NARRATIVE ONE

You Don't Need to Be a Doctor or Scientist to Smell the Stench

The Story of Fausto Limon

Fausto Limon lives in the Perote Valley, where Smithfield Foods has built a huge hog-raising complex. He is a leader of the resistance to the hog farms.

My family has been living in the *municipio* of Perote for generations. My ancestors were landowners, and they had a big hacienda in Alchichica, where they built a church that's unique, different from all the rest in Mexico.

My great-grandfathers went off to fight with Pancho Villa during the Revolution. Then, even before the land reform came, they divided up the hacienda into small parcels. My grandfather then bought his own ranch, where we live today, called Rancho Riego. My father built a stone house here during the 1950s. He was very taken with modern ideas about design and construction, and there's nothing like it.

Today we grow corn, beans, wheat, carrots, tomatoes, and tomatillos—at least we would if we had the money. That's what we used to grow. Today I hardly have enough money to plant a crop of beans, which is what we have in front of the house. We farm thirty-eight hectares, which is enough to support a family. There were six of us, but there's only five now since my mom died of a kidney infection.

Before the *granjas* [pig farms] came, they said that they would bring jobs. But then we found out the reality, the way things really are. Yes, there were jobs, but they also brought a lot of contamination.

The *granjas* came in '94 and '95. What we experienced at first was the stench. The air smells like rotten meat. The wind has a chemical smell. I can't really describe how bad it smells. At night we'd begin to

vomit, and we'd get into my pickup truck and drive until we couldn't smell it any longer, and we'd all sleep in the truck.

Then the taste of the water from my well changed. We had very good water before, but everyone in my family began to suffer from kidney infections. Two and a half months ago, we went to a doctor who told us we should stop drinking the well water. We began to drink bottled water. Since then we haven't had to take any more medicine for our kidneys. Before that we were taking it every fifteen or twenty days.

There are a lot of flies now. Some time ago we also had a lot of savage dogs, who were attracted by the dead bodies of pigs from the farms. They'd just bury them right below the surface of the earth, and the dogs would dig them up. There were many of them. We were raising ostriches, and they killed five of the six we had on the ranch.

Once people began to understand the reality, we began to hold meetings and form a group, Pueblos Unidos, to defend what is ours. I was one of the first people, because I was living in the middle of it all. The reason for the protests was the stench, and the pollution in the air, the ground, and in the aquifers. In the area where I live, the water table is about 8 meters below the surface now. When they dig the holes for their oxidation ponds, they don't use a membrane or filter, so what's in the pond travels into the aquifer. The ponds are as deep as the level of our aquifers.

In 2003–2004, they bought land near my own farm. The company bought land from *ejidos* [collectives formed during the land reform] mostly, and some from small farmers. When they announced they were expanding the unit there, the people got together, and we wouldn't let them build it. Earlier there'd been an expansion in Totalco, and people stopped it from expanding there also.

We sat in and blocked the highway, because they were beginning their expansion plans again for the farm next to my ranch. We actually let cars through, but we slowed them down. There were more than a thousand of us. We had an effect, because it stopped the construction of more farms.

We also collected signatures, and sent appeals to government

authorities, but to this day we've never received any real answers. There was a meeting with the authorities from Puebla and Veracruz in Chichicuautla. At that meeting we signed an agreement, but the company went on functioning and treating us as they always had.

Now they're saying again they're going to expand. We'll see what the people decide to do. The municipal president in Guadalupe Victoria in Puebla wants to give the company permission to do it. At a meeting with the subsecretary of administration for the state of Puebla, people told me that she said the company was going to expand no matter what.

The people are saying now that they're not going to let the company put in more farms. I don't know exactly what they will do, but if they say they won't let the company build more *granjas*, then for sure they won't let it happen.

Our back is to the wall. I'm glad to see the people waking up to the pollution here. You don't need to be a scientist or doctor to smell the stench or see how it's filtering into our water and earth. The authorities and the company say they're not polluting. But everyone here can see it. When they say the pollution is not getting into the water, no one believes it.

There was a lot of pig-growing here before the *granjas*. We used our pigs as kind of a savings account, and because we could feed them the corn we were already growing. They were something we could sell if we needed money. But now there's very little.

You have to vaccinate pigs so they don't get sick, three times for different illnesses. When the pig farms came, they stopped selling the medicine, and lots of our pigs died. The medicine's not available here anymore. They don't sell it.

Once one of the people working at the *granja* told me I should get rid of my pigs, and they'd give me sheep to raise instead. But to this day I've never seen a sheep from them. I'm probably a sheep for believing him.

Many people have left for other countries. It's also because of the lack of jobs here. People leave in groups, and invite others to go with

them—groups of three, four, even ten people. They risk crossing the border without documents, and many lose their lives. It's a big problem, and getting even bigger.

We all want the company to leave. We don't want it here and we don't see any other solution.

NARRATIVE TWO

We're Here Because of the Economic Crisis

The Story of David Ceja and Guadalupe Marroquin

David Ceja and Guadalupe Marroquin were both born in Veracruz and migrated to the United States, where they went to work at Smithfield Food's Tarheel plant.

DAVID CEJA

My father and brother are *ejidatarios* [farmers on communal land] near Martinez de la Torre, in Veracruz. They have some land, but never enough money to cultivate it. That's why I left, in order to get some money so that we could farm. As a child I was already working in the fields, just to buy shoes, or a book or pencil for school. It was hard to find enough for everyone, so I suffered all through my childhood.

It was hard just to get bread, much less a piece of meat, because it was all so expensive. As they say, we ate tortillas with salt. But we could give milk to people who came asking for it. There were people even worse off than us. Now the boys I played with are all here. I'd see them working in the plant.

At first we had some fruit trees—oranges and bananas—and about ten cows. We had some pigs and chickens we'd sell to get sugar or salt. Sometimes the price of a pig was enough to buy what we needed, but then it wasn't. Farm prices were always going down. Everyone was hurting almost all the time.

The fruit we were growing was for the US, but then when they'd stop eating it, or they'd have some requirement we couldn't meet, we couldn't sell what we were growing. The free trade agreement was the cause of our problems. They were just paying as little to farmers as they could. When the prices went up, no one had any money to pay. After the crisis, we couldn't pay for electricity—we'd

just use candles at home. But when you see that your parents don't have any money, that's when you decide to come, to help them.

In the ranches where we lived, *coyotes* would come by offering to take us north. I was eighteen years old when I left, in 1999. When we started thinking about coming to the US, we couldn't see how to come up with the money we needed. We'd look at what we had and it didn't add up to much. My parents sold four cows and two hectares for the money to get to the border. Then I walked across the river from Tamaulipas to Texas and walked through the mountains for two days and three nights.

The *coyote* cost $1,200. I couldn't find work for three months. I was desperate and afraid of what would happen if I couldn't pay. I had to stay and work in Texas until I paid him off, and then some friends told me to go to North Carolina to harvest tobacco. In Veracruz we'd heard there was a slaughterhouse there. While I was working in the tobacco fields friends gave me a hand, and I was hired. They all come from the area near where I lived in Martinez de la Torre. Lots of people from Veracruz worked at Smithfield.

GUADALUPE MARROQUIN

I grew up on a ranch in Las Choapas, in Veracruz. Our family grew rice and corn and sold pigs when the price was high. But prices were usually low, and my father complained that when the crops were harvested the prices always fell. Whenever we thought we could get ahead, the prices would fall.

Later, I worked on a rubber plantation. I was never able to go to school, because we didn't have any money. I got married in 1981, and my husband and I worked in the fields. We had a small piece of land, and we'd raise corn, cows, and pigs. Sometimes we could get a good price, but mostly we couldn't. My four kids were born in the 1980s. I didn't want them to be illiterate. I could read and write a little, but I wanted something better for them, so I began to put them through school.

In 2000, my oldest girl started college. She took the exam to get a subsidy for low-income families, but that wasn't enough. Plus, I had the other kids getting older too. My goal was to get them all through school.

So I came to the US with a *coyote*. I took a bus, first to Mexico City and then to Naco, Sonora. We spent three days in an empty house, sleeping on the floor, men and women together. I didn't know any of them,,and I was worried by all the stories I'd heard about women getting raped and robbed. We were all waiting for the *coyote* to get enough people together for the trip.

Then one afternoon he took us down into a ravine. We climbed into a pipe, crawling on hands and knees, one person behind the next. The pipe was only about four feet around, with sewage running at the bottom. We inched forward in total darkness, in terrible, dirty-smelling water.

We crossed in the sewers that run between Naco, Sonora, and Naco, Arizona. I was very scared, but I needed to make it across. It was very dark, and the *coyote* warned us not to go off to the side or we'd get lost. I prayed to the saints that I would come out alive. But I had such a need to come that I wouldn't stop. I dreamed before we left that I was stopped by the *migra*, but when I showed him my saint, he let me pass. It cost me $2,000 to cross the line.

I arrived in Lumberton, North Carolina, on a Saturday, went to Mass, and gave thanks to God on Sunday and went to work in the fields on Monday. With the first money I made in the states I bought a saint and gave him to the church there. A lot of people from my town live in Lumberton. They helped me get here, gave me a place to stay, and told me about the job at Smithfield. I bought identification from friends and went down and applied for a job there.

On the line, I worked on cutting out the liver and heart. It was very hard, and I had to learn how to use the knife. The line went very fast, and when the knife was dull, the work was very difficult.

DAVID CEJA

I worked at Smithfield for seven years. I went to work on the stomach line, and after eight months they put me on the loin line, making $8.25 an hour. They just put us on the line and we had to learn fast. The loin line had a lot of problems, and they pressured us to work fast.

Our supervisor began shouting at us and using gross insults. Then he put another person into our work area, and there wasn't enough

room for us all. It was dangerous because the line moves so fast, and we were going to cut him, or cut ourselves. When we protested to the supervisor, he began yelling at us for not doing a good job. When he called out to me, he used a bad word, instead of my name. We protested to the Human Resources department, but they never did anything.

The supervisor said, "If you don't want to do your job, the door is really big," meaning, go look for another job. We said they were treating us like burros, like slaves. But this isn't a job for a burro.

So we agreed that we'd stop the line. We'd done it before, but it hadn't changed anything. The line slowed for a week, but then they started speeding it up again. We didn't know anything about the law, but I told my friends that I knew people who could help us, from the union. People were scared to talk with them. But I said they knew what we could do. There were people working with the union who'd been workers inside the plant too.

We had meetings in a field near San Pablo. They suggested writing a letter first, so we put all our complaints into it. We asked for better safety because the way we were working was very dangerous, due to the speed of the line. The majority of people on our line signed, about eighty people.

We took the letter to HR at break time. Some were afraid, but I told them, if you're afraid all the time, nothing will happen. They'll just keep treating us like slaves. We were shaking when we got to the office, but we explained the purpose of the letter. The managers said they'd give us an answer in a week or two.

Two weeks later they chose ten people and took us to HR. They asked who had helped us with the letter. I said we'd written it. Finally they said they'd slow the line down. The next week we were really happy, but after two or three weeks, they speeded it up again. That's when I told my friends, we need a union. We needed an organization to support us.

I'm glad it came in. We worked hard to get it.

GUADALUPE MARROQUIN

I worked on the line for nine years. Then I got a letter from Motor Vehicles that said that my license was no good. I got very scared

because there had been raids, and people were being fired because they didn't have good IDs. So I quit my job before something worse happened to me.

Lots of people from Mexico have lost their jobs here, and many have been deported. Others get arrested for drunk driving or domestic problems, and then are picked up and deported too. Sometimes the *migra* goes to the apartment houses where we live and rounds people up. There are not nearly as many Mexicans living here as there used to be. People have moved to other states, with their whole families. Some restaurants have even closed.

But I have faith in God, and I still need the money to send home for my children. I've been here for eleven years, and when it's their birthdays or Christmas, we just talk on the telephone. I feel very sad and alone on the holidays. But I've fulfilled my commitment. I came to help my children, and with faith I can do it.

Now I work in a restaurant, making tacos for workers. They call me Doña Lupe de los Tacos. Since I came here I've never been without money. When someone gets deported, their family often will ask me to help pay their bills. Unemployment went up because of the raids, so we have a lot of collections to help those families.

So far the authorities haven't bothered me. But many of my friends believe they act in a very unjust way towards us. Everyone has come here like me, sacrificing a lot.

DAVID CEJA

I became a supervisor also, but they wanted me to put pressure on the workers. I asked to go back to being a regular worker, but they said there was no other job for me. They said, "There's the door, you can leave." I came from the line. I know what it's like. I know what your body feels like when it's tired. If workers say they can't do it, then they can't, so I couldn't just force them to work faster.

Then the company began to hire more white and black people. I don't have anything against them. We all need to work. But the company wanted them producing right away, and expected me to put pressure on them. The managers just wanted me to make them work.

During this time the *migra* arrived. I don't know if the company

had an agreement with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], but they came before the union election, and they scared the people. When someone was called into the office, they were afraid and sometimes just went home instead.

The big raids happened while I was on vacation. When I came back people just weren't there. Workers said supervisors had sent them up to the office where the *migra* was waiting, and they never came back. Then managers began to tell me to send such and such a person to the office. I'd tell the worker, go if you want, but if you don't want to, go home, because the *migra* might be there waiting for you.

They wanted me to send workers to the office where I was afraid the immigration agents would be waiting for them. I thought it was better for me to leave, so I wouldn't have to turn in my *compañeros*. These big companies always want people to be scared, so that they can keep control. That's why there's so much intimidation. Once people unite, the company starts to tremble, so they say, the *migra*'s coming, or they're going to check your papers. The company attitude is, you're here to work, so just go to work.

The company knew we didn't have papers. They need the workers, and we need the work. If the government would give us permission to work things would be much better. We'd have labor rights. But we had to buy papers in order to work. I bought my papers for $700, ten years ago.

It's really because of the economic crisis that we're here—all the Veracruzanos. It's the poverty that recruits us. We all had to leave Veracruz because of it. Otherwise, we wouldn't do something so hard. But I never let them humiliate me. I always fought for my rights.