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Immigration Raid Leaves Texas Town a Skeleton

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CACTUS, Tex. -- The streets of this small, isolated city in the Texas Panhandle are virtually empty nowadays, and "For Rent" signs decorate dilapidated trailers and shabby 1940s-era military barracks that just weeks ago were full of tenants.

Sales of tortillas and other staples are down. Money wire transactions to Central America have mostly dried up. The "Guatemalas," as local residents call them, are almost all gone, and so are a significant number of Mexican nationals. An estimated 12 to 18 children are now living with only one parent since the other was arrested in a massive immigration raid at the biggest employer in town.

On Dec. 12, hundreds of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents clad in riot gear and armed with assault rifles descended on the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in a coordinated raid of six of the company's facilities nationwide. The operation was the government's largest single work-site enforcement operation ever. The plant in little Cactus -- a town better known in the state of Chihuahua, [Mexico](#), and in the department of Quiché, Guatemala, where workers came from, than in Texas -- was the largest one raided. Almost a quarter of the 1,282 suspected illegal immigrants arrested in the raids were removed from the Cactus plant.

That an obscure town 600 miles north of the border and in the middle of High Plains country once owned by Anglo ranchers and farmers was a haven for illegal Mexican and Central American immigrants was no surprise to anyone here. The draw to Cactus has existed since American Beef Packers opened the meat-processing plant in 1974. Swift's predecessor company bought the plant in 1975, and it became known as Swift & Co.'s Cactus Beef Plant in 2002.

Although opened with local hires, Vietnamese and Laotian refugees became the dominant workforce by the late-1970s. By the mid-'80s the workforce was overwhelmingly Mexican immigrants, and by 2000 the Guatemalans, speaking the Mayan language of Quiché, had started to arrive. Before the Dec. 12 raid, Swift employed 3,050 workers in Cactus at a starting wage of \$11.50 an hour to slaughter, process and package several thousand head of cattle daily.

Work inside the plant is hard, dirty, stinky and dangerous, and it is where Cactus's biggest business owner and mayor, Luis Aguilar, and Cactus's largest landlord, Thanh Nguyen, got their starts in the United States. Aguilar, a native of Chihuahua, began working at the plant in 1976 using false identity papers, he admits. In 1986, he was able to legalize his status in the United States, along with 2.7 million illegal workers, under the amnesty program authorized by the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act.

Previously criticized by some local officials who thought he aided and even encouraged illegal immigrants to settle in Cactus, Aguilar took the raids almost personally. He canceled the annual city Christmas party because so many residents, including City Council members, had spouses or other relatives who had been arrested by immigration authorities. Aguilar subsequently lent one of his buildings to be used as a food and used-clothing pantry for residents whose relatives were caught in the raid.

"These are my people," said Aguilar, 50, who today owns the largest house in Cactus, a nearby 575-acre ranch, a laundromat and the town's only full-fledged grocery store. About half of his 26 rental units are empty now.

Nguyen and his family, part of the mass exodus of "boat people" who left Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, arrived as legal refugees in nearby Dumas, Tex., in 1979 under the sponsorship of a restaurant owner who wanted cheap labor.

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Within six months, Nguyen and his wife left for the better-paying meatpacking plant in Cactus, said Nguyen's son Phuong, 37, who is also known as Ben.

Except for the Nguyens, Asian immigrants moved out of Cactus, which is now 99.5 percent Hispanic. Some local officials recently said that 75 percent of the city's estimated 5,000 residents before the raid were illegal immigrants. Aguilar disputes that, saying it was only 15 percent.

To Ben Nguyen, that number is not important. His father usually offered a few weeks of free rent to immigrants until they got a job at the meat plant and their first paycheck and provided thrift store mattresses and clothes, if necessary, Nguyen said. Now only eight of his father's 60 rental units are occupied. Some were vacated the day of the raid, but the majority were abandoned within weeks, when frightened immigrants moved away. Since then, vandals have been kicking in the doors of the empty apartments, looking for any items of value that might have been left behind.

"I do believe in punishment for the crime, but this is too much," Ben Nguyen said. "You scare kids; you push people so far away that you destroy the economy of the town. . . . This town is built by immigrants. They were just like me when they come over here. They didn't have anything. They came over here just to work and start their lives."

But authorities charge that these immigrants had false identity documents, enabling them to get driver's licenses and jobs illegally, victimizing U.S. citizens and fueling the fraudulent document industry. Traffic stops or crime reports became confusing events in Cactus in recent years. Immigrants would offer two names, said former Cactus Police Chief Tim Turley. The had "el verdadero," as they called it -- the true name -- and their work name.

Mario Lux, 26, from the town of Canilla in Quiché, said the piece of paper that gave him his work name cost him \$1,400 and was obtained for him by a friend in Cactus. With that document, Lux said he got an identification card in nearby New Mexico and then a job at the Swift plant in March 2006, cutting fat and gristle off meat for \$11.90 an hour. He was not working the day of the raid but now will not return for fear of being discovered and arrested. He says that he still owes \$3,200 to the smuggling network that got him to Cactus and that he has been unable to send money to his wife and three children back home. He is also three weeks behind in his rent. He and his three roommates pay \$120 a week for their small apartment.

"I have no idea how I will pay that now," Lux said as he stood in the food and clothes pantry established in the Cactus town center.

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