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How Far Would You Go for a Comeback?

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WILLISTON, N.D.

Last spring, Bob Ripka decided the time had come for drastic change. His once-robust income from his job at a printing company was dwindling. His family lost its house in the real estate crash. And employment prospects around his home in Pine City, Minn., more than an hour north of Minneapolis, appeared scant.

He heard talk around town about plentiful work in North Dakota, where new drilling technologies are driving an oil boom. “And I decided, ‘Well, I’m going to go make some money,’ ” he recalled in an interview. So on Memorial Day weekend, Mr. Ripka, 48, removed the rear seats from his 2003 Dodge minivan and replaced them with a mattress. He threw some clothes in a bag, said goodbye to his family and drove 10 hours west to Williston — ground zero in the North Dakota petroleum explosion.

After filling out a round of applications and sleeping in his car for several nights, Mr. Ripka was offered a job driving heavy trucks for an oil services company, helping to pour cement to secure casings for new wells.

He passed a drug test and trained for two weeks in Denver before settling, in July, into his new home away from home: a 7-by-11-foot cubicle at a “man camp.” A sort of cross between a military barracks and a college dormitory, temporary man camps have sprung up in and around Williston to help house the influx of workers from around the country.

Mr. Ripka is one of thousands of men with similar stories. They have descended on Williston and its environs over the last two to three years, pulled by the magnet of jobs created by an oil boom with the potential to make the region one of the largest petroleum resources in the country, and pushed by the hope that a steady income can put their finances back on track after a grueling downturn. While the national unemployment rate is 8.3 percent, in North Dakota it is 3.2 percent — and it is 1 percent in Williams County, where Williston has grown from a population of 12,500 before the boom began in 2008 to an estimated 20,000 now.

Many newcomers are, like Mr. Ripka, middle-age family men angling for a fresh financial start. Builders cannot throw up homes fast enough to house them; an estimated 1,200 housing units are expected to be completed in Williston in the next few months, and one-bedroom apartments rent for \$1,700 or more a month, if they are available. With an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 job openings in the area, many men live where they can — in their cars, or in illegally parked campers — and send their earnings to their families while they hunt for housing.

Because of the fast pace of oil well development to tap the Bakken shale field, the men often are on call around the clock and are away from their families for extended periods. A typical schedule might be to work 15 days straight, followed by six days off to go home. Airfare out of Williston can be steep, though, so many workers drive or take an Amtrak train, which adds travel time that cuts into their visits. (Some companies occasionally offer to put family members up in local hotels for visits.)

But not everyone goes home. The men can earn extra money — \$150 to \$200 a day or more, depending on the job — by working their scheduled days off, so many do. That means, though, that they are away from home for five weeks at a stretch, or even longer.

Mr. Ripka, for instance, was home in January but then stayed in Williston, working, through early March. It is worth the sacrifice financially, he said. Back home, he said, he made \$27,000 for the last six months he worked at his printing job; after six months in Williston, he had earned \$45,000.

Mr. Ripka plans to continue for about five years, long enough to pay down some debt, including a loan his parents took out to help finance the purchase of the home in Pine City where his family lives. He said his credit was marred by the loss of the family's former home in a short sale, in which the lender agreed to accept less than what was owed, so his parents pitched in to help.

"I'd rather be home every day and see my family," he said. "But this economy nowadays, you got to do what you got to do."

Mr. Ripka is one of the lucky ones in Williston, as far as housing: his employer, the Sanjel Corporation, contracts to house its workers at a man camp, so his lodging and meals are subsidized.

One afternoon last month, Mr. Ripka gave a tour of his camp, operated by Atco Structures and Logistics, a Canadian company. The "lodge," as Atco calls it, comprises four, 49-room modular dormitories. His room has a twin bed, a cabinet, a television and DVD player, a chair and a single window. A blue felt blanket hung tenuously over the blinds, secured with tape — Mr. Ripka's attempt, when working night shifts, to block out the daylight while he sleeps.

Mr. Ripka says long hours help him to sleep soundly most of the time — but not always. The walls are thin, and other workers may come and go at different hours. One neighbor sometimes forgets to adjust his alarm clock when his shift changes; its "beep, beep, beep" echoed down the hall.

Mr. Ripka installed a small refrigerator so he can get a cold drink without walking to the camp's communal kitchen, but has otherwise made no attempt to personalize his living space. "I'm here to work," he shrugged.

Back in the hallway, he opened an exit door to reveal the vista that stretches for miles across the brown, rolling prairie, and shared a joke oft repeated by men at the camp. It is, he said, "The kind of place where you can watch your dog run away, for three days."

Just inside the exit door sits a bin filled with blue surgical booties. Workers must either take off their boots, or slip the covers over them when they come inside, to help keep out the ever-present mud. When the men forget and track in grime, "We scold them, and make them clean it up," said Sally Hojnacki, an assistant manager at the lodge, who also acts as a sort of adviser and den mother to the residents.

The "no-boots" edict is one of about two dozen rules given to the men on laminated cards when they arrive. Others include a ban on alcohol in common areas, no smoking inside the camp and no visitors after 10:30 p.m.

The many restrictions grate on one of Mr. Ripka's fellow campers, Randall Ervin, 38, of Beaverton, Ore. "Here I am 40 years old and it's like I got a mom, you know what I mean?" said Mr. Ervin, a burly, gregarious sort who works as an oil field pump operator. "You're not really free to do anything you want to."

Nevertheless, Mr. Ervin said, coming to North Dakota has been the start of a financial rebound and, he hopes, a new career. A native of Heflin, Ala., he proudly wears a University of Alabama lanyard around his neck. "Roll, Tide!" he said, smiling, evoking Alabama's nickname, the Crimson Tide.

He joined the Navy after high school and eventually settled in the Portland area, where he met his fiancée, Melani Stewart, while playing arena football. The couple has twin 5-year-old girls; Mr. Ervin's son from a previous relationship lives with the boy's mother.

Mr. Ervin started a firm in Oregon that did drilling for underground conduits used by communications companies. But even though Mr. Ervin's being an African-American meant his company qualified for minority-business status, it was increasingly underbid for contracts by larger companies, he said. The venture went belly up. Soon, he and Ms. Stewart were hard-pressed to pay the mortgage on the half of a duplex she had owned when they met. Ms. Stewart's job as a supply planner at Nike was secure, so they borrowed against her 401(k) to make ends meet.

"We ran through our money pretty quick," he said. "We started to struggle." They ran up nearly \$30,000 in debt, in part to pay medical bills after Mr. Ervin injured his knee while repairing his truck. They were reluctant to confide their troubles to family members and friends, so Ms. Stewart juggled bills, clipped coupons and skipped haircuts to save money, while Mr. Ervin scoured help-wanted ads. While out on

walks to help his knee mend, Mr. Ervin picked up cans and redeemed them for the deposits. “If we’d get \$10 to \$15, we used it,” he said. “Did what we had to do.”

IN August, the couple was “a month behind on the mortgage and headed for disaster,” Mr. Ervin recalled, when he saw an ad on Craigslist, seeking heavy equipment operators willing to travel. Even after the recruiter told him the job was in the oil fields of North Dakota, where subzero temperatures in the double digits are common in the winter, Mr. Ervin didn’t waver.

“At this point in my life, I didn’t care,” he said. “It was either sink or swim, and I thought I’d try the swim part.”

He drove nearly eight hours to an interview in Post Falls, Idaho, and three days later was told the job was his. He next set out to Billings, Mont., with \$100 in cash, for a two-week training period. The men were fed breakfast, but he had to buy the rest of his meals. “I would buy a sandwich and eat half for lunch and save the other half for dinner,” he recalled, “just so I wouldn’t blow through my money so fast.”

Now, all his meals are provided at the Atco camp. The cooks serve up hearty if bland fare, including prime rib once a week, along with mashed potatoes and gravy, in the cafeteria. Like Mr. Ripka, Mr. Ervin sometimes works on his time off to make more money — an extra \$1,200 if he works all of his six days off — which helps raise his annual salary to about \$80,000. He and Ms. Stewart have paid off about \$8,000 in credit card debt and are planning to take their children to Disney World this summer.

“It’s been worth it financially,” he said. “I don’t know what we would have done, honestly.”

Mr. Ervin said he did not mind hard work, but he did yearn for his home life. “I think the hardest thing is just missing the everyday things that go on at home, you know?” he said. “I think I miss most my kids jumping in bed with us like at 7 or 8 in the morning. I still get a kick out of it even though they are getting bigger.”

He does not foresee moving his family to Williston, but he hopes to work two more years in the field and then, perhaps, move into an administrative role, helping to train new employees for Sanjel somewhere else — Texas, perhaps. “I might just ride this thing until the wheels fall off,” he said.

About 14 miles outside Williston, Guy Miramontes found his second chance working in the kitchen of another man camp, the Solsten Hotel. Mr. Miramontes, 52, had worked as a cook in Las Vegas, but found himself jobless last year as the recession and the housing crisis weighed on the city’s economy.

As months passed while he looked unsuccessfully for work, he became depressed. He and his wife, Imelda, stressed about how they would pay their bills, began fighting, he said. They had bought a house at the height of the housing market for \$240,000, he said; its value fell to about \$80,000.

One day last summer, he saw a television report on the oil boom in Williston. Soon he could think of nothing else, and told Imelda he was going to North Dakota. “I could stay there and wallow in the self-pity of what we were going through,” he said. “But as we sink, eventually we’d be on the street, too.”

In early September, he put a small fold-up mattress in his Honda CR-V, along with an alarm clock and a pair of heavy boots; he was hoping for oil field work, but packed his set of chef’s knives, just in case. “I drove straight through for 24 hours, white knuckle the whole way,” he said. He packed peanut butter and jelly and beef jerky, so he would not have to spend much on food.

He parked at the Wal-Mart in Williston, for what he hoped would be a brief stretch of living in his car before finding work. “Actually it wasn’t that easy,” he said. “I stayed in my car for three weeks.” He learned to move his car around the lot throughout the day, following the shade. (The Wal-Mart has since stopped the practice of newcomers’ sleeping in its parking lot, according to Williston’s mayor, Ward Koeser.) He showered at a local recreation center, and ate as cheaply as he could at a local sandwich shop. He visited the local library daily, to check his e-mail for possible replies to job applications.

After a week, Imelda pleaded with him to return home, but Mr. Miramontes felt desperate. One day, driving around, he passed a man camp under construction, housing a skeleton crew. He walked in the back door, in his cowboy boots and carrying a résumé, and found the catering manager. “I’m looking for work and I’m a real good cook,” he told him. He called daily, repeating the same thing.

Finally, the cook on duty needed a week off, and Mr. Miramontes had his chance. He was hired, and has worked there since. He goes on duty at 11 p.m. and works until 11 a.m. preparing breakfast for the camp and readying food for two days ahead. “These people come in tired from work and they want to eat on time,” he said. “They are up there to make money. That’s what it’s all about, to have a better life.”

He is grateful for the job, but bitter at the economic mess that pushed him into it. Coming to North Dakota “was by choice,” he said, “but a forced choice.”

For now, Mr. Miramontes is not looking too far into the future. He has a son who is grown and on his own, but he worries about having to be far away from his mother, 81, who lives outside Las Vegas. His wife, who works for a Las Vegas hotel, may consider moving out to join him eventually, if it looks as if the boom will last a while. “I’ll put in as many years as I’m able to,” he said.

Back at home, the women with children must adjust to being single parents for weeks or even months at a time. For Danette Radermacher, Mr. Ripka’s partner of 22 years, duties now include digging out after snowstorms, without Mr. Ripka’s help.

At the end of February, with northern Minnesota under a severe storm warning, Ms. Radermacher woke every couple of hours to check the weather, and watched as the drifts piled up against the kitchen window. The couple’s sons, 17 and 10, are old enough to help with chores like shoveling snow. But she is keenly aware that she is the sole adult there, no matter how many times she speaks to Mr. Ripka on the phone.

“I get nervous when it snows,” she said in a phone interview just after the storm. “What if we lose power?”

Despite the challenges, Ms. Radermacher said Mr. Ripka’s new job had thrown the family a financial lifeline. Although she is a registered nurse, Ms. Radermacher had only been able to find work locally as a home health aide, covering the overnight shift on weekends so she could work while her boys slept. So when the opportunity came up in North Dakota, she agreed Mr. Ripka should go. She considered going, too, with the boys, since nurses are in demand in Williston and she could very likely find good work. But their older son is nearly finished with high school, and they did not want to make him leave his friends so close to graduation, “We have to do what we have to do.”

Even when she is not trapped in the house by the weather, she is often lonely. Entertainment is mostly watching cable television, and taking her sons to play after-school sports. “Sometimes,” she said with a wry laugh, “I forget how to talk to adults.”

THE separation is hard on the children, too. They like that their parents can now afford to buy them electronic gadgets as birthday gifts, Ms. Radermacher said. But Mr. Ripka’s job meant missing his son Dakota’s 10th birthday in February. During Mr. Ripka’s visit home in January, the boy presented his father with a jar of spare change, and asked if it were enough to pay for a family trip to the beach.

Mr. Ripka decided that they had earned a family vacation, and that he would work extra weeks to pay for it. When Ms. Radermacher was told by her employer that she would be denied time off from her job for the trip, she said, she quit in frustration. She has been applying for jobs locally, but has not yet landed one. Mr. Ripka took the train from Williston on March 6, meeting with his family before heading to Florida for a week together in the sun.

In Oregon, Ms. Stewart is coping as best she can in Mr. Ervin’s absence. “It’s lonely, especially when he’s out on long jobs,” she said in a phone interview. “He can’t always call.”

They tried video chats using Skype for a while, but often when Mr. Ervin has time to talk, the girls are in bed. So she takes pictures of their daughters to show him when he comes home, to help keep him connected with what they are doing. And they make the most of Mr. Ervin’s visits home, hiring a sitter so they can have date nights.

To save money, Mr. Ervin takes Amtrak — less than \$300, instead of two or three times that for airfare. The trip takes nearly 24 hours and cuts two days off his visit. But the time gives him a chance to decompress and mentally prepare for the transition to home life. “So when he gets here,” she said, “it’s not such a shock, jumping into swimming lessons, and whatever we’re doing.” Mr. Ervin typically volunteers at his daughters’ preschool.

His job has let them stem a scary financial spiral and opened the door to a new career for Mr. Ervin, so Ms. Stewart makes the best of the situation. Once their finances are back on track, the couple can perhaps think about setting a wedding date, she said. “I almost feel like I can’t complain,” she said. “This is a choice we’ve made. I can’t sit home and feel sad.”

Still, she is unsure how long they will keep up the extended separations. “For now, it needs to be done,” she said. “But there has to be light at the end of the tunnel.”

While the men’s families muddle through at home, workdays can stretch around the clock in Williston, depending on the situation at the drilling sites. During their off time, some of the men at the Atco camp

gather in a common area for darts, cribbage or television; the local movie theater has limited showings during the week.

A sort of camaraderie has evolved, based on the shared experience of long hours and loneliness. A half-dozen men in Mr. Ripka's work group were temporarily bald this winter, having shaved their heads together as part of an autism fund-raiser. On weekends, there are outings for pitchers of icy, light beer at D.K.'s, a Williston watering hole where visitors are scanned with security wands, like at the airport. A bouncer with a curly mullet scans driver's licenses into a hand-held gadget; if the holder makes trouble, he explains, he or she will not be allowed in again.

On a recent Friday night, a gang of workers from the Atco lodge drove to D.K.'s, where the scene was a sort of college mixer meets biker bar. The men watched as girls in jeans and heavy boots line-danced until, emboldened by beer and the thumping beat of Lady Gaga, younger flannel-clad men joined them on the dance floor, mugs in hand.

At about 10:30, women in decidedly different attire — short, skintight dresses — teetered onto the dance floor, in spike heels. Prostitutes, as well as oil workers, are said to be doing a brisk business in Williston.

The separation can strain even strong relationships. One camper said his wife objected to his removing his wedding ring while at work, even though it is advisable for safety. Another said he would not let his girlfriend visit him in Williston; he worried that he would be too jealous, with all the men around.

The men, too, worry about their partners left home alone. "If you don't have a lady at home that you can trust, you are going to have a hard time up here," Mr. Ervin said.

Yet, some of the men are reluctant to bring their wives and children to live in Williston, which has developed a decidedly gritty, frontier-town feel. Recently, the local news has been dominated by the story of a woman in nearby Sidney, Mont., who was kidnapped and, it is presumed, murdered while jogging; two Colorado men said to have been looking for oil field work have been charged in her disappearance. And in late February, the local newspaper ran an article saying that the number of registered sex offenders in the area had doubled over the previous year because of the influx of newcomers.

Mayor Koeser calls the rapid growth a "crisis" that has strained local resources with, among other challenges, increased traffic and litter, often blowing out of pickup trucks used for shelter.

Patrick Schneider, 30, left his wife and 3-year-old daughter back in Bemidji, Minn., to work pouring cement for oil wells around Williston. His employer is building family housing, and the couple is considering applying for it so they can be reunited on a regular basis. But the recent headlines gave him pause. "I think it's a good town, but they say crime is getting bad," he said. "I'd hate to move them out here and have something happen. That would be horrible."

While many of the men plan to stick it out as long as they can take it, some decide relatively soon that being separated from their families is more than they can handle. Ronald Powell, a native of Winter Haven, Fla., lasted about four months as a heavy equipment operator for an oil field services contractor before throwing in the towel.

Mr. Powell had been out of work for some time when he was hired last fall at \$25 per hour to drive trucks in Williston; he settled into a man camp operated by Target Logistics.

A gruff, churchgoing man, with hands like catcher's mitts, Mr. Powell said he was often uncomfortable in the rough-and-tumble environment of Williston. Yet things were tolerable, until he had a disagreement with his employer over working conditions and, he said, a proposed pay cut. So when a company in Florida offered him \$18 an hour to work back home, he quickly accepted it. Speaking by phone after leaving Sunday services in Winter Haven with his granddaughter, Mr. Powell said he was bitter about his treatment by his employer, but had no regrets about trying out the work life in Williston.

"Everything," he said, "happens for a reason."