

Sept. 3, 1990---

SALINAS, Calif. The ripe resolution of the Salinas Spurs baseball team recalls John Steinbeck's harvest gypsies. They, too, slow danced through the mauve mountains of the San Joaquin Valley.

The 1990 Spurs were driven by a similar search for salvation that connected the dust bowl migrants of the mid-1930s. Such a bracing fabric can still be sensed in the heart of what locals call Steinbeck Country.

Located 101 miles south of San Francisco, Salinas is surrounded by flat artichoke, lettuce and strawberry fields where, on a good day, a field worker can make \$50. A Spurs pitcher neatly folded his pay check to hide his name and showed me \$128 take-home pay that covered the last two weeks of the season.

Gypsies dance slow when the money goes fast.

The Spurs entry in the Class A California League is an independent co-op team. The Spurs are just one of eight independent minor league operations in America, which means their roster is made up mostly from the table scraps of other organizations.

So when 1,412 fans showed up last Sunday for the season-closing Fan Appreciation Day, they honored baseball migrants like Brent Hahn, the 23-year-old son of ex-major leaguer Don Hahn. Brent was hitting a parched .213. Last year he hit a buck thirty.

The loyalists celebrated the Spurs' die-hard battery - ex-big leaguers Steve Howe and Andy Allanson - who applied the finishing touches on an 8-1 victory over the Bakersfield Dodgers. Even Leon Durham was a harvest gypsy for a few weeks. He went home with a back injury after stumbling over first base, which has become something of a twilight zone for the ex-Cub.

Bowing to the fans along the first base line in Sunday's postgame ceremony were Spurs second baseman Shikato Yanagita (43 errors), center fielder Takayuki Nishusima and manager Hide Koga.

About the only sure thing about the Spurs is that clang you heard was this collection of baseball trinkets landing in last place of the Northern Division of the California League. The Spurs finished a cumulative 47-93.

They were 22-47, good for last place in the first half of the split season, and they pumped up the volume for a 25-46 second half. The im-Spurfect season didn't put a

damper on one of the more eventful summers in the recent annals of professional baseball in America:

A former pitcher in the Cubs' system, Koga became the first Japanese manager of an American professional team. Koga used to own the Mark Twain Restaurant in Savanna, Ill., also making him the first professional manager to go from dining into the dugout.

The appearance of Koga, the eight Japanese players, coach Takayuki Kohno and trainer Masahiro Kubota in Salinas represents the largest-ever Japanese export of baseball talent in America.

Howe, a baseball outlaw, got his career together after shoulder surgery and then fighting a blood clot that developed in his lung.

The Spurs threw a curve into the traditionally tight minor league baseball salary structure. Japanese players were paid \$50,000, based on their yearly contracts with the Daiei Hawks back home. The Americans got about \$500 a month.

Even the most casual fan couldn't escape the subtle Japanese influence at Municipal Stadium here. The wooden outfield fence is patch quilted with typical down-home minor league advertising, until you glance down the left field line and see signs for Ozeki sake and sake cooler.

You can buy a hot dog here.

You can also buy a bag of Sapporo, which is a thin "vegetable snack" of "real" potatoes and garden fresh vegetables, imported from Tokyo. That is how this year's Spurs would taste - salty and pasty. The Sapporo can be washed down with a Cup O' Noodles, a seafood Oriental crab soup compromised by thick noodles.

Some of the dignified customs on the field defy American baseball tradition. Yanagita led off the game for the Spurs by swinging at a bad third strike. He walked back to the dugout in sprite strides, carrying his bat like a lawyer's briefcase. On route, Yanagita gently handed his honor to the batboy. Knob down. As if it was a pair of scissors.

The Japanese summered in Salinas on a brainstorm of Spurs owner Joe Buzas. A frugal Japanese minor league system left the Daiei Hawks with nowhere to place some of their prospects.

The Hawks, one of the richest teams in Japan, could afford to export their prospects and Koga. The Hawks paid the Spurs \$10,000 for each player, as well as meal money and lodging. When the California League season ended last week, the Japanese were certain of one other constant.

The Hawks, too, are in last place of their league, the Pacific League in Japan.

They have an 18-48-3 record. "It was very nice to win our last game at home," Koga said. "The people of Salinas deserved it."

Koga knows about loyal fans. He was a harvest gypsy too.

Koga, 51, spent six years in American minor leagues in the 1960s. He went 8-6 for the Decatur (Ill.) Giants in 1966, and in 1968 pitched for the Lodi Slammers, then a California League entry in the Cubs organization.

After leaving American baseball, he played with Laredo in the Mexican League and with Maracaibo in the Venezuelan League. He has coached for the Daiei Hawks since 1979 and signed American players like Tony Bernazard and Willie Upshaw.

"We brought the players here to learn the ways of American baseball," Koga said. "I can't change the Japanese culture and the Japanese system by myself. But, if we bring the young players here, give them American experience, by the time they become coaches in Japan, maybe five or 10 years later, Japanese baseball can improve."

Koga was honest in analysis of his Japanese imports, saying they would have have no chance to make American major leagues and little chance to crack the Japanese big leagues.

He was equally blunt in his appraisal of Durham, who hit .228 with eight home runs and 26 RBI in 114 at-bats for the Spurs. "He tried but he was overweight," Koga said. "He says he'd like to go to Japan, but it would be tough for him. He has to get in better shape."

Koga's primary focus was to fine tune his player's embryonic skills against faster and stronger competition and to de-emphasize the meticulous Japanese work ethic. "In Japan, we practice, practice and practice," he said. "Over and over and over. Maybe that's why Cecil Fielder improved his swing. Depending on the day, sometimes we practice 6 hours, sometimes 10 hours. The moon comes out and we're finishing our running."

Koga didn't incorporate the excessive regiment in Salinas, although coach Kohno did. Koga said, "After the game and dinner, he would take a handful of players to swing bats outside the hotel under streetlights."

Hahn was the only American to participate in the bat patrol.

"It was unbelievable, but I figured I needed the practice," he said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. Usually, you get back to the hotel and you kick back. They go out for a half hour to get that perfect swing. It did help."

The Spurs victory over Bakersfield was tinted with Japanese tradition. With the Spurs up 8-1 in the seventh inning, Koga attempted to send first baseman Kenichi Yamawouchi home from first base on Hahn's single to right. He was thrown out. A couple of batters later, Koga had Takayuki Nishusima steal third base. "They're out to kill the other team," Hahn said. "In America, if you do something like that, you're apt to get hurt."

"Japanese coaching takes a lot to get used to. It's all execution. With Americans, you get a guy on first and hit away. Here, you have to make sure to check the sign. It may be a hit-and-run, it may be a bunt. The game has barely started and you're bunting. A lot of American guys get angry with that, especially when it's all numbers in the minor leagues."

Howe, who had a cup of sake in Japan in 1987, said the Japanese assimilated themselves in Salinas better than Americans do in Japan. All of the Japanese players on the Salinas roster took to English courses and golf courses. (It costs \$100 to play golf in Japan). "I think they try harder to be part of us than we try to be part of them," he said. "They've always been that way. They're just like sponges and that's why they're so successful. If you have something to give, they'll take it."

That's a worthy code of the harvest gypsy.