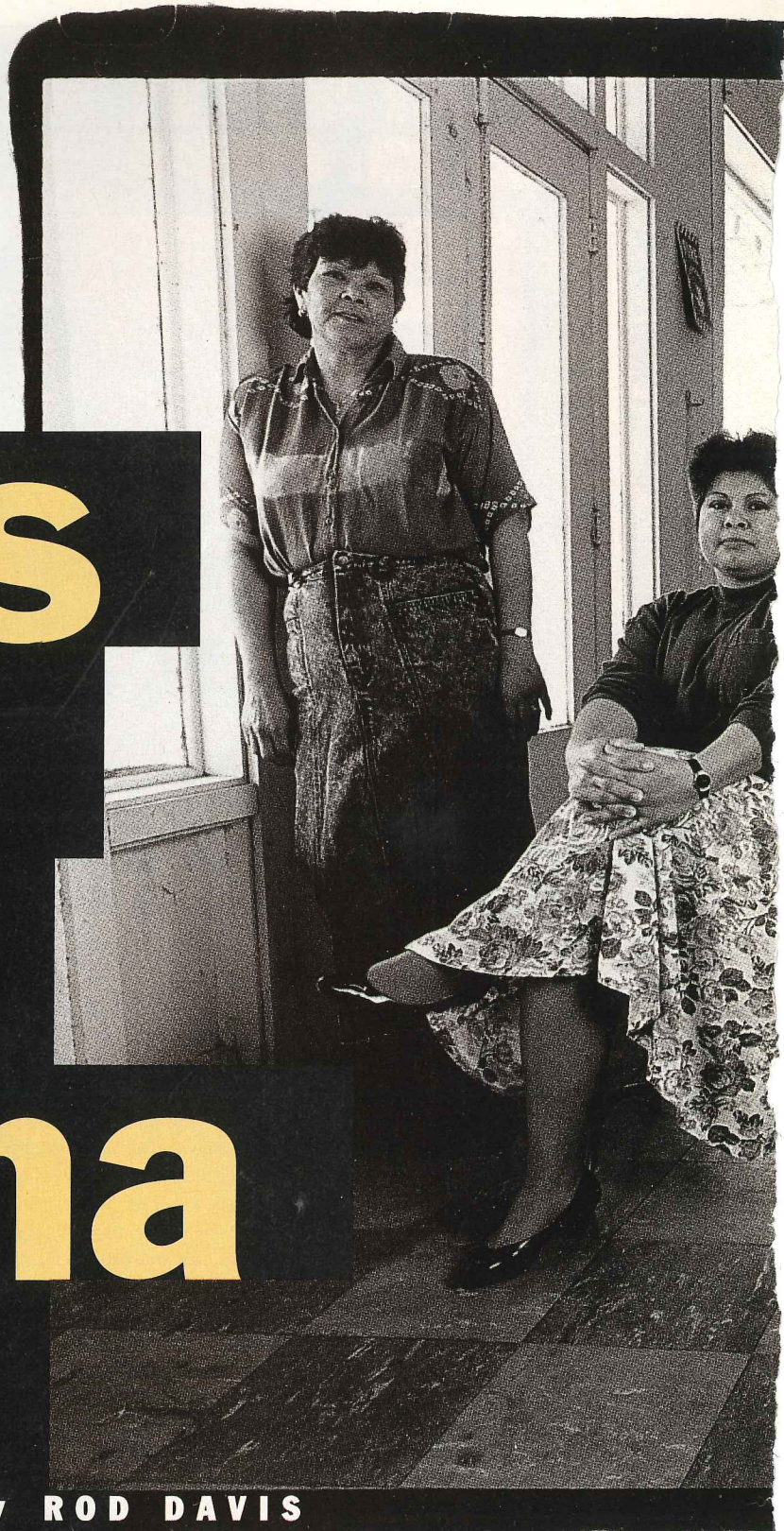


“  
this  
time  
it’s  
gonna  
be  
run  
by us  
”

by ROD DAVIS







Inside the former United Sewing Agency factory in Spur: Rita Villatoro, Irma Sanchez, Beatriz Armendariz, and Toni Fernandez.

**As goes Texas, so goes the nation. As goes Dallas, so goes Texas. So what's going on in Spur? If the women in this South Plains sewing factory are right, a test case for the American economy.**

In the city, you forget the land is out there and that you came from it. You forget that there is a mutual debt and a mutual dependence. But from out there, in the land, you see the links. From every direction the ten-

tacles of commerce, people and culture stretch into the city and out again. One place cannot endure without the other. Not even in the smallest ways. Not even in the clothes you wear.



## If a women's cooperative sewing factory succeeds, it could become one-third the industrial base of the small West Texas town.

Cruz Saucedo, driving: "Remember that smell? Like ammonia?" Outside the steamy windows of the blue Dodge minivan, the South Plains caprock stretches out in deep ravines of burnt red soil and leafless scrub just touched by the first light freeze of late autumn. The four other women in the van—Linda Blackburn, Toni Fernandez, Lupe Morales and Rita Villatoro—nod in unpleasant recollection. All five are Chicanas, all veterans of the needle trade. All are of sensible, middle-class appearance and demeanor. All are in their 30s and 40s—though several, having married as young as they started work, already have grandchildren. And all are recently unemployed.

That's why they're en route from Spur, where they all live, to Crosbyton, 30 scenic but scarce miles to the northwest. It's not really such a grand journey—just a visit to a government office to qualify for federal training grants—but under the circumstances the women might as well be campesinos massing to reclaim stolen fields. Or, in this case, a West Texas sewing factory with a strange, pungent odor.

Rain is intermittent, but the roads aren't frozen over yet. That'll come soon enough. "It's dark when you leave in the morning and dark when you get home," says Cruz, thinking about the winter ahead. Without jobs in Spur, a town of about 1,300 nearly 300 miles west of Dallas, she and the other women face an hour's commute twice daily across the black ice to Post. Longer than that to Haskell. In those places, small sewing factories making garments for the mid-line apparel markets in Dallas or New York still cling to existence, offering temporary and probably short-term jobs. Cruz has made the circuit before in her 20-year sewing career when this or that factory failed, and it's nearly self-defeating. Between gasoline bills and baby-sitter expenses you barely break even. With five kids, as many grandchildren, and bills she can't ignore, Cruz and her husband—a cotton farmer—have to break even.

Not that things at the factory in Spur, which closed in October, had been exactly ideal. You didn't have to skate the winter highways to get there, but once inside you paid for the cold anyway. The big, drafty building the town practically gave to United Sewing Agency, a Durant, Okla-

homa-based firm, had such poor heating the women had to rely on portable electric warmers and heavy clothing. Toni caught pneumonia one winter. In the summer a few swamp coolers barely dented the hundred-degree South Plains days. Cruz herself had fainted once in the terrible heat, and even at 42 she's no weak sister. None of them are. "But," Cruz says, "we needed jobs."

The bats she didn't think about, or tried



not to. Perched in the back, past the assembly lines of pea-green commercial sewing machines, also more or less given to the company by the town—desperate to keep the firm from pulling out—the bats would come in before dawn through the holes in the collapsing ceiling. Droppings lay all over the floor. That was the "ammonia" smell. Bat shit.

"It was exactly like working in a sweatshop," says Cruz, shaking her head. Like Linda, Cruz has bleached her hair, maybe to look younger, maybe because that's what you do in small towns to stay fresh. Lupe Morales, Cruz's sister, doesn't dye. Her high cheekbones and strong nose suggest Indian blood, and although she's now 39 and has been on the line since she was 18, you can see a model's features under her black tresses. Lupe seconds Cruz's

judgment. Toward the end, before United Sewing pulled out without so much as a formal notice, stranding three dozen workers, Lupe had been co-manager, trying to keep it going against the odds. Lately she's been stripping cotton at a local gin, but within a few weeks she—like Cruz—will accept one of the sewing jobs in Post. She's got four children and no husband.

Like war veterans, the women recount what had happened to them during United's five-year stint—claims of sexual intimidation, lost wages, abrupt layoffs, constant anxiety. Oddly, they laugh now, as if exorcising the bad old days with humor, a trait of both their Mexican and West Texas heritages.

But they're not joking around. They're taking over the factory that once left them

hanging. If the local bank, the chamber of commerce and various stalwarts in the small town weren't also with them, the action might be revolutionary.

On the other hand, maybe it is.

Across Texas, as throughout America, the economies of the small towns have dwindled as precipitously as the populations. West of Dallas lie hundreds of miles of an economic barren. The stripping of lives and livelihoods has been going on for decades, but in the past dozen years it seems to have gotten worse, according to those who have toughed it out. A deadly pincer of government policies simultaneously wiped out family farms and hobbled the ability of local industries to pick up the slack with new manufacturing jobs. Especially encouraged under the Reagan-Bush administration, corporations exported





**Left: Downtown Spur. Loss of a third of the town's population and most of its major businesses has literally hollowed out a once-thriving main street. Top: Lupe Morales, a former factory co-manager, had to strip cotton to make a living after the latest sewing factory in Spur failed. Now she and three of her sisters—Cruz, Mary and Ester—plan to invest in an employee-run company. Below: Where a business once stood, Spur banker Eric Swenson Jr. and Dallas entrepreneur Guillermo Galindo meet to put new life into local manufacturing.**

to cheap labor markets abroad the jobs that might have saved the ravaged agriculture-based economies of rural Texas. As for the oil patch, idle rigs punctuate the Texas skyline like tombstones.

The result: The main streets of towns along the Texas trail heading west to Spur—Rule, Haskell, Aspermont, Guthrie—are ghosts. Young people vanish as soon as they get out of high school, leaving little more than graduation dates painted on old water towers. Liquor stops and gas stations remain instead of shoe stores, car dealerships and other merchants of stability. To think of small-town Texas with nostalgia is to entertain an indecency.

To think of the towns as places that must be saved is the key to the future prosperity of Texas. That especially means the future of cities like Dallas, whose economies, immigration rates and population levels are linked to the fate of the outlands as certainly as to their own inner cores.

Which explains the presence of a sixth passenger in the minivan. Guillermo Galindo, a longtime Dallas political activist and businessman, got the idea—neither more nor less crazy than that of the

women around him—that what would be good for the town of Spur would be good for Dallas as well. Forget “free trade,” forget sending American jobs across the Mexican border, Galindo figured. Salvation begins at home.

The force of that idea propels the minivan, fogs its windows with rapid talk of rebuilding the old factory, of finding a new place to set up, of bringing jobs back to the several dozen veteran sewers, almost all women, who are trying to hang on. Soon they are in Crosbyton, where Claudia Hirst, an administrator with the federal Job Training Program Agency, assures them they can get ample funds to help reopen the factory. No problem. She remembers United Sewing, which she also calls a “sweatshop,” all too well.

Having spent most of their lives being told “no,” the sewers of Spur leave Crosbyton like superwomen. For the first time since they got the crazy idea they

could run the factory that so many men had screwed up, they believe it will happen. “When somebody told me we’d never make this plant work again,” says Cruz, “I said, ‘Bullcorn—we don’t want to have to deal with all this anymore.’” Galindo, who has spent much of his life organizing people in just such straits, and who grew up in nearby Haskell, smiles so broadly his two gold incisors glint in the afternoon sun filtering through the dusty side windows.

**L**inda, Cruz, Lupe and the others had thought of the idea before—taking over the factory. Doing it was the problem. They were good sewers, but this was new turf: setting up a business, organizing themselves into a coherent, determined, profitable company. Lacking neither motive nor will, they wanted only a tutor. Which led them to LULAC.

Last fall, just after United Sewing pulled out, a group of Mexican-Americans contacted the League of United Latin American Citizens, seeking advice on various local political and social problems. Like many towns in West Texas, Spur has experienced a shift in ethnic demography as Anglos have moved out and Mexican-Americans, many who originally came as migrants, have stayed, reared families and struggled to become a part of the often closed small-town societies. Almost a third of the town is now Hispanic.

Linda’s life is typical of the social evolution. Born and reared in Spur, where she also learned the needle trade, she crossed the town’s literal and symbolic lines by marrying an Anglo, then crossed them again by running for a seat on the all-Anglo city council. She lost. That’s one of the reasons a delegation from LULAC’s

*Continued on page 70*





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SPUR, from page 55

Dallas office decided to visit Spur and accept the invitation to open a local chapter. As in Dallas, at-large elections effectively disenfranchise the minority population. LULAC thinks single-member districts would put Blackburn or another Mexican-American on the six-member Spur city council and also on the school board.


Guillermo Galindo was a member of the LULAC delegation. But after talking to Linda and several ex-workers from the United Sewing factory, he began to realize there was yet a more effective way to consolidate Mexican-American power in Spur. One that the women could control themselves—one of the basic tenets of Galindo's grass-roots approach to politics. Since that would also have the effect of saving the town's economy, a rare opportunity to do the right thing and make money presented itself.

Within a month, Galindo was back for a second visit—not as a LULAC organizer, but as a private entrepreneur. An Armand Hammer, so to speak, of the South Plains. The plan was simple. Galindo envisioned the creation of a Dallas manufacturing and export business to market the clothing that the women in Spur, running their own company, would sew. Although he and a few other investors would own the Dallas arm of the enterprise, the Spur factory would become a collective. As envisioned, the workers would own at least 40 percent of the stock. But that portion was to increase as the business grew.

Galindo and Blackburn started making the rounds. The Spur Industrial Foundation, a Chamber of Commerce adjunct that owned nearly 200 sewing machines thanks to defaults from a succession of factories, would lease all the equipment for a total of \$200 per month, same deal as United Sewing got. The county would give the women the old factory building for free—if they wanted it, though tens of thousands would be required for basic repairs.

Convinced the project could work, Galindo and Blackburn set up an organizing meeting. They had to see if the former employees were ready to stop talking and start doing. On a chilly December night, about 20 former sewers gathered at Linda's house, a modest bungalow near the high school and just off the state highway that nearly crests the bluff on the north side of town. Most of the local meeting places—the Dairy Queen, the Allsup's convenience store—are along the highway.

What remains of downtown dwindles off to one side, hanging on against the encroachments of its own vulnerability. The defunct Texas A&M Research Station to the west speaks of failed days of yore.



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The new private prison to the south speaks of the devil's pact with the future—taking whatever industry you can get because what choice do you have? That's gotten to be an old story in Spur.

It was cold on the South Plains, so they came in bundled up, many in homemade sweaters and some in Units slacks once sewn on the line. Linda had set out cookies, hot chocolate and coffee. It might have been a church meeting, except that Father William, the white-haired local Catholic priest, wasn't invited. Though well-meaning, and even willing to seek church money to help start the factory, Father William is considered overly cautious. Anyway, the women wanted to do this themselves.

Galindo's mission was to show them how. "*Yo se que es deficit pensar en* this," he began, standing near the front of the living room, addressing the women assembled around him in a half-circle of chairs, sofas and window-perches, some standing along the walls. However, he continued, slipping easily from Spanish to English and back, it was only by thinking of difficulties that they could "create your own destinies, your own circumstances."

Shades of Galindo's days as a South Texas organizer in the 1970s with La Raza Unida flowed through his briefing. So did experience he's picked up in more conventional politics, as a former Dallas City Council candidate and currently an outspoken member of the powerful Dallas Park Board. It's a delicate business, coaching people to take power for themselves. You don't want to be a missionary. And yet you have to move things forward until things move without you.

They must develop a business plan, Galindo said. Elect a board. Choose officers. And, he said, they must invest themselves—at least \$500 each. That would make each worker a part owner. "No pain, no gain," Galindo said. "If you put money in it you're more motivated to succeed."

"Don't get me wrong," Galindo told them. "I don't come here out of charity. I want to make money, and you can make money, too. And if you make money, you get power." He made it clear that he was speaking as a businessman, not as a delegate from LULAC. But he acknowledged the two roles were related. "If you bring economic development to this community, you are going to have answers to some of the problems you were talking about last time I was here. Remember that political mobilization comes out of economic independence."

At first the women sat quietly, listening to the man from Dallas blend his gospel of political self-help and commerce. He

wanted them to know just what they could actually do. He told them that as a double minority firm—female and Chicana—they would have an edge in government assistance for small businesses and in securing contracts. He said he would go to Wal-Mart, to JC Penney, to Levi Strauss, and also to Mexico for new orders.

"You can do it," Galindo insisted. "You've done it before."

"But we done it for other people," replied Linda, frowning. On a wall full of family snapshots was a photo of one of Linda's daughters in a dress made on the United assembly line.

"And it didn't work," came a voice from across the room.

"Why?" Galindo shot back. "Because you didn't meet production?"

"No," Linda quickly asserted.

Galindo pressed the point. "Why didn't it work before? Because the quality wasn't high enough?"

"No," echoed several indignant voices.

"Why? Too much labor cost?"

Everyone laughed. Then Lupe answered for them all. "No," she said. "We were cheap labor."

Something seemed to pass through the room like electricity.

"This time," said Margie Valerio, "it's gonna be run by us."

The questions began to pour forth. Galindo worked the room like a church preacher. The goal was \$25,000 in employee-owner contributions. Enough to cover 25-30 percent of the anticipated start-up costs. The rest would come from Galindo and other investors, from both Spur and Dallas. Galindo said he could easily come up with all the money, but then it wouldn't be a collective. It would just be business as usual.

They wanted to know if he would be in charge of the money.

"No," he said, "you will. You set up a committee and handle it yourselves."

For more than an hour they peppered him with questions and began to talk among themselves. They agreed to give themselves 120 days to raise the money. Before that they would lease the sewing machines so no one else could tie them up. A few were concerned about coming up with \$500, especially before Christmas. They had become poor, many of them, or close to it. And some said they had to ask their husbands. But they had crossed some kind of line in their minds about it.

"You just have to give us a little time to let it sink in," said Irma Sanchez. "This is new for us."

"That's true," said Lupe, lighting a cigarette. "But it's also time we do something about it."

**E**VEN THE TOWN BANKER, WITHOUT whom not much gets done, became convinced that ownership by local workers, with their own capital at stake, was the only way to make the new factory successful. "I guess that's socialism, isn't it?" smiles Eric Swenson Jr., who, as president of Spur Security Bank, has been working for decades to keep his town from dying. "But at least that way the money stays in the community. I think a lot of people have made a lot of money from these factories, and frankly, they don't pay the folks who work there very well. I'd rather see a cooperative where they share the profits than one individual reap all the benefits."

The bank president speaks not with bitterness but resolve. Growing up in Spur in the '40s, '50s and '60s, Swenson had seen the town at its population peak, about 3,500. There were four car dealerships, two farm equipment stores, two jewelry stores, four groceries, several clothing and dry goods stores and six doctors. Swenson went to college and took a law degree at SMU.

When he came back the slide had already begun. The population has now dropped by two-thirds. The old dealerships are empty buildings. Two groceries remain in town. One feed store. So many buildings have fallen into disrepair the town decided to demolish the worst of them and turn them into "mini-parks," leaving green-space gaps where commerce once commanded brick and beam. Main street looks like a 6-year-old's smile.

"When I was 8 or 10 years old, in the early '50s, the leaders in this community were like superhuman folks to me," says Swenson, reflecting one afternoon in his modest office, dressed as usual in jeans and boots. "But as I look back at that time, our entire economy was based on agriculture. Had these giants, as I envisioned them then, had the slightest bit of foresight about agriculture no longer sustaining our economy, if they'd brought something in to supplement our economy..." He shakes his head. "It was a missed opportunity. Now we're just trying to hold together what we've got."

Like most small towns, and like central Dallas, Spur has been fighting back against the circumstances of its own decay. The Industrial Foundation has brought in a half-dozen enterprises. Only two major employers have survived: Dickens Electric Co-op, with about 50 people, and Caprock Telephone Co., with half that many workers.

The banner year for Spur's push toward a manufacturing future was 1974, when three new industries came to town. National Transformer Corp. relocated from Illinois to provide about 120 new jobs. Another



electronics firm, Deltron, based in Pennsylvania, opened a printed circuit board plant. And Salty's Apparel of Fort Worth opened the town's first sewing factory.

Salty's was the beginning of a new kind of industry in two important ways: One, it employed mostly women, and two, most of the women were Mexican-American. The irony is palpable: Throughout West Texas, economic stereotypes run more to ropes and boots and roughnecks than needles and cutting boards and seamstresses. But just as Dallas grew into an apparel manufacturing and marketing center, small West Texas towns like Spur lost their traditional economies and—much as in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana—became unlikely but logical feeder economies of the needle trade.

"There was a Big Picture," says Bill Hoover, whose small insurance agency, down the street from the bank and across the street from the remaining feed and seed store, is facing difficult times itself because the town's dwindling population base looks puny on actuarial tables. "With all the distribution coming out of Dallas," he says, "every one of these little towns in West Texas was set up for sewing factories. Every one could employ 30 to 50 people. And if there were enough sewing machines and factories, then we could start cutting patterns here, too. We could set up

a satellite distribution center in Lubbock."

Hoover, whose office wall sports a yellowed *Dallas Morning News* profile of Aaron Latham, a Spur native and writer of *Urban Cowboy*, smiles sadly. "But the little towns around here didn't get the Big Picture. Nobody looked further than their own city limits. We all wound up with these guys from Oklahoma or someplace else."

Salty's Apparel came on-line fast, quickly employing more than 100 women who made mostly mid-line garments for stores such as Sears, JC Penney and Neiman Marcus. By the end of the decade, owner Mary Perkins, wanting to retire, sold her factory to manager Duffy Allen. He and his son, Mac, in turn set up Allen Manufacturing. But as would henceforth be the fate for sewing factories in Spur, erratic management brought the company to its knees. Allen Manufacturing closed in 1986, owing a month's back pay to its labor force. Bill Hoover initiated an effort by the Industrial Foundation to sue Allen on behalf of the employees. After a year's wrangling, the employees were granted assets in the form of 100 sewing machines. The Foundation then made a deal with the ex-workers. It paid them 25 percent of their back wages in return for the machines, which it then promised to use as bait to lure in a new sewing factory.

Thus entered United Sewing Agency, whose owner, Dennis Hall, operator of a half-dozen successful plants in Oklahoma, had been courted by the Foundation. At first, the factory seemed to do well, with contracts to major retailers like the Units line of JC Penney. But things turned nasty. Some of the women who worked at the plant—such as Cruz, Lupe, and Linda—claimed they had been repeatedly sexually harassed by the manager, who was subsequently transferred. But the factory never recovered, finally closing in 1992 in the face of dwindling contracts. Owner Hall says the closing was due to "quality" problems and that he simply felt it necessary to "transfer liabilities" to Haskell, where the company still operates a factory.

As relations with United began to deteriorate, the Industrial Foundation pursued an additional company, Horizon Medical. The Lubbock-based company rented an empty building from the local pharmacist and eventually hired some of the sewers United was laying off. Eager for success, the Foundation agreed to buy another 100 sewing machines, then lease them back to Horizon. All seemed to be going well until Horizon abruptly closed in December 1990 after owner Joe Mims was indicted in Lubbock in connection with an alleged hospital embezzlement scheme. Now the

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Foundation had almost 200 machines, with the bank holding a note for approximately \$17,000. But there was no company to use them. Rehab Plus Medical Products, a small firm set up by two young Lubbock men with little experience in sewing, opened briefly in the Horizon space in February 1991, but pulled out amid hard feelings a year later. By the end of 1992, no factories remained.

"In retrospect, we had three quality employers—Salty's, National Transformer and Deltron," says banker Swenson. "As long as they were here, we did fine. When they left or went broke, I think almost a panic set in. Instead of really screening people, we just grabbed 'em. Anybody who'd walk up and say, 'We'll open something.' We would have done well to have been a little more judicious. And then after each disappointment, people in the town became more discouraged. The plus side is that we did create some jobs."

Bill Hoover says it was all part of the risk of doing business. "But," he says, "the risk is that you get cleaned."

**Y**ET THERE ARE ALL MANNER OF risks. Several weeks after the pre-Christmas meeting, Linda Blackburn called Galindo in Dallas to say that she was striking out with the potential employee investors. "Nobody has any money," she said. In consequence, Linda told Galindo, she and her husband, Doug, thought they might put up the investment money themselves.

Shortly thereafter, Galindo returned to Spur to see what was going on. Stories were in conflict. According to other women interested in the project, Linda hadn't gotten money because she hadn't followed through. Several women who had come up with the money said they'd never been contacted. And so on. Bad feelings seemed to be growing. Galindo concluded the idea of a collective was being endangered. If the Blackburns started up the factory on their own, that would still mean jobs, but the central point of the enterprise—self-determination—would be scuttled. There was also talk that other people—Anglo investors from the area—might decide to reopen the plant.

After discussion among themselves, and with Galindo, the women decided to regroup, to elect officers to an acting board of directors for their own company. Linda could be an investor, but not the owner. Lupe, probably, would become factory manager. Linda and Doug, meanwhile, said they had dropped their idea of sole proprietorship. "We thought about it at one point," she said, "but I think it's best for everyone to be involved."

According to schedule, PlainsWomen Industries, or whatever name is chosen for the cooperative, will go on-line sometime this spring. Presumably, the worker-owners will not "clean" themselves. They will ensure good working conditions. They have agreed that base pay will remain minimum wage, but production incentives will push virtually everyone to far above \$4.25 per hour—the practice at any well-run plant. Management will be not only committed to the community, but of it. Swenson has promised to do all he can to help. Even the former United manager's ex-wife, an Anglo now remarried to a local

rancher, might come back to help with the factory, helping to heal bruised feelings among the white and brown communities.

Then come the real risks.

Like the entire "grow the economy" manufacturing renaissance envisioned by the Clinton administration, the push for success in Spur is hampered by enormous social and economic obstacles. In a very real way, as goes Spur, so goes the country's effort to replace over one million manufacturing jobs lost since 1989 and an industrial infrastructure that has fallen far behind those of Japan, Germany and other dominant nations. Certainly as goes Spur,

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But none of it will trickle back to Spur unless Galindo and the owner-workers overcome macro-pitfalls which, in the last 15 years alone, have caused 200 sewing factories in this region to close, as well as 400 statewide. By one knowledgeable estimate, no more than 4 to 5 legitimate factories remain in the entire state.

The most immediate and palpable threat is the growth of a formidable underground home sewing industry. Run through a network of nearly 300-500 contractors and subcontractors—mostly Vietnamese and Korean—this invisible sewing empire parcels out work to immigrant families crammed in apartments from Irving to Garland. Now dominating the industry, home sewing comprises perhaps half the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 apparel jobs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area—about as many as have been lost through factory closings in the past decade.

Home sewing has proliferated for two reasons. One is lax enforcement by the Labor Department. The other is pervasive sidestepping of the law by design companies who themselves are under intense market pressure to extract the lowest possible labor costs in order to remain price-competitive. Some former factory owners privately accuse the Reagan-Bush administration of ignoring illegal home sewing because the policy led to lower production costs, and therefore higher profits.

The effect on the microeconomics of legitimate factories isn't tough to figure. Home sewers pay no overhead. Hourly wages can fall to below one dollar. A factory must pay not only minimum wage, but also numerous taxes, including workmen's compensation, which can add 20 to 30 percent to the payroll costs, plus health insurance and other benefits, which could add another 20 percent. The factory must also carry the cost of equipment, building leases, etc. Dennis Hall, owner of United Sewing, who runs his plants about as close to the bone as possible—but still runs them—calls it like it is. "If you are running legitimate factories you have to maintain quality standards; you can't possibly compete with cottage industries."

That leaves manufacturers with few

alternatives. They can go out of business, and leave the market to the outlaw sewers, or they can join the pack heading offshore. Taiwan, Malaysia, Korea and Mexico are already well-known escape routes for industries trying to cut production costs by driving wages below U.S. levels. Big companies have been sending out huge "cuts" to foreign sewers for years, against long-standing, generally ineffectual objections by American labor. Two years ago, Levi Strauss closed a profitable Dockers sewing plant in San Antonio and shipped the jobs to Costa Rica. The wages to the south were \$3.80 per day, about half the *hourly* rate in San Antonio. An estimated 1,150 people, almost all Mexican-American women, were fired. A group of laid-off workers, calling themselves Fuerza Unida (United Force) organized a boycott and other protests, but to little avail.

Meanwhile, the pressure on smaller firms, such as many in Dallas, to follow what Ross Perot calls the "sucking sound of jobs going south" is increasing. Barbara Roberson, founder of Hairston-Roberson, a respected maker of upscale Southwestern women's fashions, currently sends her sewing jobs to Dallas contractors, including some Asians. Roberson says there just aren't any factories to go to. She says her "dream" is to have her own factory, to ensure quality control and to avoid problems with labor laws—illegally made goods can be confiscated—but thinks the odds are too much against it. "I have small cuts, 100 or so," she says. "But I think if I had a lot of volume, I'd have to go offshore."

The economics of her reasoning are basic and brutal. In the apparel business, prices are "keystoned," or doubled, at virtually every stage. If it costs \$1 to sew, it is wholesaled for \$2, retailed for \$4, etc. The pressure to push down costs at the lowest level, where most of the manufacturing occurs, is intense. "I feel like I'm caught in a cycle I can't control," says Roberson.

Even ex-military man Dennis Hall, no liberal or softie, predicts that within another 10 years the combination of home sewers and the offshore markets "will kill the entire lower end of the American manufacturing process." Larry Whitman, owner of Lamesa Apparel, Inc., one of the few Texas sewing factories to have survived the past decade, concurs. He says "quality is the only thing" he can offer against cut-rate labor, which, being cut-rate, is notoriously shoddy. "If I made a cheaper line," he says, "I couldn't compete."

And it's not just hard luck for Spur. William Greider's influential 1992 study of American economic and political policy, *Who Will Tell The People*, described what he called the "harmonization" of wages

around the world as jobs are shifted from higher paid workers in one country to sweatshop laborers in another and a new "equilibrium" causes everyone to settle for lower pay. "The Mexican government has attracted more U.S. enterprise by steadily depressing the wages of the workers," he wrote. "The people who lost their premium manufacturing jobs in the United States are compelled to settle for lower incomes. But so are the Mexican peasants who inherited the jobs. On both sides of the border, workers are caught in a vicious competition with one another that richly benefits the employers."

The land of West Texas shows what happens when policies and markets create a net job vacuum. Over time, the societies that depend on those jobs are sucked drier and drier. In time they are so hollowed out they can never recover. Equilibrium in West Texas has almost killed it. What, meanwhile, is the benefit to the country of further undercutting a domestic manufacturing base that will shrink to 15 percent of the work force in another decade. Guillermo Galindo is obsessed by the lack of an answer to that question.

"Consumers don't get cheaper prices," he says. "The only thing that happens is that corporations make a lot more money. Do you know how much it costs to make a pair of Reeboks, which are made in Malaysia? About 12 cents in labor. Do they cost you any less at the store? No way. And meanwhile how many people here have lost their jobs?"

You don't have to be a socialist to see which way such economies of scale flow. That is what brought Eric Swenson around. And Bill Hoover, and all the other Anglos in Spur whose future rests on keeping the jobs of Mexican-Americans from becoming the jobs of Mexicans. Which will only become more likely under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). There aren't many NAFTA fans in Spur.

"A lot of women here are deep in debt," says Cruz. "It's hard times. Where I work now the owner is hassling us a lot that our plant in Spur will never open or Guillermo will run out on us like the others. We're tired of hearing that. I tell my friends, we're always being left out in the cold, holding the bag, with a lot of bills. I say, we got to put our foot down sometime, why not now?"

So she's put her \$500 on the line. So have her sisters—Lupe, Mary and Ester. So have the sisters of many others in the small town. Perhaps there are enough sisters. ■

Senior writer Rod Davis wrote about the Dallas TB epidemic in the December issue of D Magazine.