

'We all have families. We want to survive.'

— Laborer Roberto Rendon

Waiting for a job

Work-hungry laborers flock to K mart lot

By DENISE FRANKLIN
Sentinel staff writer

SOQUEL — Just after sunrise, circles of men dot the near-empty parking lot in front of the K mart and Safeway stores on 41st Avenue. Mostly Latino, they talk in low tones in their native language.

A few clutch steaming paper cups of coffee or eat warm tortillas out of brown paper bags.

When a pickup truck arrives, the lot springs to life. Two dozen men sprint across the pavement, surrounding the vehicle. The lucky one, chosen for a day of manual labor, hops into the truck bed and waves to his companeros, who return to their huddles.

Contractors who frequent the lot to pick up day laborers jokingly call it "the employment office."

■ *Illegal aliens and the law* — Page A4

Over the past three years, the number of men gathered at the lot seeking work has grown from a few to nearly 100 as the economy weakens, as more and more immigrate from south of the border and as the drought dries up field work. It is their last resort before going on the welfare rolls.

But within days, the "employment office" may close.

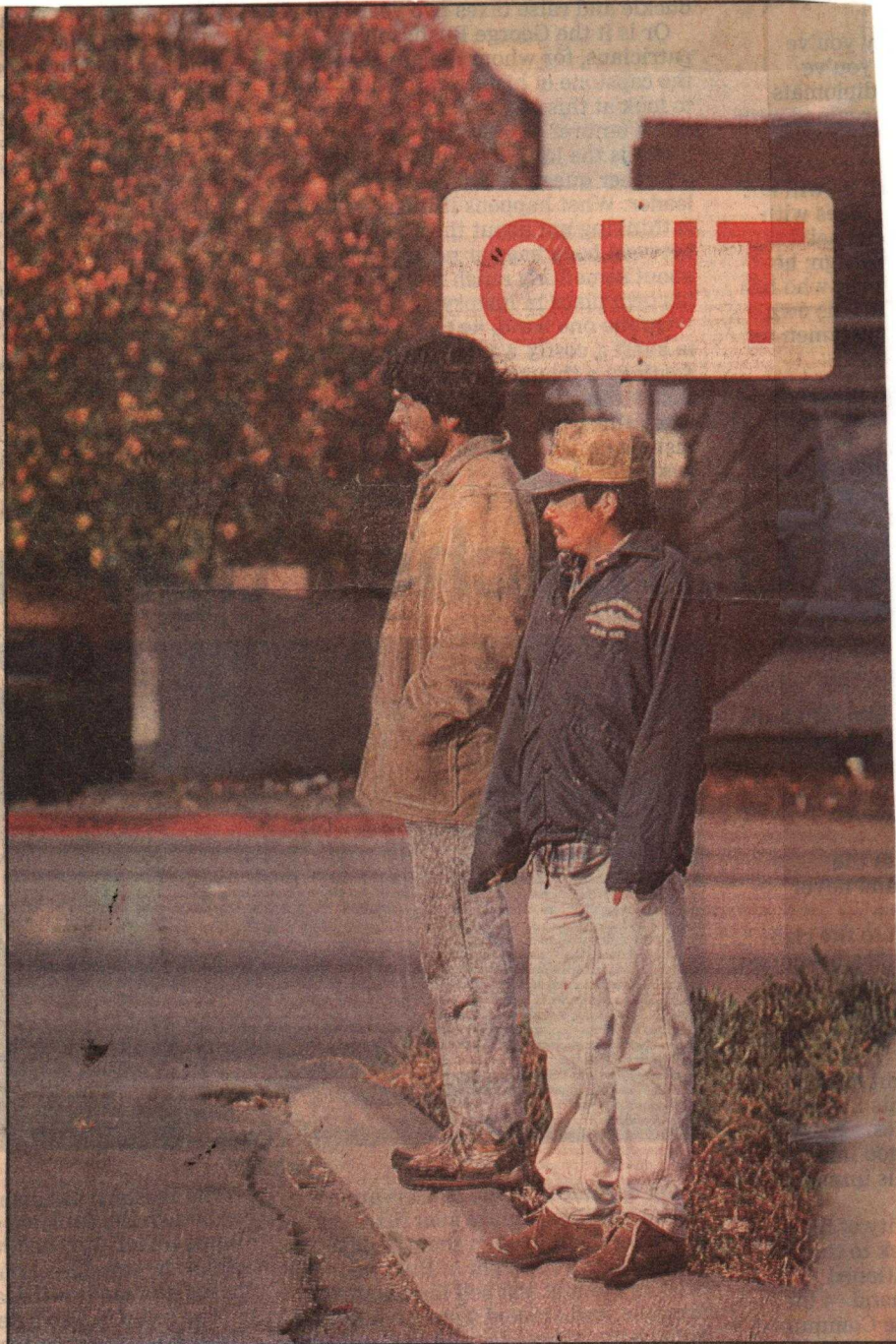
KNS Shopping Center, the Beverly Hills-based owner of the shopping center, wants the men out because of complaints by shoppers and employees of harassment. Owners have authorized the Sheriff's Office to cite the men for trespassing and loitering; signs will go up in the next few days, according to KNS spokeswoman Patrice Franklin.

That action puts an even greater significance on the efforts of Bill Melendez, who is working with Rep. Leon Panetta's office to establish hiring halls for unskilled laborers in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties.

Melendez, state director of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said the problem of getting laborers and contractors together is not unique to Santa Cruz; congregations of day laborers exist statewide.

Melendez found out about the shopping center owners' actions Friday, one day after he had met with Panetta, D-Monterey, and government officials from Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Monterey about setting up safe places for the men to gather, and meet potential employers.

Please see WORKERS — A4

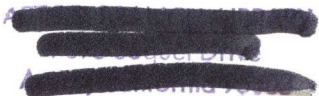


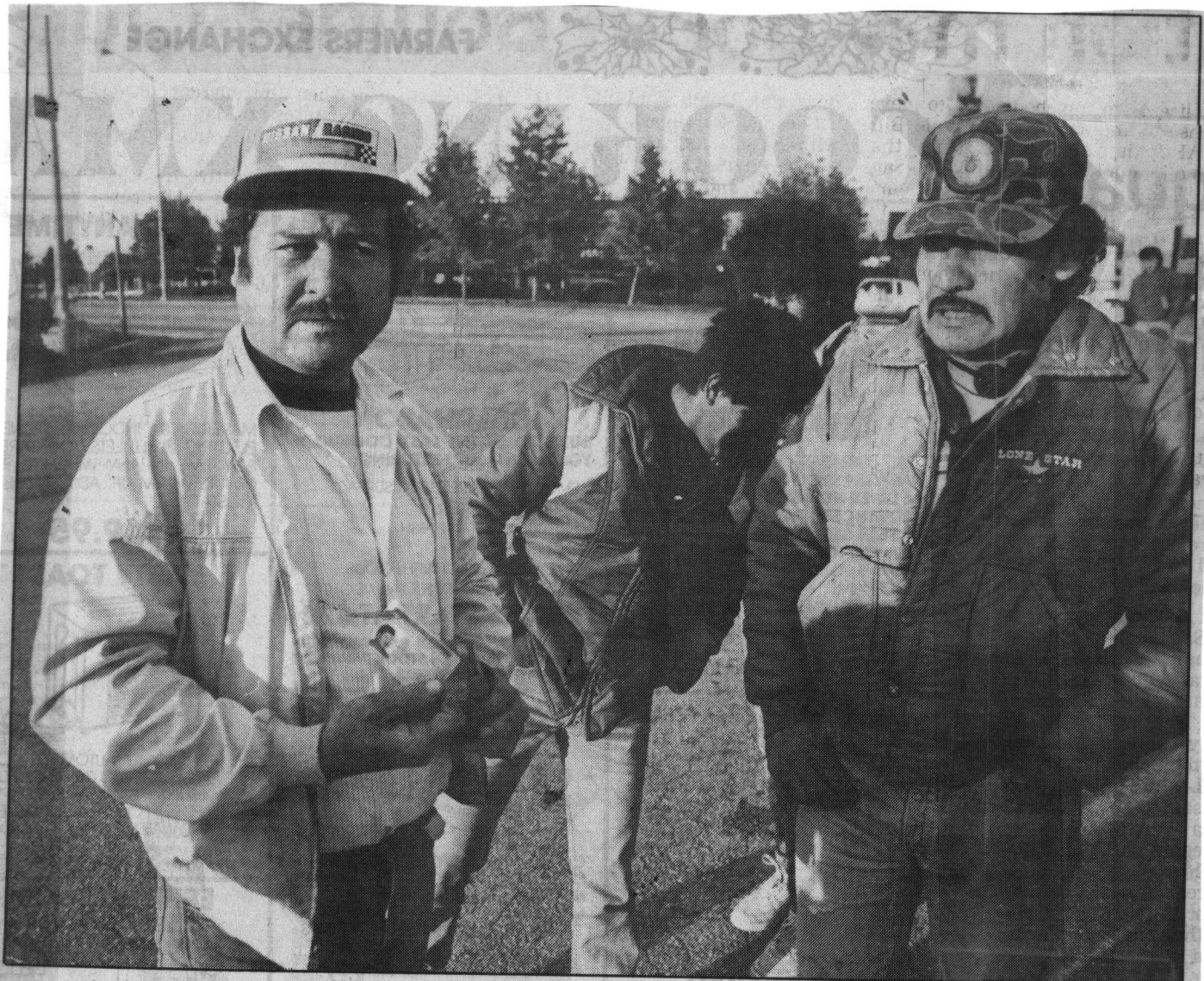
A pair of workers, top, wait for work at the Soquel K mart. Left, laborers crowd the truck of a would-be employer.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

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A laborer at the K mart lot shows his green card, which allows him to work in the United States legally.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos



Happy worker waves to his friends as he leaves with a contractor.

'If no one helps us, then we will have to take money from the government in order to live. . . . We want a place where we can all come together and meet contractors legally.'

— Laborer Francisco Lopez

Workers

Continued from Page A1

"It is not that we aren't doing anything," Melendez said. "It concerns me that maybe the owners are unaware that something is in the offing, and it is just a matter of time."

If the men are cited for trespassing, they will probably drift elsewhere — to another parking lot or vacant lot. The deputies' actions will scare off some of the men.

Some seek work this way because they are in this country illegally. Sheriff's deputies, responding to complaints by Safeway and K mart employees that the men have harassed them, have called the Border Patrol out to the parking lot several times this year. Deportation proceedings have begun against 63 of them.

Not all the men who gather there are illegal aliens, however. Roberto Rendon, 35, of Santa Cruz, has been coming to the lot for the past three years. He says he was born in the United States.

Rendon said he is well known to local contractors and gets framing or finishing work every day. He makes \$8-\$10 a hour, depending on the job. It is up to him to pay income taxes. He supports his pregnant wife and child who live in a Beach Flats motel.

"We all have families. We want to survive," said Rendon, one of the few in the parking lot who speaks fluent English. Rendon grew up in the San Fernando Valley, where he worked for 12 years for his contractor father.

"If they don't want us here, we could sell drugs or stolen things," he added, sarcastically.

Guadalupe Rodriguez, 39, of Watsonville used to work in the Brussels sprouts fields on the North Coast during the winter. The crops are small because of the drought, and there is no work this winter, he said.

In Watsonville, it is the same, he added. For 11 years, he worked for agricultural firms such as the William Buak Fruit Co. and Peter Battinich. But the drought has affected these companies, too.

It's Rodriguez's second day in the parking lot, and he hasn't yet gotten work. He said he has a work permit and is willing to paint, garden or help with roofing.

As a further sign of hard times, Anglo faces are beginning to dot the parking lot landscape. This particular morning, two Anglo men awaited work. Ralph Millard, who is homeless, was one of them.

"I come here because at times it is difficult to get work, not having a phone or address," Millard said.

In the 11 days he has been coming to the lot, Millard has worked 10. He's worked the past eight days for a roofer for \$5 an hour and has another job lined up for a month.

"The main advantage is getting paid every day," Millard said. "In a normal job, I can't wait the 10 days or two weeks for my first pay check."

Millard scoffs at the raids by the Border Patrol. "They send 100 back to Mexico and 300 come back," he said. "They go back home and bring back their brothers and their cousins."

Jose Lopez, 25, said he has been deported three times this year. He recently returned because he has a job lined up with a contractor who frequents the parking lot.

"In Mexico, it is very difficult," Lopez said in Spanish. "We like this country because the people help us. If we want to succeed in Mexico, we have to come here first."

A group of men gathered around Lopez, agreeing with him. In Mexico, they said, they make \$28 a week, but it takes two weeks' pay to buy a pair of pants.

Hilario wouldn't give his last name because he doesn't have papers allowing him to work. If the Border Patrol, *La Migra*, comes to the lot, he said he

will run.

It is not only illegal for non-citizens to work without a permit, called a green card, but it is also against the law for citizens to hire undocumented workers.

The men in the parking lot say they are rarely asked by contractors to produce evidence that they can work here legally. No one in Northern or Central California has ever been arrested for hiring illegal aliens, according to Alan Dwelley, assistant chief patrol agent for the INS.

However, the INS has levied some heavy fines against employers who repeatedly hire undocumented workers, Dwelley said.

"I question them," said general contractor Noel Benson, "but I know (fake) papers are too easy to procure. I don't worry about getting arrested. I don't ask to see their papers; these people are hungry."

General contractor Doug Borders, who hired over 100 men from the parking lot when he owned his own construction business, laughed at the thought of asking to see papers. "They sell those for \$35 a piece," he said.

The men worry that police presence

and raids by the Border Patrol will scare off employers. They said they'd want a hiring hall where contractors can come with confidence.

Such halls have been established in Los Angeles. A \$70,000 pilot project to set up a hall will start in San Francisco in February.

A hall would provide a safe, stable, legal place for the workers to gather. A hall would remove the chance of being cited for trespassing or loitering. A hall would stop customer and employee complaints of harassment, which the men say is done by just a few. And it would relieve some concerns of contractors.

"There has to be serious screening because I have had theft," said contractor Benson. "I have had tools missing. I've had guys who said they worked all day, and it turned out they worked three hours. But for the most part, I have found them honest."

"I think a hiring hall would be a good idea," contractor Borders agreed. "A lot of people are worried that if something gets stolen, they won't be able to find the worker. A hiring hall would relieve that pressure. It would give employers

some reference point that this guy would be working for them for a year."

Borders said he hired the day laborers "because if the job is repetitious, most white people don't like that kind of work. The Hispanics are tickled to get work. They keep their mouths shut and they will do the work."

Tom Bryan of the Carpenters Union Local 829 said the day laborers don't take work from skilled union workers.

Union representatives have visited the lot, handing out their literature. As a result, four of the day laborers have joined the union and are being trained to do structural work, Bryan said.

Francisco Lopez, who once studied medicine in Mexico and now waits for work in the parking lot, said the men there are eager to work and shouldn't be shunned.

"If no one helps us, then we will have to take money from the government in order to live," he said in Spanish. "Many people here have the proper papers, but they don't have work."

"We want a place where we can all come together and meet contractors legally, without problems, without *La Migra*, without *la policia*."

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