AMERICA'S BERLIN WALL
Part One: Crossing with the Hated *Pollero*
By Dan Baum

Arnoldo usually wears a goofy grin on his smooth round face, but he wasn't smiling at the airport in Tijuana. He'd just taken his first-ever airplane ride – scary enough -- and now he was getting ready to face the most exhilarating and dangerous adventure of his 19 years: crossing illegally to the United States.

"My mother cried," he said. "But I think my dad was jealous." Cofradía de Suchitlán, his cobblestoned village of 1,200 souls, is used to ambivalent farewells. Wages there average about $3 a day, so at any one time about half of its working-age men are in the States. Now it was Arnoldo's turn to face that rite of passage.

"Got a pollero?" I asked him. Pollero – slang for the guide needed to elude the Border Patrol – literally means "chickenherd," for the way migrants follow them in the desert like hens following a bowl of grain.

"No," Arnoldo said, avoiding my eyes, and I thought he was just nervous about being in so big a city after a lifetime in which he was related, one way or another, to almost everyone he knew. He said he'd stay with a friend's cousin until he found one and gave me his phone number. Then, after retying the string holding his tiny satchel together and promising to meet me later, Arnoldo ventured off alone into the smoking cauldron that is Mexico's premier border city.

Tijuana is the archetypical border town -- filthy, chaotic, grasping, and vicious – and I despaired for him. This coddled Cofradía boy, like thousands of others who pass through here on their way north, suddenly found himself amidst leering, unshaven men who know at a glance which pocket harbors your wallet, and regiments of shellacked women in crotch-length spandex who pluck your sleeve and hiss "sucky-fucky" as you pass. At the bars, if a man can bear the stink of cigarettes, stale beer, and cheap perfume, and the braking-subway screech of blown speakers at top volume, he can be approached and fondled by a parade of hopeful hookers for the price of a single beer. Many a farm

boy fresh off the bus, intending to cross the border to California, has gotten no farther than Tijuana's bars and brothels. That first night, I tried the phone number Arnoldo had given me: disconnected. He was gone. I'd lost him.

In the old days, anyone who wanted to sneak into the U.S. from Mexico could simply take a taxi to the outskirts of Tijuana, hop over a lonely strand of barbed wire and run into Chula Vista, California in about 15 minutes. But in 1994, President Clinton launched Operation Gatekeeper, doubling the size of the Border Patrol and concentrating it on population centers from Tijuana on the Pacific Coast to Matamoros on the Gulf. The old strand of barbed wire has morphed into the desert equivalent of the Berlin Wall – literally, a twelve-foot-high wall of corrugated steel, emblazoned with warnings that on the other side is a Zona Despoblada, a Depopulated Zone. Through cracks in the wall, a harsh no-man's-land is visible, about 100 yards wide, strung with concertina wire. At night, floodlights bathe the area.

Of course, migrants aren't shot on sight in the depopulated zone as they were in the "death strip" surrounding the Berlin Wall. But even so, eight times as many people as before Operation Gatekeeper die each year trying to cross the border because the Zone -- backed up by the night-vision-equipped helicopters, tanks, and soldiers of the U.S. Army -- has pushed migrants out to the scorching deserts and freezing mountains far from town. As many died of heat and cold last year -- about 400 -- as died attempting to cross the Berlin Wall during its entire 28-year history.

It is amazing what people will endure to make beds in a Ramada Inn, fry doughnuts on the graveyard shift, pick vegetables in South Carolina, or mow golf courses in Memphis – jobs so lousy most Americans won't apply. But somebody has to do that work, and an inexhaustible supply of Mexicans (and Central Americans) is so eager for those jobs they risk their lives to show up. Heavy-handed border enforcement has worked the same social alchemy as the War on Drugs: Without making a dent in the problem it was intended to solve, it has raised the body count, inspired ingenuity in the lawbreakers, and created a lucrative illicit economy. The capital of that economy is Tijuana.

People-smuggling is a complex business. No single pollero guides a migrant all the way from downtown Tijuana to safety on the other side. Each specializes in a select stage of the journey, buying and selling migrants along the way in a jittery underworld bucket brigade. The minute a Mexican steps off the bus in Tijuana, he's prey for the first pollero on the chain. Polleros stake out the bus station and airport and watch the Cathedral of Guadalupe, a towering island of quiet amidst the cacophony of downtown. You see them in church every day, alert young men in sunglasses leaning beneath the stations of the Cross with their arms folded, ignoring Mass as they chew matchsticks and scan for clean-cut, jittery-looking guys with small suitcases. "Going to the other side?" they whisper. I hung out at the cathedral on and off for days looking for Arnoldo but, with a fishy accent and the wrong attire, never got any of these polleros to talk. Arnoldo never showed either. But people-smuggling is to Tijuana what Detroit is to cars, so everybody -- whether prostitute, shopkeeper, tout, taxi driver, hotel clerk, cop, or priest – has a little piece of intelligence or folklore to impart.

Polleros are despised in Mexico – even by the migrants who depend on them -- in a way that, say, drug dealers are not. Drug dealers, after all, largely export their brand of misery. They're rich guys who tip lavishly and pay to cultivate their image, having popular bands record ballads in the same revolutionary genre that romanticized Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Polleros, on the other hand, are the paupers of the criminal world, often addicts, and they prey on Mexicans -- overcharging, robbing, and sometimes abandoning migrants to their deaths in the desert. "I see a narquero coming, I'll open the door for him, make him welcome; I had one give me a $100 bill once just for bringing him some ice," says Julio Velasco, who earns $60 a week at a downtown Tijuana hotel. "But a pollero? I'd spit on him." He'd also turn him in to the cops – for a reward, certainly, but also "just for the pleasure of it." While it's not against Mexican law to try to sneak into the U.S., it's a serious crime to be a pollero; suspects are denied bail, and the minimum sentence is seven years.

A pollero's first stop with a new client is usually a caseta telefónica, a storefront business of telephones in glass booths. Most migrants don't have the cash to pay a pollero – it's to earn such sums that they're going abroad – so a friend or relative on the other side has to agree to pay. The migrant calls his stateside contact collect and hands the receiver to the pollero, who names his price. Everything that follows depends on that phone call, between two people who have never met and never will.

Once promised payment, the pollero installs his client in one of Tijuana's cheap hotels with an order to stay put. The rooms in these hotels, otherwise rented for fifteen-minute trysts, are little more than booths; when sitting on the edge of a bed your knees touch the wall. The pollero keeps depositing migrants until maybe half a dozen men end up on the bed, hugging their knees, swapping what they know. Adjoining rooms fill up, too, each segregated by destination – Los Angeles? Atlanta? Chicago? – and mode of travel.

Migrants can go what you could call coach, business class, or first class. Coach is a long deadly walk in the desert. This option, typically costing $1,500, became a lot less appealing in May of 2000, when fourteen migrants died of dehydration in Arizona and the story made headlines for weeks in Mexico. For a while, more migrants opted to go business or first class – either stuffed into a car trunk or hidden compartment for a short, uncomfortable $2,500 ride through the checkpoint, or breezing past the border agents with elaborate phony papers that rent for as much as $3,000 a crossing.

The pollero who gathers a hotel-full of migrants gets his fee – about a quarter of the promised payment -- when he sells them to the pollero who will take them across. If pollero number one sells his migrants to the man with the box full of phony passports he'll get about $750 apiece, if he sells to the body shop that builds false compartments into car trunks, he'll get about $625, and if he sells to the desert-hard man who takes groups walking, he'll get about $375.

Just as the desert became less attractive after the May deaths, crossing at the border checkpoints got harder on September 11. Border guards who used to balance security with efficiency have thrown the dial to full-on security. No more quick glance at

passport and vehicle registration -- border agents in rubber gloves, their Glocks slung low in black Cordura tac holsters, now turn cars inside out. Driver and passengers all climb out. One agent double-checks papers while another unpacks the trunk, goes through the bags, combs the engine compartment, and runs mirrors under the chassis. Cars wait for hours in the queue, plenty long for a migrant stuffed into a car seat to suffocate. Even the pedestrian queue is glacial. So lately it's back to the desert, where migrants are less likely to get caught but more likely to die. When a bunch of veteran border-jumpers was trying to explain this cruel calculus to me, one said of the desert, "it's safer but more dangerous." Everybody in the room knew exactly what he meant.

To slip around la Migra, Tijuana's polleros these days are taking their migrants about 100 miles east of town to a desolate place called La Rumorosa. In the U.S., La Rumorosa – The Murmurer -- might be a national park, so weirdly beautiful are its geologic formations. From a distance they appear to be solid mountains; up close, they are mountain-size piles of baby-pink boulders, each as big as a VW bug and as comically spherical as rocks on the Flintstones. The boulders are heaped so high, with so much air space between them, that it seems as though you could pull one out and bring them all down like cans stacked in a supermarket. Arnoldo had hoped to cross "business class" in a false compartment under a van but he knew he might end up walking. I headed out to La Rumorosa, not so much expecting to find him as wanting to see what he'd endure.

At 3 o'clock on a September afternoon, the digital thermometer on the pickup truck's dashboard read 105. Driving the pickup was Felipe Flores, a baby-faced 33-year-old officer of Grupo Beta, the agency established by the Mexican government ten years ago to rescue migrants from the desert. Felipe makes this trip every afternoon from Tecate, where the beer is made, driving an hour east to La Rumorosa, then plunging down switchbacks to the back of beyond. He's a maritime engineer who lost his tuna-fishing job in 1989 when a U.S. boycott targeted Mexican fishermen whose methods were killing too many dolphins. His job search beached him on this waterless plain. "Penance," he laughed.

As we snaked among La Rumorosa's boulders, he reminded me that it's not illegal for a migrant to hike to the border. "All I can do is try to convince them to turn back." He tapped a ring binder on the seat; inside were pictures of desiccated human beings splayed like tipped-over scarecrows in the sand. "If these don't do it, all I can do is give them water." Nobody is ever carrying enough, in Felipe's opinion. You need a liter an hour in the desert and the walk can take five days because the *polleros* zig-zag to avoid *la Migra*. "A human being can't carry enough," Felipe said. "I sometimes find people out here with two sport bottles, *no más*."

We rounded a bend and the earth fell away in front of our bumper. I saw now where we were going, a flat pan of desert 3,000 feet below: stark white, featureless, hazy. The Valley of the Shadow of Death, I thought, and heard myself blurt, "I don't want to go down there."

"We have to," Felipe said. He winked under his White Sox cap. "There's a cooler in back with ice and lots of Gatorade."

It was a six mile walk from where we stood to the conceptual line in the sand that separates the United States from Mexico, and another six miles from there to California State Highway 98, where the guide-*pollero* often sells his flock to the next *pollero* in the chain.

"How do the *polleros* endure this again and again?" I asked.

Felipe made a joint-smoking gesture with his lips and fingertips.

Down, down the switchbacked highway we went, the digital thermometer on the dash ticking upwards: 106, 108, 109. . . . As the road flattened on the desert floor Felipe swerved off and we bucked and lurched into the desert, Felipe gunning it to keep the wheels spinning in the soft sand. I grabbed the dash as Felipe steered wildly around cacti, the hulks of dead cars, and a nasty long-armed plant called the Crucifixion Thorn. Nothing out here offered the slightest shade. The thermometer read 120. Felipe slowed and stopped before a baby-blue plywood crate on legs, on which someone had crudely painted Grupo Beta's green-white-and-red logo.

"We put these water tanks here but the polleros avoid them to keep from running into us," he said as he climbed out. "If we talk the migrants into turning back, the pollero doesn't get paid. And if the migrants tell us which is the pollero, we can arrest him." Felipe opened his button-down sport shirt to reveal a holstered automatic pistol the size of a toaster oven. "The problem is, by the time we find them, the migrants are so traumatized they believe the pollero is their only way out of here. They rarely leave him, much less rat him out."

Outside the air-conditioned truck, the heat grabbed the tubes in my chest like a fist. I started to take off my shirt but Felipe stopped me. "That's the big mistake the migrants make," he said as we trudged through deep white sand toward the tank. "The water leaves your body twice as fast without clothes."

The tank inside the raised crate was full, the water warm. Around us lay a yard sale of discarded clothes, shoes, and toys. The ground was slightly elevated at the tank and Felipe peered at the horizon, looking for the telltale puff of dust that would reveal a group of walking people. "That's La Mojonera" (The Landmark), he said, pointing to a low butte in the distance that marked the border. "It separates the land of dólares [dollars] from the land of dolores [pain]." I'd been in deserts before – the Kalahari, the Sahel, Death Valley – but never anywhere as brutal as this. The heat and dryness defied belief; my skin was dry but I could feel the water being sucked from me into the air. I couldn't imagine walking to La Mojonera, much less twice that far to Highway 98. Just shuffling through 50 feet of soft sand to the truck was a challenge. Is Arnoldo out here? I wondered, imagining his plump features withering under the sun.

We checked a couple more tanks, searching for fresh tracks as though deer hunting. Near one, Felipe gestured through the windshield at a couple of rocky outcroppings joined by a line of waist-high plastic slats poking up at ten-foot intervals from the sandy swale. "La linea," he said. The border.

It occurred to me as we got out to inspect it that Operation Gatekeeper resembles the Berlin Wall in this way, too: it is ultimately doomed. As long as employers will hire them, the Mexicans will come -- through corrugated steel and infrared spotters and a

desert of Biblical lethality. As a barrier to illegal immigration, the border does not exist; if Osama bin Laden wanted to wade the Rio Grande, he'd probably make it. La linea can't contain people's aspirations any more than the Wall could.

As we approached the slats, I saw that while the sand lay naturally in windblown swirls on the Mexican side, it had been combed smooth on the far side, as on a high-class private beach. "They do that to make the migrants' tracks easier to see," Felipe said.

A siren blast sliced the air and a white Ford Bronco roared toward us, fishtailing from behind a rock pile on the U.S. side. A kelly-green stripe around its belly framed the words Border Patrol. Out jumped a clean-cut blond man in a green uniform and aviator shades. "Oh," he said, deflated. "It's just you."

His brass nameplate read M. Bolf; the creases in his uniform were sharp enough to cast shadows, and around his waist hung enough hardware to open a store. "We saw some tracks," Felipe told Bolf, and described where. In halting but correct Spanish, Bolf reported a puff he'd seen to the east. "Maybe migrants walking, maybe a dust-devil." I asked if the increased patrols announced since September 11 had discouraged migrants here. Bolf laughed. "They keep a-comin'," he said.

We were standing close enough to touch each other and it would clearly have made no difference way out here if one of us put a toe across. Yet Felipe stayed carefully on his side and Bolf on his. They didn't even breach the border to shake hands. We stood like wary farmers talking over a fence. The sun dropped behind a cliff and, with no moisture in the air, the temperature seemed to drop instantly 30 degrees. Bolf climbed into his Bronco and gunned back through the swale, raising a roostertail of sand.

"So you help La Migra catch Mexicans?" I asked Felipe as we trudged to the truck. I was shivering.

"Better they get arrested than eaten by buzzards," he said.

As I watched Bolf's taillights bouncing across the trackless expanse, I remembered a day years before when I'd watched (IS THIS ACCURATE? Of course it's accurate. I covered crime for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution) the Georgia State Police yank up and burn a marijuana field. The captain in charge called it an "eradication."

"Won't it all grow back?" a TV reporter asked innocently, and the captain just stared at her in silent loathing.

When a group of migrants makes it alive to Highway 98, their ordeal continues. The guide-pollero sells them to a stateside pollero for about three-quarters of the final price – these days about $1,125 apiece. The guide-pollero, who has risked the physically grueling stage of the trip, makes the biggest profit: having shelled out $375 to the launch-stage pollero, he clears $750 a head, and he's the only one who doesn't have to pay overhead to store the migrants.

The stateside pollero is an enforcer. He takes his chickens to a safehouse – they call it a clavo, or nail -- in an out-of-the-way neighborhood of one of the small border towns, where he holds them captive. After all, they still haven't paid for their trip. The pollero pays daily rent of about $25 a head until he can arrange transportation to the destination, often Los Angeles, where most Tijuana migrants have family members who can pay. After a busy few days at the border, a clavo might shelter 30 or more men who huddle in front of a TV with the blinds drawn, eating beans and tortillas twice a day. The pollero eventually loads them into cars, no more than two at a time, for the two-hour drive to their destination. Small cars with paid gringo drivers are best because they attract less attention, and the migrants climb into the trunk before passing through known Border Patrol haunts. The pollero has more than $1,000 invested in each migrant, and if they get caught his entire investment evaporates.

The pollero's employees hold them at another rental house in Los Angeles where the migrants take turns using the phone to summon the friend or relative who has promised to pay. "If the family doesn't pay, they take the guy back to Mexico," said Chino, a Chicano L.A. gang member who has dabbled in the business. "If he doesn't want to go they put a knife to his throat and tell him shut the fuck up or they'll kill him and his whole fucking no-pay family. Then they drive him south through the line, which is easy. They give him an ass-whipping as a warning to others, and let him go." Chino paused and chuckled. "But that doesn't happen too often," he said. "Most people pay."

Back in Tecate, Felipe's boss at Grupo Beta, Gabriel Arias Ochoa, has a map that stretches from corner to corner of the break room, showing the desert from Tijuana all the way to La Rumorosa and beyond. The map bristles with colored pins: green shows popular passes through the desert, blue indicates Grupo Beta's water tanks, and white shows where migrants have been convinced to turn back. Red means corpses. The day I visited there were six of those. Operation Gatekeeper, Arias said, depends on the corpses.

"Their purpose is to kill people," he said of the U.S. policymakers. "They knew that if they increased enforcement in the west it would push people into the desert east of here and there would be deaths, and that would discourage people."

Still, the number of Mexicans living illegally in the United States keeps growing – by about 300,000 a year – and now approaches 5 million. For those who survive, the ordeal of crossing is simply a cost of doing business. Just as corporations used the North American Free Trade Agreement to rub out the border; campesinos are erasing it with their feet. In another decade or two, we may look back on the hardened U.S.-Mexico border the way we look back on the wall across Berlin; we'll remember it as something people fretted about, but we won't really remember why.

Two weeks after I got home my phone rang and it was Arnoldo, calling from a payphone in Greenville, South Carolina. Now I knew why he'd looked so shifty at the airport. He'd given me the slip. He'd had a pollero lined up all along, he said: his cousin, who is married to a Tijuana cop. They'd told him to ditch the gringo journalist.

"Ay, it was hard," he says of his crossing. He had indeed crossed at La Rumorosa, probably only days after I'd been there. It took a day and two nights, he said. Nobody in his group died. Now he was working, hanging sheetrock with his brother and a bunch of other guys from Cofradía.

"Would you make the crossing again?" I asked him.

"I'm making $11 an hour," he said. "What do you think?"

end