

# The Charlotte Observer

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## THE CRUELEST CUTS

OBSERVER SPECIAL REPORT: *First of Six Parts*

The human cost of bringing poultry to your table



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Chickens move down the line at House of Raeford's West Columbia, S.C., plant, where about 90 percent of workers are Latino. Thousands of cutting motions per shift can leave workers' hands in pain.

### House of Raeford Farms masks injuries inside Carolinas plants

BY KERRY HALL, AMES ALEXANDER  
AND FRANCO ORDOÑEZ  
Staff Writers

In an industry rife with danger, House of Raeford Farms depicts itself as a safe place to work. Company records suggest relatively few workers are injured each year as they kill, cut and package millions of chickens and turkeys.

But an Observer investigation shows the N.C. poultry giant has masked the extent of injuries behind its plant walls.

The company has compiled misleading injury reports and has defied regulators as it satisfies a growing appetite for America's most popular meat. And employees say the company has ignored, intimidated or fired workers who were hurt on the job.

House of Raeford officials say they fol-

low the law and strive to protect workers.

But company and government records and interviews with more than 120 current and former employees show:

■ House of Raeford's 800-worker plant in West Columbia, S.C., reported no musculoskeletal disorders over four years. Experts say that's inconceivable. MSDs, including carpal tunnel syndrome, are the most common work-related injuries afflicting poultry workers.

■ Its Greenville, S.C., plant has boasted of a five-year safety streak with no lost-time accidents. But the plant kept that streak alive by bringing injured employees back to the factory hours after surgery.

■ The company has broken the law by failing to record injuries on government safe-

SEE POULTRY | 11A

#### INSIDE TODAY

2A | Editor Rick Thames: The most vulnerable workers.

11A | Carolinas are major poultry producers.

12A | Experts: Federal safety data misleading.

13A | Record-keeping chief: OSHA failing workers.

15A | How carpal tunnel syndrome happens and hurts.

#### ONLINE VIDEO

Scenes from inside a poultry plant; hear workers talk about their pain.

www.charlotte.com/poultry

#### POULTRY'S MARK: RUINED HANDS

A quarter-century ago, poultry processing changed forever with the introduction of a revolutionary product: the Chicken McNugget.

The bite-sized pieces ignited demand for new poultry offerings. Now, dozens of specialty cuts - and hundreds of chicken and turkey products - are available to consumers. The revolution has come with consequences.

In America's poultry plants, which rely increasingly on vulnerable Latino immigrants, workers' hands are more threatened than ever.

Karina Zorita knew little of this when she considered a poultry job four years ago. **IN THE BIG PICTURE, 15A**



Karina Zorita

### INSIDE

Politics | 4A

#### Obama wins in 3 states

Barack Obama swept the Louisiana primary and caucuses in Nebraska and Washington state Saturday.

**Sunny**  
Low: 37. High: 57.  
Clear and windy today. Cold tonight with lows in the 20s. Sunny and cool Monday. Forecast, 10B.



Nation | 3A

#### Writers strike could end today

Key leaders of the Writers Guild of America endorse deal to end 14-week-old walkout.

Arts & Living | 1E

#### A dancer's dream

Meet a 23-year-old Charlottean who made the leap to the renowned Ailey dance theater.

Arts & Living...1E Local & State...1B  
Books.....5E Moneywise...1D  
Celebrations...1H Movies.....6E  
Classified.....1F Obituaries.....8B  
Editorial.....22A Sports.....1C  
Horoscope.....6E Travel.....1I  
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#### STORYCORPS IN CHARLOTTE

### In sound booth, lives become legacies

BY ELIZABETH LELAND  
eleland@charlotteobserver.com

Let me tell you a story about stories. Angie Forde asked Dawoud Assad to describe the saddest day of his life. He told her about the time he visited his mother in a nursing home and she didn't recognize him.

Though Forde had never heard Assad's story before, she knew his story. It was her story, too. Her father, who had Alzheimer's, often mistook her for someone else.

Telling stories is how we connect - as family, as friends, as a city of 695,995 people and, on a global level, as a civilization. How could we make sense of our lives today, if somebody hadn't passed along stories of what went before?

That is why a silver Airstream trailer is parked at the library at North Tryon and Sixth streets. Inside, people like Dawoud Assad are telling stories. They are part of NPR's national StoryCorps project, which will record 10,000 stories to be archived at the Library of Congress.

SEE STORYCORPS | 5A



GARY O'BRIEN - gobrien@charlotteobserver.com

Leslie Williams, 50, and her father, George Linker, 78, interview each other Friday, the StoryCorps MobileBooth's first full day in action outside the Main Library in Charlotte.

#### Online Extras

Go inside the StoryCorps MobileBooth and see how Charlotte participants' life stories are captured at [WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/news](http://WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/news)



# The 'A' List

## Top romantic retreats

Coastal Living magazine names top island destinations just in time for Valentine's Day.

1. Bermuda
2. Manhattan (New York City)
3. Big Island of Hawaii
4. Whidbey Island, Wash.
5. Lovers Key, Fla.

— COASTAL LIVING MAGAZINE

## Dishing It Out

SARAH AARTHUN



Aspiring country crooners: This is your chance for your big break.

"Nashville Star" is casting for its next season, and the show's producers are looking for untapped talent in the Charlotte area.

Haven't heard of the show? Well, that's because it's been hidden on cable television for the first five seasons. Now, get ready for primetime — the show is coming to NBC.

A new network comes with new (relaxed) rules. Anyone 16 and older may audition, and for the first time, the search will be open to solo acts, duets and singing trios.

Country bar Coyote Joe's is the appropriate spot for the open call Wednesday from 7 to 11 p.m.

The winner of "Nashville Star" will receive a coveted recording contract with a major label.

The 'A' List is edited by Sarah Aarthun. Reach her at saarthun@charlotteobserver.com.

## Today: Feb. 10



Dorn



Roberts

## Birthdays

Actor **Robert Wagner**, 78.  
Singer **Roberta Flack**, 71.  
Olympic gold-medal swimmer **Mark Spitz**, 58.  
Country singer **Lionel Cartwright**, 48.  
ABC News correspondent **George Stephanopoulos**, 47.  
Actress **Laura Dern**, 41.  
Actress **Emma Roberts**, 17.

## In History

**1968:** U.S. figure skater **Peggy Fleming** won America's only gold medal of the Winter Olympic Games in Grenoble, France.  
— ASSOCIATED PRESS

## IF YOU SPY A CELEBRITY IN CHARLOTTE, LET US KNOW!

Send photos or words about it to saarthun@charlotteobserver.com. Be sure to tell us your name and a daytime phone number.

## MUSIC, FILM CLIPS AT SERVICE IN PERTH

# Ledger gets an Aussie farewell

BY MIN LEE  
Associated Press

PERTH, Australia — **Heath Ledger's** family and friends and Australia's entertainment elite bade him farewell at a private memorial service Saturday in his hometown. The 28-year-old actor died Jan. 22 in his Manhattan apartment from a prescription drug overdose.

**Michelle Williams**, who became

romantically involved with Ledger while filming "Brokeback Mountain," arrived at the service with Ledger's parents in a six-car motorcade. The 75-minute service kicked off with the performance of a didgeridoo, a tradi-



Ledger

tional Aboriginal wind instrument, performer Levi Islam said. Rock songs were also played — Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'," the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd and Neil Young's "Old Man."

Organizers also showed footage from Ledger's films and of 2-year-old Matilda, his daughter with Williams.

## CAUGHT ON CAMERA



DAN STEINBERG — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

**SO GLAMOROUS:** Singer **Fergie** (left) and Interscope Geffen A&M Records Chairman Jimmy Iovine pose at a party honoring Timbaland in Los Angeles on Friday.



HERMANN J. KNIPPERTZ — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

**CHECK OUT HIS INK:** Actor **Tom Arnold** shows off a tattoo during a photo call for his movie "Garden of the Night" at the 58th International Film Festival Berlinale in Berlin on Saturday. The festival runs through next Sunday.



DAN STEINBERG — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

**TEEN 'IDOL':** Former "American Idol" winner **Jordyn Sparks** poses at a party honoring Timbaland in Los Angeles on Friday.

## Musicians pay tribute, 'respect' to Franklin

LOS ANGELES — **John Legend**, **Lil Mama**, **Corinne Bailey Rae** and gospel singer **Shirley Caesar** paid their "Respect" to **Aretha Franklin** in a musical tribute to the Queen of Soul.

They and other stars helped launch Grammy weekend Friday by honoring the 65-year-old R&B diva as MusiCares Person of the Year.

Franklin is up for her 18th Grammy tonight, nominated for a duet with **Mary J. Blige**. — ASSOCIATED PRESS

► More Grammys coverage on 4E.

## Renfro OD'd on heroin, morphine

LOS ANGELES — The death last month of 25-year-old actor **Brad Renfro** was caused by a heroin and morphine overdose, according to the coroner's report.

The Los Angeles County Coroner's Office ruled the death was accidental. His body was found on Jan. 15 in his home. — ASSOCIATED PRESS

## Talks halt between Burton, his ex

LOS ANGELES — Mediation talks collapsed between **Tim Burton** and his ex-girlfriend, who claims she was cheated out of her rights to assets that the director promised her during their nearly decade-long relationship, attorneys said. The legal fight is scheduled to play out before Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Harold Chernes on Aug. 12.

**Lisa Marie**, a former Calvin Klein model, met Burton at a club in 1991 and went on to star in several of his movies while the couple lived together. Burton broke up with her nearly 10 years later. — ASSOCIATED PRESS



JOHN D. SIMMONS — jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

**A worker trims wings as chickens move past. Many poultry workers have no standing in this country and are reluctant to complain about poor working conditions.**

# Poultry series exposes a new, silent subclass

*Neglect of workers has ugly precedent in Carolinas history*

EDITOR



Rick Thames

Today we ask you to join us for a six-day series on the plight of Carolinas workers who put America's most popular meat on the table.

These workers — about 28,000 of them in the Carolinas — process chicken and turkey in all its forms. Whole birds, fillets, nuggets, slices, cubes, sausage and even hot dogs.

It may surprise you to learn that most of the workers speak Spanish. Many of them entered the country illegally.

Should that matter as you consider the working conditions you will read about?

I say yes, but maybe not for the most obvious reason.

It should matter because the neglect of these workers exposes an ugly dimension to a new subclass in our society. A disturbing subclass of compliant workers with few, if any, rights.

I say disturbing because North and South Carolina share some regrettable history of building economies on the backs of such workers.

Before the Civil War, slaves and poor sharecroppers powered the region's tobacco and cotton plantations. Early in the 20th century, children as young as 8 were put to work in Carolinas textile mills to help feed their poor families.

Consider the parallel to illegal immigrants. Same as slaves and sharecroppers, same as the cotton mill workers derisively termed "lintheads," this subclass is now a scorned bunch.

And yet they help power our economy. We live in houses they built. We drive on highways they paved. We eat the chicken and turkey they prepared.

Illegal immigrants often take the least desirable jobs, earning low wages, because those jobs lift them and their families from the poverty they left behind in their homelands.

As a group, they are compulsively compliant, ever-conscious that one complaint could lead to their firing or arrest or deportation.

"Some speak out, but most of these workers just wanted to remain in the shadows," said Franco Ordoñez, a reporter who spent months speaking to workers in the Latino communities surrounding the poultry plants. "It's just not worth it, considering how much they've already risked, to draw more attention to themselves — even if they're hurt. They're like the perfect victims."

And, as you will read today, businesses take advantage of

their silence and vulnerability. Will we allow such conditions to go unchecked again?

That is the broader question raised by an Observer investigation.

It's also all the more reason you should be concerned about the treatment of these workers.

Our team of reporters and editors spent 22 months interviewing more than 200 poultry workers throughout the Southeast and analyzing industry documents. Their investigation soon led them to focus on one of the largest Carolinas-based poultry producers, House of Raeford. Its eight plants have been cited for more serious safety violations than all but two other poultry companies in recent years — and more than some companies several times their size.

Our journalists found evidence that House of Raeford has failed to report serious injuries, including broken bones and carpal tunnel syndrome. They discovered that plant officials often dismissed workers' requests for medical care that would cost the company money.

They also found that House of Raeford has undergone a work force transformation. In the early 1990s, its workers were largely African Americans. Today, between 80 percent and 90 percent of workers at some of its plants are Latinos. Most have no legal standing in this country; most are poor.

They are our newest subclass.

If you look beneath America's entanglements with slavery and child labor, you will find governments that failed famously to balance a free market against the inherent promise of basic human rights.

And today? No question, failed government policies produced our present crisis over illegal immigration. Yet Washington's official approaches to this issue continue to range from half-hearted to demagogic.

We should demand that our leaders repair those policies with realistic solutions. But as citizens and consumers, we should also insist on humane treatment for this new subclass of Latino immigrants who now work to the benefit of many in this country.

We've learned from our history. We are better than that.

Contact  
rthames@charlotteobserver.com or  
704-358-5001.

## Poem starter for your sweetie

*For Valentine's Day on Thursday, a fill-in-the-blank sonnet by reporter Dan Zak:*

Your (1-syllable body part, plural) are ruddy in winter's harsh light  
As heaven lets tumble its frozen tears.  
On Valentine's the world seems (1-syllable adjective) and right  
As we sigh and (3-syllable verb) through the years.  
But (1-syllable exclamation!) Think not of seeking affections  
Elsewhere. Remember you are mine tonight.

Love's not composed of endless directions  
But of something freer — a (1-syllable animal, singular) in flight.  
Shall I compare thee to my last lover?  
Thou art more (2-syllable adjective), my sweet valentine.  
Your breath smells of (2-syllable food item), your lids hover  
O'er eyes whose fairness rivals spring's sunshine.  
Love's a (1-syllable noun), they say, so gird your loins now;  
I'll take you to (a desirable place, 1 syllable), if you show me how. — WASHINGTON POST

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### Look and Listen

- **The Cruellest Cuts:** Watch video scenes from inside the poultry plant as the Observer investigates the House of Raeford Farms: www.charlotte.com/poultry
- **NASCAR Season Begins:** For more coverage from Daytona International Speedway, including race results, blogs, notebooks and slideshows, log in to: www.thatsracin.com
- **Black Tie:** Who's on the scene at parties, benefits and galas? Olivia Fortson captures the scene: www.charlotte.com/living
- **Your Story:** Go inside the StoryCorps mobile, which is in Charlotte through February, and see how facilitators capture people telling their life stories: www.charlotte.com/news
- **Hoops:** Check out a slideshow with shots from Saturday's action around the Carolinas and the ACC: www.charlotte.com/hoops
- **Travel:** Readers send photos holding copies of the Observer from distant locations: www.charlotte.com/travel
- **NFL:** What do you think of the Panthers reaching a deal with defensive tackle Damione Lewis? Express your thoughts on our Inside the Panthers blog at: www.charlotte.com/panthers
- **Blotter:** Find latest crimes in Mecklenburg County: www.charlotte.com/news
- **Golf:** See a slideshow of the Pebble Beach National Pro-Am: www.charlotte.com/golf

### Connect with the Observer

- **Inside the NBA:** New Jersey beat Charlotte on Friday, and reporter Rick Bonnell says Bobcats "management should be perplexed by this one." Read more at: www.charlotte.com/bobcats

### What Everyone's Reading Online

The top 3 viewed stories on Charlotte.com at 6:15 p.m. Saturday:

1. WBTV anchor says her firing was swift
2. MSNBC's Chelsea comment angers Clinton
3. Bride dies during marriage's first dance

### News You Can Use

- **Meals:** Seven-day menu planner: www.charlotte.com/living

## Corrections and Clarifications

The Observer strives to be accurate and fair. Those values are crucial to our relationship with readers. We are committed to correcting our mistakes promptly. Corrections from all main Observer sections are published here. Errors on Opinion and Viewpoint are corrected on those pages. Errors from our regional publications are corrected on page 2 of those sections.

A photo in Saturday's Observer of a woman outside the Cabarrus County Courthouse was actually an unidentified woman, not the mother of Lisa Greene. The photo caption was incorrect.

If you see a mistake, please call us at 704-358-5040 or e-mail us at corrections@charlotteobserver.com.



Bonnell

## Lottery Drawings

Here are the winning numbers selected Saturday.

### N.C. LOTTERY

#### CAROLINA PICK 3

6-6-7

#### CAROLINA CASH 5

17-35-25-5-10

### S.C. LOTTERY

#### PICK 3

Midday: 6-2-1 Evening: 6-7-8

#### PICK 4

Midday: 8-2-5-5 Evening:

4-9-8-7

#### POWERBALL

4-23-24-30-43

Powerball: 28 Power Play: 5

### GOT A STORY OR PHOTO IDEA?

Call metro editor Cindy Montgomery at 704-358-5040 or e-mail localnews@charlotteobserver.com

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THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE



JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

The House of Raeford plant in West Columbia, S.C., processes 750,000 chickens a week. Chickens are de-feathered, gutted and conveyed to processing lines. The company says it has "programs in place to provide a safe and respectful work environment for all business associates. These programs adhere to government regulations and guidelines ..."

## Pain of poultry work is found near plants

### Poultry from 1A

ty logs, a top OSHA official says.

At four of the company's largest Carolinas plants, company first-aid attendants and supervisors have dismissed some workers' requests to see a doctor — even when they complained of debilitating pain.

Companies have a financial incentive to hide injuries. Ignoring them lowers costs associated with compensating injured workers for medical care and lost wages.

Also, the government rewards companies that report low injury rates by inspecting them less often. And regulators rarely check whether companies are reporting accurately.

Government statistics show a decade-long decline in injuries among poultry workers. Critics say the numbers are misleading. They point to one government measure showing that employees in toy stores are more likely than poultry workers to develop musculoskeletal disorders.

Experts say that's implausible; poultry workers routinely make more than 20,000 cutting motions a shift, and the work often leaves them with nerve and muscle damage.

House of Raeford and other poultry companies depend heavily on workers' hands to turn thousands of birds each day into convenient cuts for restaurants, stores and cafeterias. Companies increasingly rely on Latino immigrants, who are often reluctant to complain for fear of being fired or deported.

House of Raeford says it looks out for the safety of workers and treats them with respect.

"We come to work with five fingers and toes," said company safety director Bill Lewis. "And we go home with the same thing we came in with."

The newspaper asked one of the federal government's top record-keeping experts to review House of Raeford's safety logs and what injured workers told the Observer. Bob Whitmore, who has directed the national injury and illness record-keeping system for the U.S. Labor Department since 1988, said he believes his agency has failed to protect poultry workers.

Whitmore was not authorized to comment for the government but said he felt compelled to speak on behalf of workers.

After reviewing the Observer's findings, he said, "This is violating the laws of human decency."

### Growth comes with cost

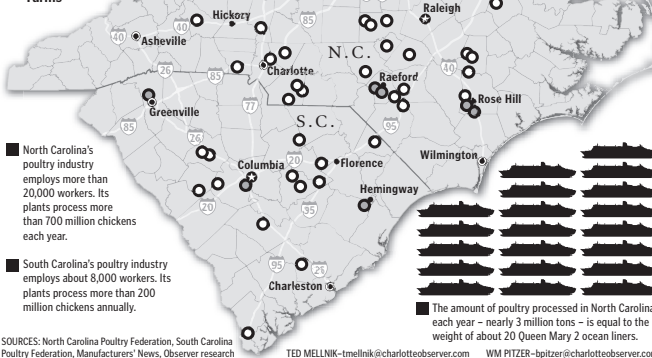
House of Raeford isn't a household name.

### A poultry leader

More than 80 percent of the nation's poultry is processed in the South. North Carolina ranks second in turkey processing, behind Minnesota, and fourth in chicken processing. About 50 processing plants are spread across the Carolinas, including seven House of Raeford plants.

#### ○ Poultry plant locations

#### ● House of Raeford Farms

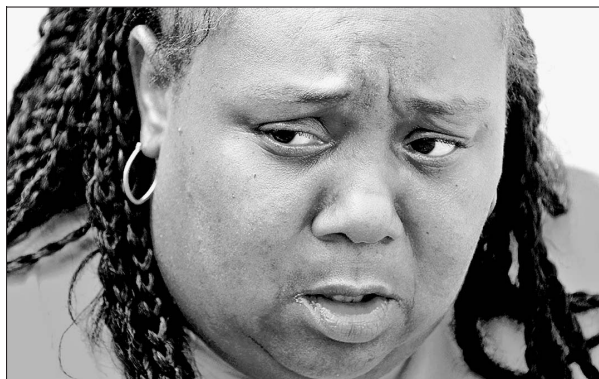


SOURCES: North Carolina Poultry Federation, South Carolina Poultry Federation, Manufacturers' News, Observer research

TED MELLNIK-tmellnik@charlotteobserver.com

WM PITZER-bpitzer@charlotteobserver.com

**Claudette Outerbridge says her hands were injured at a House of Raeford plant in Raeford, where her job included cutting turkey gizzards. "I would go to work sick or I would go to work in pain, and they didn't care," she says.**



JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

It has climbed from a backyard bird operation to one of the nation's top 10 poultry processors, helping make North Carolina the second-largest turkey producer. The company expanded turkey consumption beyond holiday dinner tables by creating new products, including deli-style breast meat and turkey "dinosaur" wings. It has grown by acquiring competitors and selling chicken parts overseas.

Its rise has come with a human cost. Workers have been maimed by machines and poisoned by toxic chemicals. Two were killed in accidents managers might have prevented. Even more suffer from grueling, repetitive work that can leave their hands wracked with pain or missing fingers.

The company, based in Raeford in Eastern North Carolina, has been cited for 130 serious workplace safety vio-

lations since 2000 — among the most of any U.S. poultry company.

In communities surrounding House of Raeford plants, the pain of poultry work can be found in aging trailer parks and clusters of weathered rental houses where sheets cover windows for privacy. Knee-high rubber boots spattered with chicken fat rest on stoops.

In Raeford, about 100 miles east of Charlotte, former line worker Claudette Outerbridge lay awake nights because of pain pulsating in her right hand. The ache, she said, stemmed from her work, which included cutting thousands of turkey gizzards each day.

During her more than five years at the plant, Outerbridge held a variety of jobs, including pulling out turkey guts and trimming parts. She said she moved from New York, where she worked as a police department clerk,

and took a job at the plant in 1998.

She began visiting the first-aid station almost daily around 2002 to cope with the pain, she said. A first-aid attendant, she said, gave her a cream but performed no tests and refused her request to see a doctor.

She recalled times on the production line when her hand hurt so badly she dropped her scissors and cried.

"They'd say, 'Oh, you're not hurting,'" Outerbridge said. "They made me feel that I was bothering them to go to the nurse, that I was supposed to take the pain."

When she told a plant manager she needed medical help, "He sat me down and he said, 'I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do about it,'" recalled Outerbridge, now 48. "That day, I got a lawyer."

In 2003, she went on her own to a doctor, who diagnosed her with severe

### House of Raeford

**Headquarters:** The privately held company is based in Raeford in Eastern North Carolina.

**Processing plants:** Four in North Carolina, three in South Carolina and one in Louisiana.

**Employees:** About 6,000.

**Annual sales:** Nearly \$900 million, including some to China, Afghanistan and other countries.

**Ranking:** It's among the nation's top 10 chicken and turkey producers.

**Production:** Slaughters and processes about 29 million pounds of chicken and turkey each week.

#### Customers:

■ **Restaurants** including Blimpie, Golden Corral and Ryan's.

■ **Schools** around the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

#### Stores including

Harris Teeter, Food Lion and Lowes Foods. The company's deli meat is marketed under the name "Lakewood Plantation."

■ **Distribution companies** that supply food to restaurants and institutional kitchens.

SOURCES: Observer research, House of Raeford, Dun & Bradstreet, Watt Publishing, National Poultry and Food Distributors Association



carpal tunnel syndrome and later performed surgery, she said. She settled a workers' compensation case with the company the following year for an undisclosed sum.

"I just wanted justice," she said. "I just wanted someone to take care of my hand."

House of Raeford said it can't discuss Outerbridge's case because the settlement is confidential.

Human resources director Gene Shelnett said the privately held company considers its workers family. The company, he said, "would never allow anyone to mistreat anyone in the family. ... I believe we have provided the care

for our employees that is expected."

Current and former human resources employees at two House of Raeford plants said the company finds reasons to fire injured workers.

Belem Villegas, a former employment supervisor at the Greenville plant, said her boss didn't like "repeat complainers."

For five years until spring 2005, Villegas hired workers and translated for Spanish-speaking employees. She

SEE POULTRY | NEXT PAGE

"I just wanted justice. I just wanted someone to take care of my hand."

CLAUDETTE OUTERBRIDGE, FORMER HOUSE OF RAEFORD EMPLOYEE





Seferino Francisco Guadalupe holds an X-ray showing the screws that surgeons inserted to repair his shattered ankle. The injury happened in an accident at a House of Raeford plant in 2006. House of Raeford failed to record Guadalupe's fracture on its injury logs, as required by law. The company said it was an isolated incident.

Company says it strives for a safe workplace

Poultry from 11A

shared an office with the plant medical director and said as many as 20 workers a day came in saying their hands, wrists and arms hurt.

She said she urged plant managers to send injured employees to a doctor, but they often refused. "They'd say, 'Belem, if they keep coming to the office, they're going to have to be let go.'"

Workers got the message. "You complain and you become unemployed," Villegas said.

House of Raeford didn't respond to questions about Villegas' allegations. The company said it fired her because she was "accepting money to provide employment favors to potential employees." Villegas denied the claim and said she believes she was fired, in part, because she started speaking up for workers.

The Observer interviewed more than 50 workers no longer employed at House of Raeford. Ten said they were fired after reporting injuries.

Company officials said workers are required to tell supervisors if they are hurt and that they will be sent to plant first-aid stations, or outside doctors if need be. They also noted that plants are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and that its representatives have "full grievance procedures at their disposal." Local union officials said membership is less than 30 percent at some plants because immigrants are often reluctant to join, making it difficult to enact change.

"Certainly, we work hard to run a safe and healthy workplace, and to comply with all state and federal laws," Barry Cronin, complex manager of the Greenville plant, said in a written response. "...If any supervisor is discouraging employees from reporting injuries, that supervisor is in violation of company policy."

Carolina Cruz said her pleas for help were repeatedly ignored. A young mother, Cruz took a job at the Greenville plant in 2003 cutting chicken wings. After her hands started to throb, she said, she went to a company nurse who several times gave her ointment and sent her back to the line. "They don't help us at all," she said.

By the summer of 2006, she said, "My bones hurt .... If I continue like this, my hands are going to get to the point where I won't be able to do anything."

Cruz later left the plant. House of Raeford declined to comment on many of the workers' specific allegations, saying that, without signed releases, it was unable to discuss details of their health or employment. In general, the company said it found "many inaccuracies" in the information workers provided to the Observer but declined to elaborate.

"The allegations made by these for-

Concealing dangerous conditions

During the past decade, regulators have cited more than 50 poultry plants for failing to properly record workplace injuries. Some examples:

- 1 Gold'n Plump Poultry, Arcadia, Wis. Inspectors in 2004 cited the company for failing to record several cases in which employees suffered hearing loss.
- 2 Trinity Valley Foods, Irving, Tex. Firefighters in 2005 had to administer oxygen to at least two employees after a liquid nitrogen leak. Those injuries weren't recorded on the logs, OSHA found.
- 3 Marshall Durbin, Hattiesburg, Miss. OSHA concluded in 2003 the company had created an environment where employees felt dissuaded from reporting injuries. Most went to their own doctor or to the emergency room at their own cost. The company also failed to record some injuries and keep records of all visits to the safety coordinator.
- 4 House of Raeford Farms, Raeford, N.C. N.C. regulators concluded in 1998 that the plant had crossed at least 35 names off injury logs.

\*OSHA cited the company for a record-keeping violation but deleted the citation as part of a settlement. The company disagreed with OSHA's characterizations and said there was no practice or pattern of discouraging employees from reporting injuries.

OSHA AND WORKPLACE INJURIES

What should be recorded on OSHA injury and illness logs?

Companies should record significant work-related injuries and illnesses, including those that result in death, days away from work, restricted work or job transfers, and medical treatment beyond first aid.

Which companies does OSHA target for inspection?

OSHA targets companies reporting higher-than-average injury rates. However, the agency rarely checks whether companies are reporting honestly - and checks the accuracy of

only a small percentage of injury logs, which are kept at plants.

How often do regulators cite companies for underreporting?

Citations for underreporting have dropped sharply since 1990, when state and federal OSHA agencies cited employers for record-keeping violations more than 10,000 times. More than 100 of those citations were for poultry processors.

In 2006, the total number of citations was less than 4,000 and fewer than 10 were for poultry processors. OSHA says the drop is partly due to a policy change in the 1990s that allowed companies to

fix minor paperwork violations to avoid a citation.

How does OSHA monitor whether companies are telling the truth?

OSHA conducts occasional audits of injury logs. But Bob Whitmore, an OSHA expert on injury records, said the agency's once-aggressive focus on enforcing record-keeping regulations "fell off the radar screen in 1990 and never returned."

One example: An Observer review of nine years of OSHA audits showed most lasted one day. Whitmore said they should take a week or more to catch "significant and fraudulent problems."

SOURCES: OSHA, Observer research

WM PITZER - bpitzer@charlotteobserver.com

mer employees do not fairly or accurately represent the policies or management practices of House of Raeford Farms," the company wrote.

Injuries not reported

If House of Raeford's records are accurate, the company in recent years has operated some of the nation's safest chicken and turkey plants.

Businesses are required to record most serious injuries and illnesses on U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration logs. But it's an honor system, and companies must give logs to regulators and employees only if asked. Regulators use the logs to spot troubling workplace safety trends.

The newspaper obtained four years of logs for company plants in Greenville, West Columbia and Raeford.

In a sampling of workers in neighborhoods surrounding the plants, the Observer confirmed 31 injuries serious enough to be recorded for regulators. In 12 of those cases, the injuries didn't show up on logs.

Seferino Guadalupe was driving a machine moving pallets of turkey breasts at one of the company's two Raeford plants in November 2006 when, he said, the brakes failed and he crashed into a wall. Surgeons inserted screws to repair his shattered ankle.

Bernestine Wright said her hands went numb after months of cutting chickens into bite-sized pieces at the Greenville plant. She said a company nurse refused to send her to a doctor when she complained about pains.

The pain grew so intense, she said, she visited a doctor and received painkillers. She was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome in 2005, according to the law firm that represented her in a workers' compensation case.

Lucas Hernandez cut his arm with a knife in summer 2005 while on the production line at the West Columbia plant. He missed work the next two days because of pain, he said.

None of those injuries showed up on House of Raeford injury logs.

In addition to the 31 injuries the Observer confirmed, 10 more workers described serious injuries that weren't recorded, but the newspaper could not confirm their medical treatment.

Whitmore, the OSHA record-keeping expert, examined House of Raeford logs and details of the 41 injuries the Observer found. He concluded the company violated workplace safety law by failing to record more than half of those injuries.

"These are severe, serious, debilitating cases," Whitmore said.

Company officials said they follow OSHA rules for recording injuries, and are unaware of any work-related injuries being excluded from the logs. Lewis, the company's safety director, said he couldn't explain why Guadalupe's accident wasn't included and called it "an isolated case." He said the company has corrected its logs.

Company officials said Wright's allegations are inaccurate but wouldn't elaborate.

At the West Columbia plant, safety



Flowers

manager Mike Flowers said that because Hernandez stayed home on his own and did not call his supervisor, managers didn't know the extent of his injury. "There's a lot of gray area," Flowers said.

Nonsense, said Whitmore.

"The supervisor knew there was an injury. The person missed work and it was because of pain related to an injury," he said. "It was clearly recordable. Period."

Record-keeping questioned

Poultry plants are filled with hazards. On one side of the factory, employees grab live birds before hanging them upside down on moving hooks that whisk them off for slaughter. On the other side - after the birds are scalded, plucked and chilled - they're hurried along production lines where workers stand shoulder-to-shoulder wielding blades for hours with few breaks.

Temperatures hover near freezing to prevent the spread of bacteria. Water drips off machinery, falling onto floors slick with chicken fat. The din of clanking conveyor belts makes conversation nearly impossible.

The conditions are ripe for musculoskeletal disorders, which afflict the muscles and nerves in wrists, arms, necks and backs. MSDs also include repetitive motion injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis.

Federal safety data misleading, experts say

Federal statistics suggest poultry plants are safer than ever. But experts question those numbers.

In October, the U.S. Labor Department reported fewer poultry workers were hurt in 2006 than in any previous year. The government cited an injury and illness rate of **6.6 per 100** workers, compared with **17.8 in 1996**.

The National Chicken Council praised poultry processors for adopting an "emphasis on safety, new and redesigned equipment and processes, early intervention, and other measures...."

But Bob Whitmore, a longtime Labor Department record-keeping expert, said the poultry industry's injury and illness rate is likely two to three times higher because of underreporting. He's particularly suspicious of OSHA records showing no injuries at some poultry plants. He said the government has done little to crack down on companies that undercount injuries.

Rich Fairfax, OSHA's enforcement director, said inspectors look for underreporting but rarely find it. "When we try to track it down, it goes nowhere."

Here are the 2006 rates of injuries and illnesses per 100 workers:

7.7	Motor vehicle parts manufacturing
7.5	Furniture manufacturing
6.6	Poultry processing
6.0	All manufacturing
4.4	All private industry
4.4	Textile mills
2.4	Pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing
2.0	Computer and electronic product manufacturing

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Safer than a toy store?

Workplace safety experts also question a reported drop in musculoskeletal disorders. In 2006, **20.8 of every 10,000** poultry workers missed work because of MSDs, down from **88.3 in 1996**, according to the Labor Department.

That 2006 rate would make poultry plants safer than toy stores. "It's intuitively implausible," said Dr. Michael Silverstein, a former OSHA policy chief. "Something is clearly wrong."

Here are the rates of MSDs resulting in lost time, per 10,000 workers:

47.4	Hobby, toy and game stores
38.6	Average for all industries
27.5	New car dealers
25.9	Pharmacies
20.8	Poultry processing

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

— AMES ALEXANDER AND KERRY HALL

At the West Columbia plant, which employs 800, not a single musculoskeletal disorder was recorded from July 2003 to April 2007, according to the most recent records obtained by the Observer.

Twelve employees who worked at the plant during that time said in interviews they suffered pains commonly brought on by MSDs. Two said they had surgery for carpal tunnel at company expense. Most of the others said they complained to company officials about their injuries but weren't sent to doctors or given time off from work - steps that likely would have made their injuries recordable.

James Mabe, the complex manager, said he was unsure why his logs showed no musculoskeletal disorders.

SEE POULTRY | 13A

“...If any supervisor is discouraging employees from reporting injuries, that supervisor is in violation of company policy.”

BARRY CRONIN, COMPLEX MANAGER OF THE GREENVILLE, S.C., PLANT  
MORE COMPANY RESPONSE ON CHARLOTTE.COM/POULTRY



THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

# He says his agency is at fault

Record-keeping chief says OSHA lets companies underreport injuries

BY KERRY HALL AND AMES ALEXANDER  
Staff Writers

Bob Whitmore is doing what few career government employees dare – publicly criticizing his own agency.

Whitmore, an expert in record-keeping requirements for the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, said OSHA is allowing employers to vastly underreport the number of injuries and illnesses their workers suffer.

The true rate for some industries – including poultry processors – is likely two to three times higher than government numbers suggest, he said.

Whitmore is not authorized to speak for the government and is risking his job simply by talking to the Observer, he said.

“I want to hold people accountable that are abusing workers,” he said. “It’s as simple as that.”

OSHA officials say they look for underreporting but rarely find it.

Whitmore has directed OSHA’s record-keeping system since 1988. Early in his career, he said, OSHA looked closely at companies’ injury and illness logs and issued big fines to businesses that underreported such incidents.

But by the 1990s, he said, industry groups and pro-business lawmakers were accusing OSHA of focusing on what they perceived as



COLBY WARE – SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Bob Whitmore, an OSHA record-keeping expert, spent a weekend examining House of Raeford safety records, national data and information that workers shared with the Observer. “This is abuse,” he said. “I don’t know what else to call it.”

frivolous paperwork violations. Today, he said, the agency is conducting fewer inspections and issuing fewer fines, leaving businesses to police themselves.

The government, he said, has no clear picture of the hazards that lurk inside some of America’s most dangerous manufacturers.

A leading manufacturers group contends the government figures are accurate. While underreporting occasionally happens, it’s rare, said Hank Cox, a spokesman for the National Association of Manufacturers.

In July, Whitmore was placed on paid administrative leave after a confrontation with a supervisor. He said the supervisor spit on him, so he stuck his foot in the man’s door and threatened, “If you ever do that again, I’ll kick your a—.”

Whitmore has filed a complaint alleging a hostile workplace. As of this month, he was still on administrative leave.

The labor department declined to comment on Whitmore’s status citing “privacy considerations.”

## Company has history of fights with regulators

Poultry from 12A

work stations and other safety measures contribute to low injury and illness rates, they said.

Mabe also said the plant recently spent \$3.5 million for equipment that included a machine to remove guts from chickens, eliminating a highly repetitive job.

He offered another explanation: “Hispanics are very good with their hands and working with a knife. We’ve gotten less complaints.”

Asked to elaborate, Mabe said, “It’s more like a natural movement for them.”

Tom Armstrong, a University of Michigan professor who has studied the prevalence of MSDs in poultry processing, questioned how Mabe arrived at his conclusion about Hispanics. “I know of absolutely no data to support that,” he said.

Armstrong said it’s highly unlikely a large poultry plant could go consecutive years without a case of carpal tunnel or tendinitis.

“I’d be skeptical of the record-keeping in a situation like that,” he said.

### Company fights in court

House of Raeford has a history of underreporting injuries.

In 1997, union leaders at a plant in Raeford received calls from workers complaining about injuries. Yet the plant was reporting one of the industry’s lowest injury and illness rates – 3.5 per 100 workers – well below the industry average of 16.6.

The union looked closer and found the plant had crossed 159 names off its 1996 and 1997 injury logs.

State regulators investigated and found that 35 of those names had been crossed off with “plain indifference to the law.” They could not confirm others because some of the workers had left the plant and could not be found.

Regulators designated the violation as “willful” – the toughest category under OSHA rules – and recommended a \$9,000 fine. House of Raeford fought back. The state threw out the willful designation and reduced the fine to \$800. House of Raeford says it has since established procedures “to prevent any further occurrences of the same nature.”



JOHN D. SIMMONS – jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Guillermo Santiago of Vera Cruz, Mexico, had the tips of three fingers sliced off while washing a grinding machine at a House of Raeford plant in Raeford.

Because House of Raeford reports some of the industry’s lowest injury and illness rates, workplace safety officials rarely conduct random inspections at its plants.

Several times when inspectors did show up at one of the Raeford plants, managers refused to let them in.

Acting on a tip that workers were suffering injuries, regulators in 1999 began investigating. They spoke with 40 workers, many of whom complained of throbbing pain in their hands, arms and shoulders. More than a third had been diagnosed with repetitive motion problems.

One of the inspectors, J. D. Lewis, recalls seeing young workers who could no longer use their arms or hands properly. One couldn’t lift his arms above his head, he recalled.

Inspectors wanted to talk with more workers, but House of Raeford officials repeatedly blocked them – even when they arrived with a warrant. Company officials said the interviews would disrupt operations.

The case went to N.C. Superior Court, where Judge Jack Hooks ruled in late 2000 that the state had no authority to investigate further. His reason: Compliance deadlines for a new federal ergonomics standard had not yet kicked in.

### Still suffering

A visit to the largely Latino communities surrounding the Raeford plants reveals the hidden cost of poultry work.

A year after the accident that shattered his ankle, Guadalupe struggles to walk with crutches and said he is unable to work because of lingering pain.

Four houses down, Ernesto Ramirez, a House of Raeford sanitation worker, said he had blurred vision for three days in 2006 after chlorine splashed into his eyes from a loose hose at work.

Down the road, Guillermo Santiago had the top half of three fingers sheared off last February when he tried to jimmy loose a hose from a grinding machine. Doctors were able to reattach just one finger.

A native of Vera Cruz, Mexico, Santiago said he’s reminded of his accident each time he looks at his hands.

“I’m never going to be the same.”  
— STAFF DATABASE EDITOR TED MELLNIK AND STAFF RESEARCHERS MARIA WYGAND, SARA KLEMMER AND MARION PAYNTER CONTRIBUTED.

### Spanish version

To read some of the Observer’s poultry stories in Spanish, pick up Wednesday’s edition of La Noticia.

## THE SERIES

- Today: Poultry giant has masked the **EXTENT OF INJURIES** in its plants. **SPECIALTY CUTS** put poultry workers’ hands at greater risk.
  - Monday: **MARVIN JOHNSON**, House of Raeford chairman, has taken on regulators.
  - Tuesday: **ONE BOSS’ STORY**: Pressure to produce came at expense of Latino workers.
  - Wednesday: **COMPANY MEDICAL WORKERS** sometimes make it hard for employees to get proper care.
  - Thursday: Greenville, S.C., plant’s **SAFETY STREAK** is a myth, current and former workers say.
  - Friday: **LAX ENFORCEMENT** of workplace standards allows dangerous conditions in poultry plants to persist.
- READ OUR STORIES ONLINE AT [WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/poultry](http://WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/poultry)**

## The perils of processing

About 100 U.S. poultry workers have died on the job during the past decade, and more than 300,000 have been injured. The industry’s death and injury rates are higher than those for manufacturing as a whole. For many workers – including those who suffer amputations, chemical burns and debilitating hand or wrist ailments – on-the-job injuries have left a lasting mark. Poultry plants are typically divided into two functions. At one end, birds are slaughtered, scalded and plucked. At the other end, tightly clustered workers cut and package meat.



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS – jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

## 1. Receiving and killing

Forklift drivers unload cages of live chickens or turkeys. Workers hang the birds upside down on an overhead conveyor. Machines kill, scald and de-feather the birds.

**HAZARDS:** Forklift accidents account for many serious injuries. Many employees develop hand, arm, shoulder or back injuries from lifting thousands of live birds each day. Frequent contact with chicken feces and dust leaves some workers suffering from respiratory problems.



## 2. Evisceration

Workers or machines remove internal organs, which are placed in bins and graded by inspectors. Some organs, such as gizzards and livers, may be cleaned and packaged. The carcass is cleaned and vacuumed. The bird is packaged whole after evisceration or placed on cones for cutting and de-boning.

**HAZARDS:** Employees may develop repetitive motion problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome or tendinitis.



## 3. De-boning

Workers use their knives and hands to separate the meat from the skin and bones. Some employees make more than 20,000 cuts each day.

## 4. Cutting

Workers use scissors, knives and saws to cut wing tips, wings and legs from birds.

**HAZARDS:** Cuts, nerve damage and repetitive-motion injuries such as tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome are common. Cuts not treated promptly often become infected from the bacteria on raw chicken.



## 5. Packaging

Employees package meat and box it for shipping.

**HAZARDS:** Repeated reaching and lifting may leave workers with injuries to their backs, shoulders, arms and hands. — AMES ALEXANDER

SOURCE: Occupational Safety and Health Administration

STAFF GRAPHIC BY HOLLY FARRANT AND JASON WHITLEY

## HOW THE OBSERVER DID THIS INVESTIGATION

Observer reporters interviewed more than 200 poultry workers across the Southeast, along with regulators, workplace safety experts, lawyers and company officials. They reviewed thousands of pages of OSHA documents, academic studies, workers’ compensation cases and rarely-examined company injury logs. They analyzed government databases with information about all workplace safety enforcement nationwide, as well as injury rates reported by plants.

They also toured three poultry plants in the Carolinas and Virginia and obtained records of ambulance calls to some plants.

Companies are required to keep records of work-related injuries and illnesses that result in medical treatment beyond first aid, days away from work, loss of consciousness and death.

To analyze underreporting, the newspaper interviewed injured House of Raeford workers and compared their accounts to company injury

records from 2003 to early 2007. The Observer counted cases as unreported only if it was able to confirm that the workers received medical attention beyond first aid or had time off work. The newspaper also asked a top OSHA record-keeping expert to assess whether the cases should have been recorded.

### How to reach the reporters:

**Ames Alexander** – 704-358-5060; aalexander@charlotteobserver.com  
**Kerry Hall** – 704-358-5085; khall@charlotteobserver.com  
**Franco Ordoñez** – 704-358-6180; ffordonez@charlotteobserver.com (Ordoñez speaks Spanish.)  
**Peter St. Onge** – 704-358-5029; pstonge@charlotteobserver.com

“

I want to hold people accountable that are abusing workers.”

BOB WHITMORE, DIRECTED THE NATIONAL INJURY AND ILLNESS RECORD-KEEPING SYSTEM FOR THE U.S. LABOR DEPARTMENT SINCE 1988