again."

But if they stay, he doesn't have work. The family now owed almost two months' back rent. "It's breaking my head, wondering what are we going to do, what are we going to do?" he said.

Mormons were at Galvez's house — two blond, Spanish-speaking women from Utah who had been coming weekly.

Down the street, a man in a crisp plaid shirt was walking around in the heat, shaking hands and introducing himself to everyone he passed. He was an evangelical pastor from Lemoore.

The drought is bringing a lot of religion to Huron. Ministers walk the streets; bars notorious for violence and prostitution are empty.

"We've been having less problems downtown," said Police Chief George Turegano, a retired Capitola officer. "People have less money in their pocket. They're saving it to move to the next town, the next job."

When Turegano took the job two years ago — the 10th police chief in about as many years — he told his friends in law enforcement that Huron was like the Wild West.

"Not too many bedroom communities have the level of nightly

shootings, prostitution and domestic abuse as these small Westside towns," he said. "But it's calmer lately."

At Galvez's house the lead missionary was encouraging Galvez's middle daughter, 12-year-old Dianey, in prayer.

"Just say what's in your heart," she told her.

Dianey haltingly gave thanks for waking up in the morning, and that her grandmother hadn't been sick lately. She didn't pray for rain as numerous signs across the Central Valley suggest.

Galvez, who was raised Catholic, has been going to several different churches.

"I like what they say. They all say the same thing: 'If your mind is right you can talk to God and he will tell you what to do," he said.

"I still have to learn how to make my mind right."

In May, a season when Huron's population once doubled with workers planting



"WE'VE BEEN having less problems downtown," Huron's police chief says of an area once known for violence and prostitution. "People have less money in their pocket. They're saving it to move."



DROUGHT IS different from other natural disasters because it doesn't end, one fieldworker says. Though rain has been scarce for years, some workers believe this is just the start of their hardships.

and picking, Galvez had found three days of work in two weeks.

The family was down to the amount of his last check: \$256. They had stocked up on huge bags of beans and rice. The Mormon missionaries had brought misshapen cupcakes, the cake not reaching to the top of the cups and canned chocolate frosting three times higher. Two family friends had brought over bags of sweet breads and cilantro from their garden.

Galvez and Maya called a family meeting. Galvez said they told the children they would probably be moving to Texas soon.

The 15-year-old, Itzel, said no, she had a boyfriend. The 11-year-old, Francisco, said no, he liked his school. The oldest son, Manuel, said not a word. He only put a hand on his father's shoulder.

diana.marcum@latimes.com