

Immigrant goes from boxing to picking fruit

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

ROCK ISLAND, Wash. — One night in June of 1981, Victor Hugo Vega approached two men in Tijuana, Mexico, and asked them if they'd ever been to the United States.

They said they hadn't. "Vamonos (Let's go)," he said to them, and a short while later they crossed into San Ysidro, Calif., at a spot where the border fence was down.

To their knowledge, no one saw them. They felt no danger.

"We started walking along the railroad tracks toward San Clemente," says Hugo, who was then 23. "We were not afraid. We were young."

Hugo and his two companions walked more than 60 miles to San Clemente during the next few days, sleeping in the hills.

In San Clemente, a friend gave them a ride to Los Angeles. There they went their separate ways. Hugo found a cousin who pointed him to her brother-in-law's place in Oroquieta, Calif., between Visalia and Fresno.

"There's work there," Hugo recalls her saying.

Soon he was picking nectarines and oranges, earning \$350 a week. It was a lot of money compared with 3,000 pesos (\$250) a week he'd made at a gasoline refinery in Vera Cruz.

He planned to stay just a short while. But the pay was good and so was the life, so he decided to stay five years.

Five years became a lifetime.

Hugo is one of millions of people who have illegally entered the United States from Mexico over the past several



Guadalupe Campos holds a flier from Mexico advertising a boxing match for her husband, Victor Hugo Vega, 40 years ago. They were in their home in Rock Island, Wash.

decades. Most say they did it for better-paying jobs.

Government and private sources say there are now 1 million to 3 million migrant farmworkers in the U.S. planting, cultivating, harvesting and packing fruits, vegetables and nuts. Besides California, Texas, Washington, Florida, Oregon and North Carolina have the largest populations of farmworkers, according to Student Action with Farmworkers.

Hugo was born in Apatzingan, near Zamora, in the state of Michoacan to Purepecha Indian parents in 1957. They didn't speak Spanish but he learned it as a boy.

When he was 18 he be-

came a featherweight boxing champion in Morelia, having trained in Mexico City.

After his trek across the border, he spent several years working the fruit crops in the San Joaquin Valley and began migrating seasonally to pick fruit in Orondo, Wash.

In 1987, he decided to move permanently to Orondo.

About that same time, he took advantage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, often called the Reagan amnesty, and got his green card. In 1997 he became a U.S. citizen.

On a trip home to see family in 1991, he met Guadalupe Campos. They married two years later in Mexico. She

came to Orondo with him illegally but was able to become legal through their marriage and became a citizen in 2002.

They've spent their lives picking and packing fruit in the greater Wenatchee, Wash., area, eventually settling in Rock Island, where they've raised three daughters. The oldest is now 21 and studying political science at Washington State University. Her goal is to become a lawyer.

Hugo enjoyed picking apples more than any other orchard job. His best money on piece rate was \$1,000 a week back in 1996.

He was a "fast picker and very good worker," says Campos, 47, but he fell from a fruit

Reform needed to increase labor supply, immigrant workers say

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

ROCK ISLAND, Wash. — The shortage of tree fruit workers in Central Washington is significant and immigration reform is needed, say a couple who have spent their lifetime picking and packing fruit in the greater Wenatchee area.

Migration of workers to the region for cherry harvest following California's cherry harvest has dropped in half in the last two years, says Guadalupe Campos, an area tree fruit worker since the mid-1990s.

A light crop and rain resulted in such a bad harvest in 2013 that migrant pickers didn't make a lot of money and didn't want to come back, she says.

Pickers working for growers of Stemilt Growers LLC, Wenatchee, can't earn as much as they want because their days are shortened to maintain fruit quality, Campos said.

Migration also has been slowed by greater fear among illegal aliens of get-

ting caught by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents as they travel, particularly just after crossing the Columbia River bridge into Washington from Biggs, Ore., she said.

"So they'd rather stay in California where they know their work even though they don't make as much money," she said.

"We are missing a lot of people. The store (at Rock Island) has noticed they don't get as many pickers coming in anymore," she said.

Campos and her husband, Victor Hugo Vega, say they think most illegals are willing to pay some sort of fine to gain legal work status. Noting companies are hiring increasing numbers of H-2A visa guestworkers from Mexico, she said that system needs to be made easier for more workers to come.

Campos said her brothers, a biologist and a chemical engineer, can't find work in Mexico.

"A lot of people in Mexico would like to come up and work," she said.

tree while thinning branches in an Orondo orchard in 1996 and suffered a stroke the next year. They think the fall and stroke are related. The stroke left him without full use of his left hand and with an impediment to his speech.

Since then he's done janitorial work at local packing

sheds and, for a while, at the Wenatchee Post Office.

On May 2, at age 58, Hugo turned in an application for cherry season janitorial work at Stemilt Growers' 12th annual job fair in Wenatchee.

He says he needs to keep working as long as he possibly can.

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