

Chickens

There's a reason that chicken is cheap. Her name is Rosa.

Five years ago, with her daughter wrapped in a shawl on her back, Rosa walked, rode and swam from Guatemala to the U.S. to escape war and poverty. She found work in an Iowa chicken factory that welcomed undocumented immigrants into its workforce.

In a loud room chilled to 47 degrees, she stood for up to 14 hours, five nights a week, cutting skin and bone from chicken breasts with a pair of scissors. Her boss wanted 15 breasts cleaned every minute, 900 per hour. If she went to the bathroom, the breasts piled up and her boss yelled at her. So she held her urine as water from the carcasses splashed on her apron and shoes, soaking them and chilling her.

On the chicken line, Rosa earned \$6.25 per hour. The breasts she cleaned were sold in grocery stores, three per package, for about \$3 a pound. For each \$6.25 she earned, she trimmed and deboned \$900 worth of chicken breasts—hour after hour.

Rosa's labor, and that of 250,000 other workers who toil in 174 major chicken factories, have helped make chicken America's cheapest and most popular meat protein. At least half of these workers are Latino and more than half are women. Agriculture experts say 1983—the year McDonald's introduced the Chicken McNugget—proved a turning point in American chicken history. The race for cheap chicken parts has more than doubled the number of chickens butchered to 8 billion a year. Unionized meatpacking plants collapsed, and mega-factories arose in the rural South and Midwest.

Nothing in her 33 years in rural Guatemala, where chicken was a rare Sunday treat, could have prepared Rosa for the work that she did in Iowa.

A "modern" poultry plant is a violent machine that kills, eviscerates and cuts apart millions of chickens a day. Rosa and the tens of thousands of Latino men and women who work on the "disassembly line" are disposable cogs in this apparatus.

Hung on hooks and stuck on conveyor cones, chicken carcasses stream by at a rate of hundreds per minute as workers—standing shoulder-to-shoulder, bundled in sweaters and aprons, and armed with scissors and knives—make repeated cuts, up to 30,000 repetitions per shift.

"I was dizzy from so many chickens that I saw pass by," Rosa says. "No matter how fast you worked, that belt never slowed down. All day, it was full of chicken."

Supervisors with stopwatches keep a close eye on the workers to monitor their productivity.

"Cutting wings, they would even check how many chickens we cut per minute, measuring us like machines," said one Mexican woman who worked for Tyson Foods Inc. in Arkansas. "And you do it to not lose your job. You were racing with the machines."

Working in a chicken factory is one of the most dangerous occupations in America. In the decade ending in 2008, 100 poultry workers died in the United States, and 300,000 were injured, many suffering the loss of a limb or debilitating repetitive motion injuries.

Marta, 45, recalls the day her nephew lost a hand in a machine that grinds chicken feet: "When he was taking out a piece to clean the machine, a crew leader pushed a green button and turned it on. And his hand got ground up. I heard him screaming."

Even in the absence of an obviously serious injury like the loss of a limb or a broken bone, the pain is constant. Many immigrants rely on over-the-counter pain relievers imported from Central America, which some call "vitamins."