

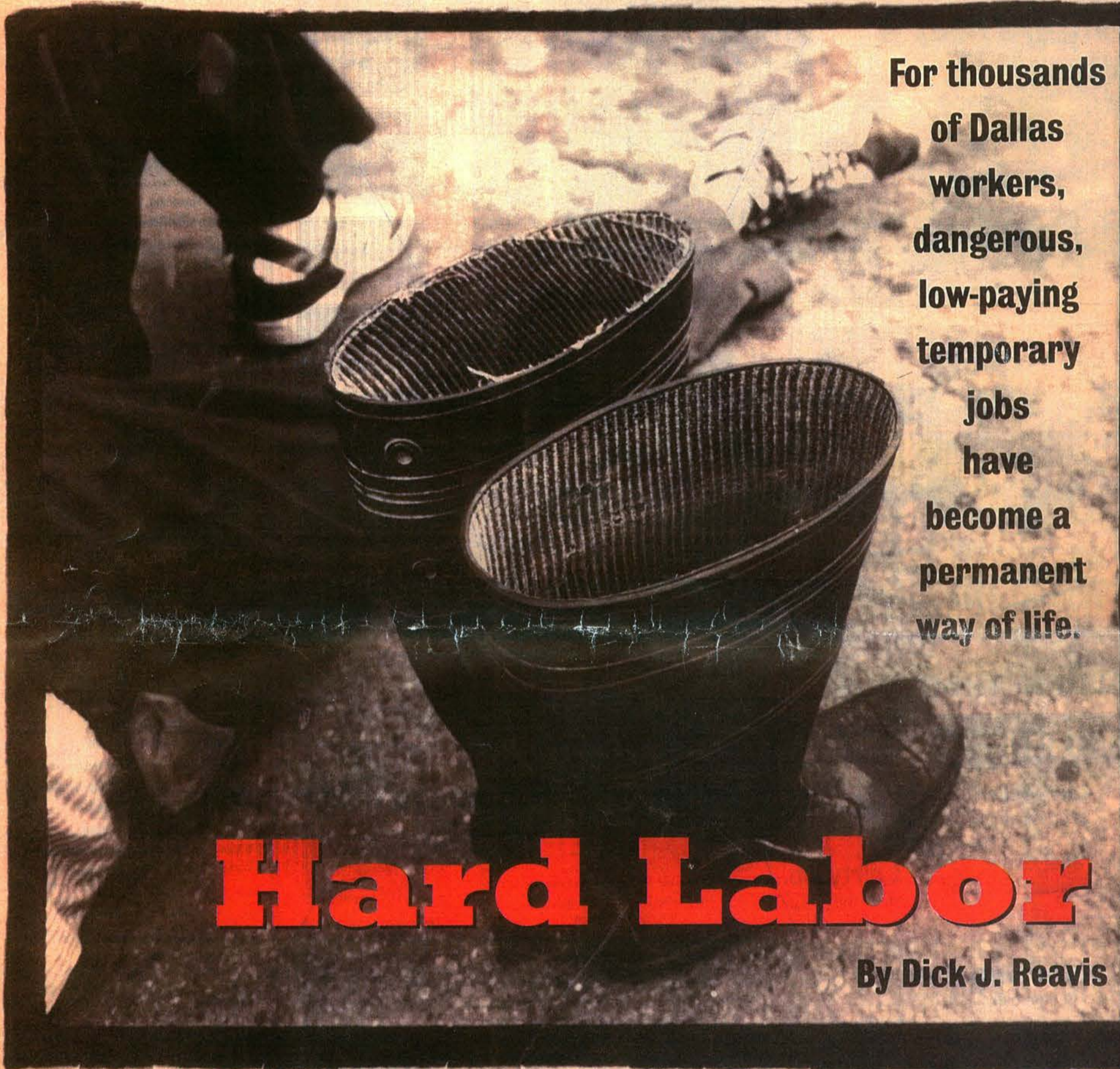
DALLAS

Observer

July 15 - July 21, 1993

**Supercollided dreams:
South Dallas
ambitions get the shaft**

Number 541 FREE



**For thousands
of Dallas
workers,
dangerous,
low-paying
temporary
jobs
have
become a
permanent
way of life.**

Hard Labor

By Dick J. Reavis

Red Cross turns its back on Mount Carmel survivors

**Slouch this way:
Aerosmith rocks
gently into
middle age**



**Local writer's
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probes Dallas'
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**Porter get
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read his ode to the female bottom. Can
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by Dick J. Reavis Photos by Michelle Dapra

the dirty job



Cowboys' headquarters in Valley Ranch, on the northwestern horizon of Dallas. Ten day-labor workers, including Big Boy, Slim and Harry Hippie, plus a few regular employees of a scaffolding company, were to build a huge platform on the eastern edge of the Cowboys' practice field. When the job was finished, Stanley said, there would be a blow-out, beer and barbecue for all. But no one really believed him, except Big Boy.

Big Boy is a white guy in his mid-30s, built like an ox. He said that he'd come to Dallas from the East Coast in 1989, all by himself in a van. He'd run onto hard times, begun to drink too much, been arrested for DWI, sold his vehicle, and, because he kept on drinking, had landed in the homeless shelters. There he'd met the 17-year-old woman who would become his obsession.

He was a credulous type, a sucker. Some of the guys on the crew knew this about him from other jobs; the rest

arrived at that conclusion when they saw how his girlfriend took advantage of his nature.

The two had moved to a motel on Fort Worth Avenue, where they shared a room under an agreement which exempted her from working, though she was as able-bodied as he. Their room rented for \$75 dollars a week, or \$20 a day. Big Boy paid the daily rate because, he said, he could never get \$75 ahead. Twice a month, to raise a little extra cash, he sold a part of his Food Stamp allotment as well, something that could have landed him in jail.

"I guess I'm just a traditional kind of guy," he'd say. "I think I should be able to support a wife."

Continued on next page

The promise of the beer and barbecue had been made at the start of the job, and it had tantalized Big Boy like the pot of gold that's at the end of every rainbow. The job had begun on a Tuesday, at the

How the "dogs" of day labor survive doing the worst work for the least money.

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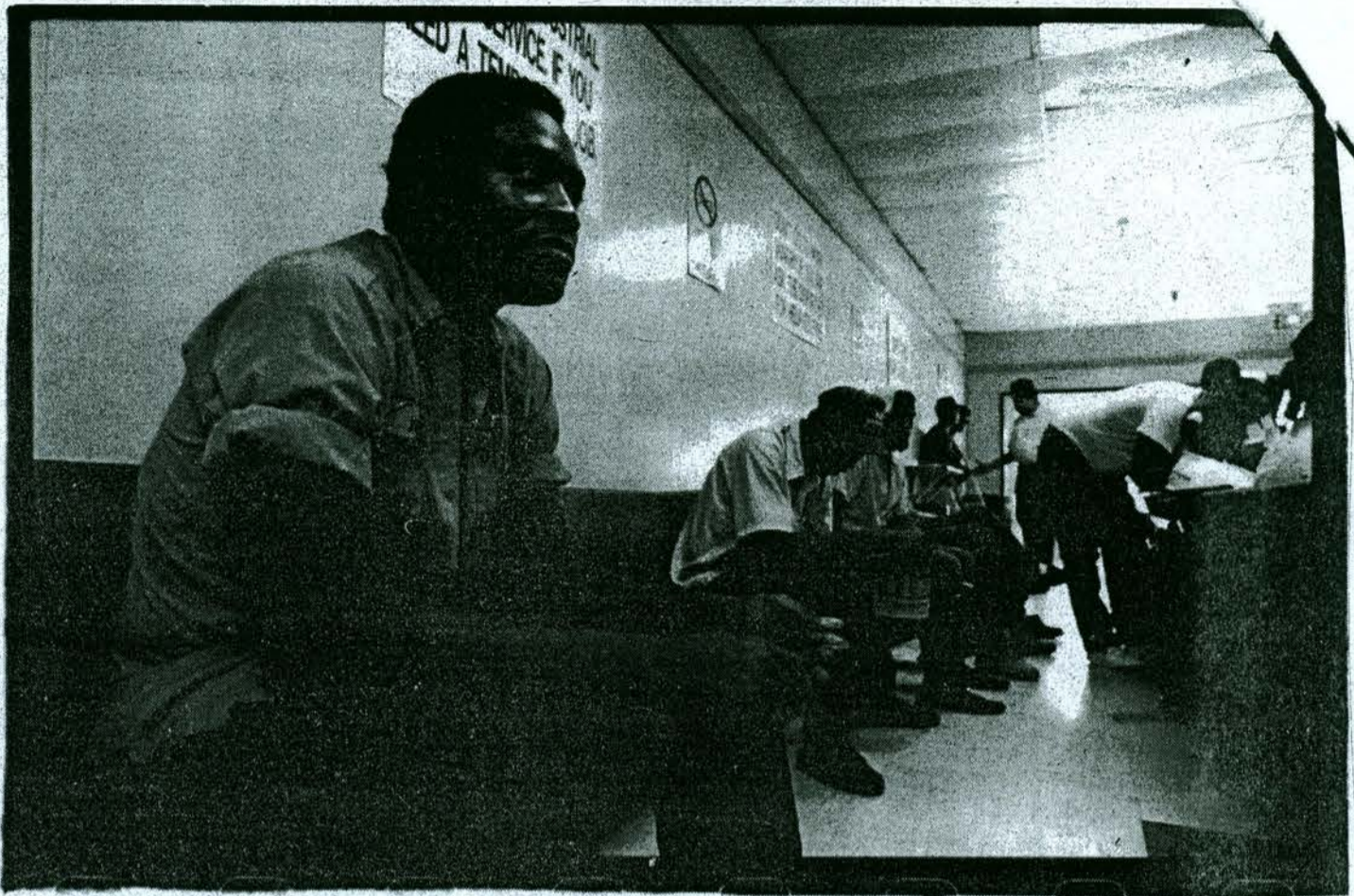
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At the Industrial Labor Service hall, workers wait to be called for a job.

A dirty job

Continued from last page

Other guys on the job had girlfriends and obligations in kind. For example, when the Cowboys job began requiring extra hours, one guy quit so that he could walk his girl from her job to their apartment in a rough part of town. But none was as love-struck as Big Boy. Every day at lunchtime, and sometimes at break, he braved derision to make a phone call to her. One time he walked 200 yards to reach a pay phone.

Big Boy stood out not only because of his hulk and his faith in romance, but also because he clamored for everyone to stay on the job and stay happy. Whenever anybody would gripe about the foreman, Stanley, or moan about pain—on Wednesday when everyone was swallowing Ibuprofen by the handfuls, for example—Big Boy would pipe up: "Don't quit now, man. Hang on till Sunday, you know that we're going to have beer and barbecue that day."

Slim—every regular day laborer is soon burdened with two or three nicknames—was a tall, thin, very black-skinned man in his early 40s. He was married, not divorced like most of the guys, and he still lived with his kids and wife. He'd been in Dallas forever, and said that he'd had a regular construction job during the '80s but that his company had gone broke, leaving him no option but the labor halls. With

his minimum wage earnings and those of his wife's nursing-home job, plus food stamps, his family was managing to survive. His wife had an old clunker, but Slim, like nearly everyone else at the labor hall, was reduced to the status of

Big Boy believed the company might treat the crew as working men deserve—fairly and with dignity. He didn't know that in today's workplace, that's as much a fairy tale as the lifetime job is.

pedestrian. Since becoming a day laborer, he had worked on a couple of jobs for several months, and had even been offered permanent employment. But he had to turn it down, he said, because he had no transportation of his own.

But he may have also had problems passing a company security check. One day while the men were taking a break in a tent set up to provide some shade, someone had asked Slim what his social security number was.

"My TDC (Texas Department of Corrections) number?" Slim replied.

Then he'd rattled off the TDC digits. "Hah, I'll never forget that one, no way," he'd said with a laugh. "Darrington unit, that was me!"

Another guy had joined in, remembering his prison stretch, which was more recent than Slim's 1978 term. In short order, three of the work group confessed to serving prison time, without showing any shame.

About that time, Stanley came in—cutting the reminiscences short—and told

the crew that he was going to ask the bossman to give them not only beer and barbecue, but also \$20 bonuses if everyone stayed to finish the job. He said that he expected it to end on Sunday.

Nobody but Big Boy paid much attention to the promise, probably because Stanley was talking something about birds in the bush. The guys who really cared about booze carried cans of malt liquor in the bags and backpacks they brought to work, and they took sips anytime Stanley turned away. But Big Boy started talking up the promise.

"You know, the company doesn't have to do that for us," Big Boy said. "They might not give us \$20, I know, but it's nice to think that they might, too."

Big Boy believed the company might treat the crew as working men deserve—fairly and with dignity. He didn't know that in today's workplace, that's as much a fairy tale as the lifetime job is.

America's largest employer is no longer U.S. Steel, General Motors, IBM, or any manufacturing giant. Nor is it the service industry's McDonald's, nor even the Wal-Mart retail chain. Instead, it is Manpower, Inc., an agency that supplies factories, offices, and stores with temporary workers, a subgroup in the category of contingent workers, which includes part-time and contract workers as well. Manpower employs some 560,000 people, a mere few thousand more than McDonald's, but 100,000 more than Wal-Mart, nearly 200,000 more than GM, and a quarter-million more than IBM.

The growth of temporary labor suppliers reflects a shift in the economy from one that produces secure, essentially lifetime jobs to one that offers workers the survival of catch-as-catch can.

Contingent jobs straddle various occupational categories, most at the lower end of the pay and benefits scale. Some are part-time jobs, some are temporary,

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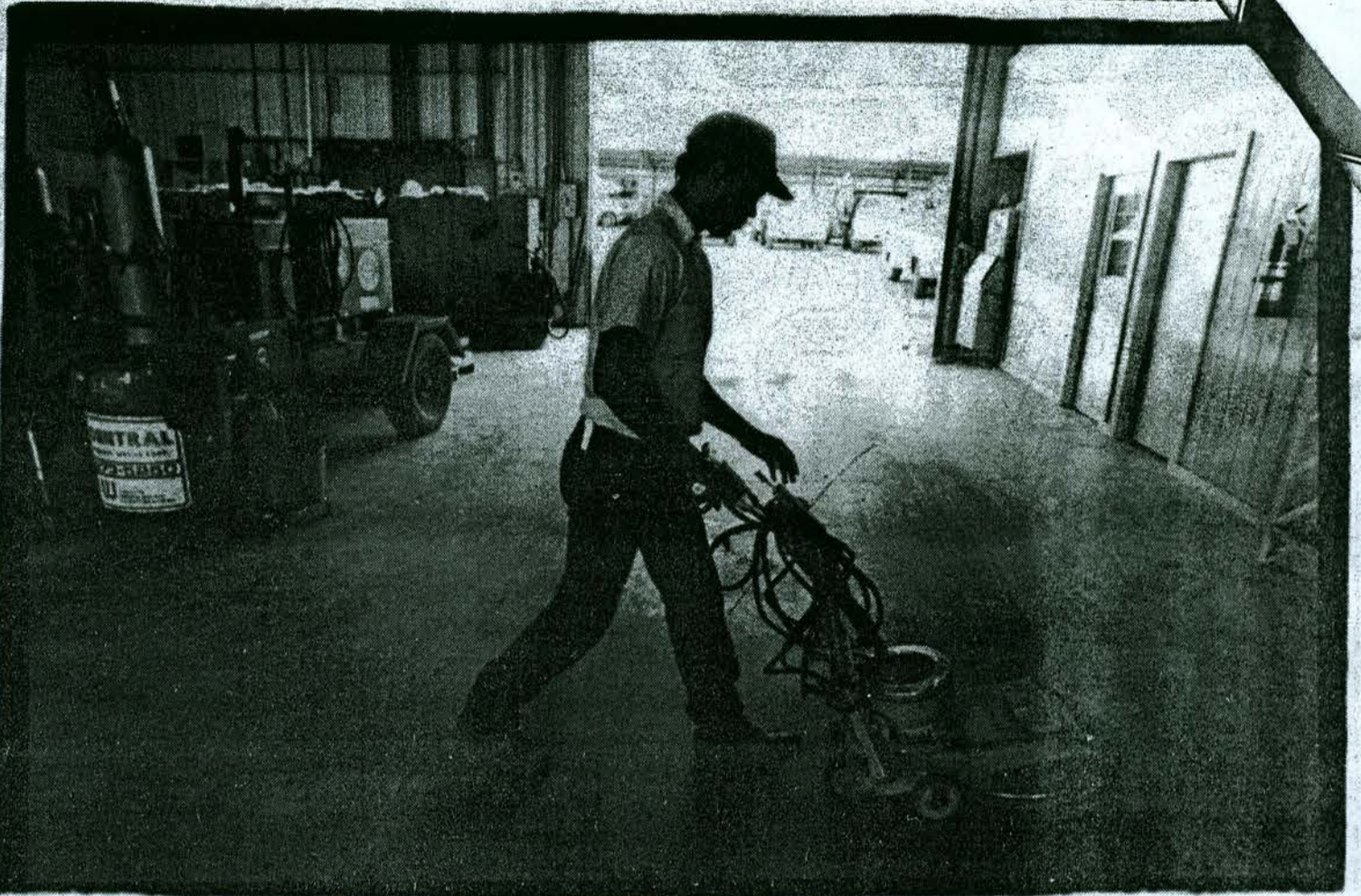
A dirty job

Continued from page 14
some involve the shadowy category of contract labor, and a few are consultancies.

Companies seek workers from temporary agencies for several reasons—cost being the most important of them. Day laborers, for example, do not receive regular employment benefits like vacations, retirement plans, or health programs, and their wages are rarely more than a half-dollar above the federal minimum. In today's economy, which experts say is characterized by a weak recovery, many companies prefer to increase their work force with temporaries—until they're sure, or convinced, that a real recovery is at hand: when temporary workers are laid off, companies don't have to pay unemployment benefits.

Over the past decade, contingent jobs were created 10 times faster than regular full-time employment. Today some 35 million Americans, a third to a fourth of the work force, are in contingent and/or part-time status, and projections say that by the turn of the century, such jobs will account for half of the labor market. Two-thirds of the jobs created in 1992 were contingent, and in the first quarter of this year, fully 90 percent were.

The boom in contingent jobs, and changes in technology as well, have even enabled some of their providers to abandon humble roots. In a labor market which needs data-entry clerks more than



Even government, in this case the city of Garland, turns to cheap temporary labor.

construction grunts, Manpower, for example, has become a multinational—it operates in 36 countries—and has closed its day-labor halls, leaving to lesser firms the field from which it arose.

In Dallas, most employers turn to a

half-dozen smaller firms—with colorful names like Peakload and Backlog—for unskilled, blue-collar workers, paid on a weekly or daily basis. Like all businesses, these firms make their profits by selling something more dearly than they

buy it, in this case labor. Most bill their clients between \$6 and \$8 an hour, while paying their workers from \$4.25, the federal minimum wage, to \$5 an hour. The only "fringe benefit" that the workers get

Continued on page 18

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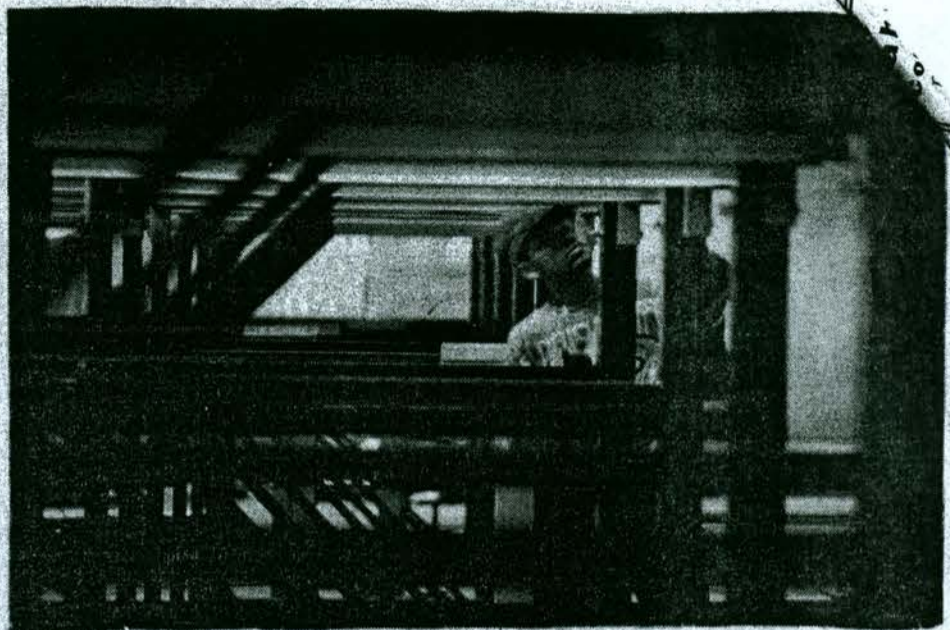
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A temporary worker sets up shelves in an Addison warehouse.

A dirty job

Continued from page 16

is that—like the guys on the Cowboys job—if they put in 40 hours, they begin drawing overtime pay.

The Industrial Labor Service, where Slim, Big Boy, and Harry Hippie find work, is the biggest of the half-dozen labor halls in Dallas. Clients of the company include giants like Dr. Pepper, the Borden dairies, and BFI. The company also supplies workers to the cities of Duncanville, Plano, Garland, Richardson, and Farmers Branch. Though it has no contracts with the city of Dallas, it furnishes, through third-party contractors, laborers who clean up Reunion arena and the "gunslingers" who pick up garbage bags and hurl them onto trucks. In 1992, ILS manager Pat Tammaro says, the company's gross billings in Dallas exceeded \$10 million.

The hall's offices are on the corner of Ervay and Hickory streets, in a run-down area southeast of downtown called the Cedars. Across the street from the labor hall are several abandoned buildings and a beer joint that operates from behind barred windows and doors. Behind the ILS stands a boarded-up apartment complex that's a crack-trade hangout. "It's real handy when people get off from work as a place to buy dope," says Dallas police officer Joe Waldon.

The ILS building is a large, cream-colored two-story whose top floor is a homeless shelter, the Bunkhaus, which is operated by ILS on a for-profit basis. Its residents—Harry Hippie was one of them—pay \$5 a night, and in the main, seek work downstairs. The large, ground-floor labor hall is stocked with vending machines and rows of wooden benches that face a wall studded with a half-dozen

sliding-glass service windows. Looking down from the slightly elevated windows, the dispatchers transact business with the job-seekers in the waiting room.

On the east side of the parking lot that surrounds the hall sits a small ILS-owned concession stand called the Chuck Wagon, where workers buy snacks and cash the vouchers with which they're paid. Vans—IILS operates 18 of them, to carry workers to and from job sites—nearly rub fenders as they enter and leave their parking spots. Rush hours are between 5:30 and 7 a.m., when most workers are dispatched, and between 4 and 6 p.m., when they return, but there's movement on the lot almost all the time; the hall is open 22 hours a day, seven days a week. Every weekday about 600 men leave for work from ILS. About half as many "catch out," or find jobs, on

Saturdays. Only on Sundays is the traffic quiet and slow.

Most of the laborers who work for ILS—about 80 percent—live within a mile of the hall, and go there, like Slim and Big Boy, because they haven't got cars to take them to permanent jobs—which, increasingly, are to be found only in the suburbs, practically out of the reach of bus traffic. Most are black males under the age of 40 who, far from being casuals in the true sense of the term, have been working as day laborers for months, or like Slim, for years.

On any given day, more than half of the men who show up at ILS are returning to the employer who hired them the day before, and about half of these are returning to jobs where they've been working for weeks.

The first day of the Cowboys job had been like forced labor. The van from ILS dropped the workers off just before 7 a.m., only feet from the car of a mustachioed, squat, carpenter-type guy, the

Continued on page 20

The job was a grand project, worthy of a barbecue and beer finale—but the men still could only guess what it would be, because nobody told them what it was building, or why.



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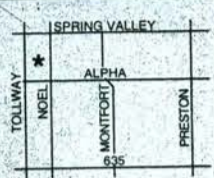
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A dirty job

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white foreman. Without shaking hands or asking names, he had herded the men over by the practice field, north of the offices at the Cowboys complex, to a spot where hundreds of I-beams were piled. The aluminum beams in lengths from 11 to 22 feet were in stacks. Every beam had a 1" x 1" wooden strip embedded in its center. The first task, the white foreman declared, was to get the beams from where they lay to an area about 100 yards from there, where the platform was to be built. And the only way to move the beams was by muscle power.

The white foreman demonstrated how to carry the unwieldy beams—or how do to it his way, anyway. He lifted a beam on one end, pulled it out towards him, and walked backward until the free end fell off of the stack. Then he raised the other end to his shoulder and walked forward until he was about midway down the beam. At that point, he balanced the beam on his shoulder, half in front of him, half behind. He gave his one-time demonstration with a 14-foot beam.

It was considerably tougher with the longer beams, because they weighed more. They'd balance all right—and when they did, their heft squashed the carrier's feet into the moist soil. The going also got rougher as the day wore on, even with the short beams, because men, unlike forklift machines, get tired of hauling freight. Once or twice, a couple of guys teamed up, two men to a beam. But when the foreman spotted them, he put a stop it.

Before an hour had passed, some of the guys adopted an easier method, to which the foreman tacitly agreed. Two men would carry two beams between them, one guy leading, the other guy trailing, both resting the beams on their waists or cradled at their sides. Everybody began doing it that way after a while.

Everybody, that is, but Harry Hippie. A thin, 40ish white guy with long locks of hair and tattoos on his arms, Harry had something to prove. He put one beam on each of his shoulders, and carried two at a time. Before anyone could cast more than a scornful glance his way, the foreman had noticed, too. He rewarded Harry Hippie by picking him as an assistant, and from that moment on, Harry Hippie held one end of a tape measure while the foreman, holding the other, decided where the laboring caste should lay the beams they toted to the site.

By midafternoon, the beams were moved. Then the men began raising them to a uniform height—the ground underneath was hilly—placing wooden blocks or steel legs beneath the beams, and screwing them into place with metal clips. The beams were forming a series of squares across the hillside, stretching almost 100 yards north and south, and another 100 yards east and west. The job was a grand project, worthy of a barbecue and beer finale—but the men still could only guess what it would be, because nobody told them what it was that they were building, or why.

It was early the first morning, while the men were moving the beams, that the long white pickup had pulled up, its radio blaring a rap song. A trim, muscular black guy in an orange-and-green striped canvas outfit got out. A white leather cap, decorated with the image of a gold-stitched marijuana leaf, sat on his head. He had a pierced ear, with three earrings, and one of his fingers

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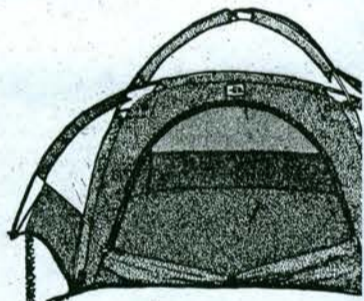


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Workers doze at 5:30 a.m. while waiting to be assigned to an ILS job.

A dirty job

Continued from last page
flashed a golden dollar sign. He walked to the rear of the pickup—and began twisting and jumping like a fish out of water, flapping his arms like they were fins. It was as if he'd been hired to dance.

Who is this fool, everyone wondered. The rapper was Stanley, the guy who would hold out the barbecue promise. He was the real foreman.

Nobody told the workers that. They learned by seeing.

That afternoon, while Harry Hippie and the white foreman were measuring distances, keeping everything square, Stanley and an assistant began doing the same thing. But in a different way. The white foreman measured from edge to edge of his beams. Stanley measured from center-to-center. An argument over the proper method ensued.

"I'm not saying he's a dumb white boy," Stanley sang out, tauntingly. "But he's pretty dumb."

"Yeah, these dumb white folks, they just think they know. They don't know from shit," he said.

"If I was as dumb that old white boy, shit, I guess I'd have to be white, too."

The workers looked on, expecting a fight. But the white foreman kept his mouth shut—as only a subordinate would.

It wasn't long before Stanley proved that he could

be as demanding and arbitrary as the white foreman had been. On that first day, the workers expected to return to the hall at 4 p.m., having completed an eight-hour day. But Stanley wanted his "dogs"—in his vocabulary, there were three kinds of men: motherfuckers, niggers (regardless of race) and dogs—to work until 7 or 8 in the evening. He got an argument from a couple of the guys, the glibbest of whom said something like this:

"Hey, I live in a white neighborhood, way up north by Richland College. If I stay till 6, I don't get to the hall until nearly 7, and I have to be lucky to catch that last bus at 8. If I do make it, then I've got to walk home. Do you think I want to walk through that neighborhood at night? Hey, them white folks is scared enough already, without me

giving them a scare."

Stanley offered a compromise. He'd let the workers go at 4, but everyone who wanted to return had to agree that on the following days, they'd work until 7 pm.—12-hour days. That meant that the job would provide—and require—plenty of overtime.

In the morning, four of the 10 workers failed to report at the labor hall. They were replaced by others. Those who failed to show missed a good thing; neither the white foreman nor Stanley appeared until 9 a.m. The crew spent two hours lounging. When Stanley finally came, he stammered something about, "I'll ask our boss if he'll pay you dogs for the time," as if he was doing a favor.

But several of the guys spat back things like, "Hey, don't ask, brother, you pay." Stanley backed off. He agreed to sign time cards for the 12 hours the men would be on the job, and everybody returned to his task.

A strange-looking white man was watching that day. The man's torso was round, with little legs and arms attached like tooth-

picks to an apple or pear. He didn't walk, like the white foreman, or pilot a pickup, like Stanley. Instead, he rode around in an electric golf cart. He had a regal appearance, like a Roman in a chariot. From time to time Stanley went to consult with the round man, and when he went—he


ran. This guy, obviously, was the boss.

The round man appeared at the door of the tent at break time that second afternoon, with Stanley running in front of him, like a Dalmatian before a fire engine. Without dismounting his chariot, the round man began to speak. The job, he said, was going pretty well, and would take about four more days. He intended to give us all a barbecue and beer party when it was done, he said. Then with a whir of an electric motor, he rode off again.

"What about the bonus?" somebody asked Stanley. "He didn't say nothing about that."

"Well, I told him about the bonus, but I don't think he's going to do that," Stanley muttered.

Continued on next page



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A dirty job

Continued from last page

Inside the break tent, Slim squinted and sneered. "Ain't going to be no barbecue, either, I could have told you that."

Ultimately, the men got their beer—no thanks to Stanley or the big boss, but from an unexpected patron. It was late Wednesday afternoon when Dallas Cowboys receiver Michael Irvin appeared.

He and a coach came onto the playing field to toss a ball around. One of the platform crew hollered to him. Irvin threw him a pass. Other laborers dropped their tools, and Irvin threw more passes. After a few minutes of this, he approached the knot of workers who had gathered to watch.

"Do you guys have any water out here?" he asked. The men moaned that despite promises, Stanley hadn't brought a water cooler to the job.

"I knew they'd be treating my people like this," Irvin said, turning to go back inside the Cowboys gym.

Ten minutes later he returned with armloads of canned fruit drinks from the team's supply.

"Say what kind of beer do you guys drink?" he said as he handed out his booty. "I think I'm going to buy you some beer."

On Friday afternoon, Irvin appeared again, asking guys to name their favorite brand of beer. About an hour later, he showed up with a red barrel, choked with ice and cans of beer.

Seconds after Irvin left, the round man carted up. There would be no beer until quitting time, he said.

As the crew walked out the gate that day, Stanley stood guard at the red vinyl barrel.

"Everybody gets three cans!" he said.

A couple of the light-fingered guys took four, and even with that, two dozen were left at the bottom of the stack, reserved for Stanley and his cronies from the scaffolding company.

"Hah, this is the only beer you're gonna get," Slim snorted as he popped the top on the first of his share.

By Sunday, the men had learned—from grapevine gossip—just exactly what they were doing: building a scaffolding for TexFest, a musical program starring Janie Fricke, held by the Cowboys to benefit an Irving charity. But that didn't matter much to the crew. What was important was that everyone was exhausted and sore.

More than half of the men who had started the job weren't on hand anymore. Hard-working Harry Hippie had fallen out of the crew on Wednesday after eating several jars of baby food at lunch. He'd been grumbling something about ulcers and surgery all day, and about half an hour before quitting time, as if to prove that his ill health was real, he'd fallen to his knees and vomited time after time.

A lithe and strong young man called Red failed to show, because he was on the road. He had a Monday appointment with a probation officer in another town. Another veteran had simply failed to get up on time, a victim of Saturday night. But Slim and Big Boy and were still on the job.

The day was a tough one, because for most of the men, it was plywood time. The understructure of the platform was nearly finished, and now most of the crew had to cover it with sheets of wood; the 1 x 1s in the center of the beams were for the nails that would hold the sheets in place.

Continued on next page

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A dirty job

Continued from last page

Getting the plywood onto the platform wasn't as hard as moving the beams had been, but it was no cakewalk, either. The men had to drag the plywood, one sheet at a time, across the platform, which by noontime was griddle-hot.

Tempers were short, and everyone was weary of Stanley's constant jive. Charlie, a chubby black who had been on the job for two or three days, was working on a team with Big Boy, clamping the last of the beams in place. Charlie was boastful, still reeling from the night before, bragging that he'd paid \$20 for the services of a prostitute. Stanley was only a few yards away, as usual, looking for a chance to berate.

Stanley said something about Charlie's having had to pay for sex.

"Shut up, you motherfucker," Charlie shouted back.

Nobody had talked to Stanley like that all week.

"You jive-ass motherfucker, better leave me alone," Charlie continued.

"Ah, he's just playing with you," Big Boy—ever the apologist—said to his partner.

"Well, I ain't to play with. I'll go upside his head, that's what," Charlie warned.

But Stanley wasn't intimidated.

"Dog, you suck my dick!" he said.

"Shit, first you have to grow one!"

Charlie came back.

Everybody heard, and as on the day Stanley had tangled with the white foreman, everybody tensed, waiting for the blows to come.

But Stanley shut up. He'd met his match.

He'd been telling everyone for days that on Sunday they'd knock off early, 4 p.m., for the beer-and-barbecue fest that would last two hours.

About 2 o'clock, a handful of white children and a younger man showed up with the bossman. It looked as if a family picnic were about to begin. Stanley said the visitors had brought the barbecue. But during the 3 p.m. break, the bossman and his guests disappeared.

Stanley came into the tent to explain.

"Hey dogs, we're not finished yet. It will take a couple of hours. The bossman has left the barbecue and the beer. You can have it when we knock off at 6."

At 6! A chorus of blue language went up. Most of the men didn't want to work to six, barbecue and beer notwithstanding. A mutiny was at hand.

Stanley was reduced to pleading.

"OK, OK, you can go at 4, but the beer and barbecue, they ain't till 6. Who's going to stay with me? I need you dogs to finish this job."

Only two hands shot up, that of a newcomer who was pleading financial need, and naturally, the beefy palm of Big Boy.

"Come on, you might as well stay. It's only two hours, and that barbecue is going to be good," Big Boy told the men.

Slim didn't speak for a moment. He was mentally calculating his time. He figured he had worked about 66 hours that week.

"Fuck this job, I'm going home," he said.

At 4 o'clock, all but the two workers followed Slim out the gate. Only Big Boy and the greenhorn stayed with Stanley to celebrate the rainbow's end. ☐

To protect the livelihood of day laborers in this story, their names have been changed.

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BY ANN BISHOP

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