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After Ruling, Hispanics Flee an Alabama Town

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON

ALBERTVILLE, Ala. — The vanishing began Wednesday night, the most frightened families packing up their cars as soon as they heard the news.

They left behind mobile homes, sold fully furnished for a thousand dollars or even less. Or they just closed up and, in a gesture of optimism, left the keys with a neighbor. Dogs were fed one last time; if no home could be found, they were simply unleashed.

Two, 5, 10 years of living here, and then gone in a matter of days, to Tennessee, Illinois, Oregon, Florida, Arkansas, Mexico — who knows? Anywhere but Alabama.

The exodus of Hispanic immigrants began just hours after a federal judge in Birmingham upheld most provisions of the state's far-reaching [immigration enforcement law](#).

The judge, Sharon Lovelace Blackburn, upheld the parts of the law allowing state and local police to ask for immigration papers during routine traffic stops, rendering most contracts with illegal immigrants unenforceable and requiring schools to ascertain the immigration status of children at registration time.

When Judge Blackburn was finished, Alabama was left with what the governor called “the strongest immigration law in this country.” It went into effect immediately, though her ruling is being appealed by the Justice Department and a coalition of civil rights groups.

In the days since, school superintendents have reassured parents — one even did so on television in Spanish — that nothing had changed for children who were already enrolled. Wary police departments around the state said they were, for now, awaiting instructions on how to carry out the law.

For many immigrants, however, waiting seemed just too dangerous. By Monday afternoon, 123 students had withdrawn from the schools in this small town in the northern hills, leaving behind teary and confused classmates. Scores more were absent.

Statewide, 1,988 Hispanic students were absent on Friday, about 5 percent of the entire Hispanic population of the school system.

John Weathers, an Albertville businessman who rents and has sold houses to many Hispanic residents, said his occupancy had suddenly dropped by a quarter and might drop further, depending on what happens in the next week. Two people who had paid off their mortgages called him asking if they could sell back their homes, Mr. Weathers said.

Grocery stores and restaurants were noticeably less busy, which in some cases may be just as well, because some employees stopped showing up. In certain neighborhoods the streets are uncommonly quiet, like the aftermath of some sort of rapture.

Drawn by work in the numerous poultry processing plants, Hispanic immigrants have been coming to Albertville for years, long enough ago that some of the older ones gained amnesty under the immigration law of 1986. But the influx picked up over the last decade, and the signs on Main Street are now mostly bilingual, when they include English at all.

What the new immigration law means on a large scale will become clearest in a place like Albertville, whether it will deliver jobs to citizens and protect taxpayers as promised or whether it will spell economic disaster as opponents fear.

Critics of the law, particularly farmers, contractors and home builders, say the measure has already been devastating, leaving rotting crops in fields and critical shortages of labor. They say that even fully documented Hispanic workers are leaving, an assessment that seems to be borne out in interviews here. The legal status of family members is often mixed — children are often American-born citizens — but the decision whether to stay rests on the weakest link.

Backers of the law acknowledge that it might be disruptive in the short term, but say it will prove effective over time.

“It’s going to take some time for the local labor pool to develop again,” said State Senator Arthur Orr, Republican of Decatur, “but outside labor shouldn’t come in and just beat them every time on cost and put them out of business.”

Mr. Orr said there were already signs that the law was working, pointing out that the work-release center in Decatur, about 50 miles to the northwest, was not so long ago unable to find jobs for inmates with poultry processors or home manufacturers. Since the law was enacted in June, he said, the center has been placing more and more inmates in these jobs, now more than 150 a day.

On Monday morning, one of the poultry processing plants in Albertville had a job fair, attracting an enormous crowd, a mix of Hispanic, black and white job-seekers, lining up outside the plant and down the street.

“This needed to be done years ago,” Shannon Lolling, 36, who has been unemployed for over a year, said of the law.

Mr. Lolling’s problem seemed to be with the system that had brought the illegal-immigrant workers here, not with the workers themselves.

“That’s why our jobs went south to Mexico,” he said. “They pay them less wages and pocket the money, keep us from having jobs.”

Not far from the plant, in the Hispanic neighborhoods, it is hard to differentiate the silence of the workday, the silence of abandonment or the silence of paralyzing fear.

Many Hispanics have chosen to stay for now, saying, with little apparent conviction, that the law will surely be blocked by the president, the judge, “the government.” Until then, they are not leaving their homes unless absolutely necessary. They send others to buy their groceries and tell their children to quit the soccer team and to come home right after school. Rumors of raids and roadblocks are rampant, and though the new law has nothing to say about such things, distrust is primed by anecdotes, like one told by a local Hispanic pastor who said he was pulled over outside Birmingham on Wednesday, within hours of the ruling. His friend who was driving — and who is in the United States illegally — is now in jail on an unrelated misdemeanor charge, the pastor said, adding that while he was let go, a policeman told him he was no longer welcome in Alabama.

“I am afraid to drive to church.,” a 54-year-old poultry plant worker named Candelaria said, adding, “The lady that gives me a ride to work said she is leaving. She said she felt like a prisoner.”

All summer long, Allen Stoner, a lawyer in Decatur, has been helping his Hispanic clients fill out forms appointing friends or family members as guardians of their children, who are in many cases American-born citizens. This way, the children would not be transferred to social services if the parents were arrested and deported.

Much of this was done by the time the judge's ruling came down, though last week Mr. Stoner's clients began to contact him immediately to ask what they should be doing. Monday was quiet.

"We had a lot of phone calls Thursday and Friday," Mr. Stoner said, "but it has plummeted."

He did not know for sure, but he figured his clients were gone.