

Four hundred and nine Mexicans died trying to cross the border last year, but when 16 died of thirst last month, shriveling like mummies in the desert north of Yuma, Arizona, every Mexican village with a TV to receive the news was talking about it. If you live in San Jose or Queens, you grumble about roadwork or accidents that make you late to work. If you live in Oaxaca or Colima or Veracruz the commute is rougher. But that's all it is: a bitch of a commute.

The absent men of rural Mexico are part of the biggest immigration flow since the heyday of Ellis Island, a tidal wave of undocumented souls. But the immigrant experience at the turn of this century has little in common with that at the turn of the last. At any one time, somewhere between seven and thirteen million undocumented Mexicans live in the United States. But they aren't the same individuals who were there three years ago, or even three months ago. For most "illegals," a stint in the States is like a tour in the military: hard, lonely, and sometimes demeaning, but temporary. Most young men want to try it at least once. For many, it's a rite of passage. The rewards are great. But even those Mexicans who stay away until retirement and rear thoroughly American children dream and build for the day they can return to their Mexican village. The Mexicans who send home Polaroids of themselves cheerfully

packed eight to an apartment in Nashville or Los Angeles want to earn enough money in a few seasons of work to marry, or put a second story on their houses, or open their own businesses at home. They are upwardly mobile but not unmoored, like a trumpet vine rooted happily in Mexican soil, reaching for the cruel but necessary sunlight of the dollar economy on the other side of the fence. Few are desperados and hardly any see themselves as victims. The rebar you see sticking up from the cement walls of most one-story homes in Mexico looks desolate but it's a sign of hope: another story will go up when the next U.S. job throws off some dollars. The cross-border commuters show up at home for the holidays, wearing gold medallions in the shape of AK-47s and laden with Mixmasters, Barbie castles, CDS, and cash. The 16 who died in Yuma last month were returning from a visit home for the Easter holidays. They were not the wretched of the earth, "escaping grinding poverty," but rather the elite of their villages – the ones with the youth, drive, and vision to endure the hard but lucrative stint up north.

Part of our story is the desert, the people-smugglers (some cruel and money-hungry, many who are village heroes and smuggle for free), and the migrant way of death by heat or cold. But more important in personalizing the migrant story are the communities at either end of the

commute. We intend to deep inside one or more workers, both their lives in the U.S. and the lives of their families back in Mexico. The essential – and often-misunderstood – fact about the illegals scrambling through the desert is that they are deeply connected on both sides of the border. They go, more often than not, to build a house for their mothers or start a business with their brothers-in-law. (The wages they send home are Mexico’s third-biggest source of foreign income, after oil and tourism.) I’m exploring ways, through a coalition of American businesses that depend on immigrant labor, to get in touch with some of my illegal friends’ employers. The employers’ identities will probably have to be disguised, because they face Simpson-Mazzoli fines, but I’m confident I can find eloquent spokesmen for the employer point of view. As for the Mexican end, our two years in a rural village left us lots of notes on the impact the great commute has on a typical village drained of men.

Here are a few samples. We might be able to build on these if we agree to set the story in Cofradía, Virginia Beach, and Memphis. (which would be the most efficient thing to do). Otherwise, you can read them as a sample of what we’d find in any village.

My 45-year-old friend, Elisa Mendez, patches together a living by baking ornate birthday cakes, runs the program that feeds children a

breakfast of tortillas and chayote in the cane-walled shack beside the school, oversees the coffee harvest on the family's scrap of land, and reluctantly, does emergency plumbing jobs in her husband's stead while he's up north earning an American plumber's wages. "Those people who died," she said on the phone this morning, "it could have been my husband or my son. It's all anyone is talking about."

The women of Cofradía refer to the United States simply, as "over there:" "allá."

"My husband and son are allá," Ms. Mendez told me the first day I met her, as she leaned out the window of her pickup. Over there.

I looked over my shoulder.

"No, allá," she said, pointing heavenward.

"Oh," I said, frowning sympathetically.

"No. Allá," she said, laughing. "Allá, where you come from. Los Angeles." A sticker on the back window of her truck showed a cartoon Mexican in a huge sombrero pissing on a word in script: Migra. Turns out her son is in Memphis, and I reflected that my in-laws, who fled L.A. in the forties because it was "too crowded," would be horrified to learn that "Los Angeles" now means everything north of the border.

The women of Cofradía are divided in their attitudes about “allá.” Lourdes Cejas, a teacher, scorns her husband’s idea that they need northern dollars and wants him back, pronto. Leonila Vargas, who grew up with barely enough to eat, treks gratefully to the city each month to wait in line at the bank for her husband’s money order, accepting that their five-year-old daughter knows him only as a voice on the phone and a picture on the bureau. For Lupe Orozco, a 44-year-old divorcee living with her three children in her father’s authoritarian house, hope for a new life arrived, while I was there, in the form of a California lettuce packer with a Trans Am. (The romance fell apart; now her son is up north.)

To go or not to go: it’s a lively philosophical debate among the men. The mayor of Cofradía, who was fortunate to retire from a job as a sort of agricultural extension agent, teaching cheese- and jelly-making, wants no part of allá. He’s proud of his son who has a Mexican veterinary degree and works at a recycling plant in Palm Springs, but he also makes fun of him. The Cofradía butcher, Rigo Ponce, a hard-bellied, drooping-mustached patriot who held court with the old men Sunday mornings over a bubbling vat of chiccharones, scorned his seven commuting brothers.

“Won’t go,” Ponce said. “I’d rather starve.”

“Looks like you’re not in any danger,” I told him.

Ponce hitched his paunch and laughed.

“I am the only one of my family who stays,” he said.

“Why?”

He thumped his chest with a comic flourish. “Puro Mexicano,” he said. “Lots of work, little money.” Ponce often spoke in shorthand.

Sometimes it was funny. Sometimes it made me want to physically wring more words out of him. This time I divined the unsaid, that he’d rather live in familiar Cofradía and earn little, but be somebody, than live a lucrative but alienated and sometimes humiliating no-speaka-English life up north. It was the choice every man in town faced, and most had taken the other road.

“I have three little boys,” said Octavio Martínez, Ponce’s young assistant, as he ripped open a can of beer. Beer, at seven in the morning, struck me as a mistake for a father of three. But instead of putting it to his lips he upended the can into one of the pots of bubbling pig fat. A furiously hissing cloud of steam hid him from me and a roasty smell of hops lingered. “If I go,” he continued, “they won’t have a father. And what could I bring back? Money. Nothing more.” He opened a beer for the second vat. I thought about making such a choice. The men of Cofradía could go to the States and earn fifteen dollars an hour, which would

enable them to provide the things all parents want to give their children: a roof that doesn't leak, healthful plumbing, a balanced diet, birthday parties and bikes, maybe even a high school and college education. Or they could stay home and work for fifteen dollars a week and provide their children with a father.

“There are two kinds of men,” Ponce was saying, wagging a polemical finger. “Those who go, and those who sacrifice – to stay Mexican!” Ponce laughed, as though the idea of refusing dollars as a patriotic act tickled him. But such patriotism came relatively easy to the owner of the butchery. It was just that retail sales – whether of meat, medicines, or clothes – couldn't support many families in a town of 1,500. If all you had was a piece of rocky land and a sixth-grade education, you couldn't afford Rigo's patriotism.

The commute allá is so universal – and so dramatic – that children play Migra instead of cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers.

“Don Daniel,” Ms. Mendez's ten-year-old daughter, Eli, told me one morning when I'd consented to go on a hike through the cane fields with her and her friends. (They always called me Don Daniel. At first it gave me the creeps, but I grew to like it.) “Let's say the gate up there is the

border. We have to get across. We have to get to Los Angeles. We're the mojudos and you are the migra!"

"What?" Her proposal was embarrassing to me in all kinds of ways. In light of the arms-open welcome I'd been given in her town, I felt bad enough coming from the country that considered most visiting Cofradians as criminals. I'd lived in Berlin before the Wall came down, and every time a Cofradian mentioned the Migra, I flashed on the East German border guards who used to shoot people trying to leave. The Migra, when I thought about it, seemed the Vopos in reverse. Though the violence of the Migra is much less routine – it's still news when they shoot someone – hundreds are dying yearly trying to dodge them, victims of desert heat, winter storms, or bandits posing as guides. Eli's innocent proposal was the first time anyone had openly identified me, merely for coming from the United States, as an analog of the Migra.

Also, I still wasn't used to Mexicans using the word mojado – "wet" -- to describe themselves. "Wetback" has been a derogatory term since my in-laws were kids in Los Angeles in the thirties. But mojado is used with pride in Cofradía, and is for many still an accurate descriptor. Lots of emigrants still cross the Rio Grande the old-fashioned way. When I was waiting in line to clear Mexican Customs at Laredo, I watched people wade

right under the bridge in the opposite direction, in broad daylight, carrying their clothes above their heads. And there are other ways to get wet. Cunda Honorato, a dignified Cofradían secretary, “got wet” a few years ago visiting her grandchildren in Los Angeles by wading the Pacific surf from Tijuana to Chula Vista. But even those relatively wealthy Mexicans who use \$3,000-crooked papers to cross through airports still called themselves “wet.”

My main objection to playing Migra was that I’d be outnumbered. But if the real Mexican commuters can be good sports about the 10,000 agents deployed on the border, I figured I could be a good sport too. “Let’s pick a goal farther off,” I said. “The gate can be the border, but you have to get all the way to Los Angeles, where they’re holding a job for you.” There was a quasi-private park of smooth lawn and crimson bougainvillea at the top of the hill, with a duck pond, picnic tables, and view of both volcanoes. It was a gorgeous spot, a rare piece of parkland for Cofradía, and it struck me as a perfect place to call “Los Angeles.” It didn’t look like East L. A. or the Bronx or any of the barrios, trailer parks or former Motel Sixes where most furtive newcomers would land, but being so alluringly groomed – so arrogantly wasteful of water -- it was identifiably gringo. If they made it there, we agreed, they were safe.

I took the hillside that represented Chula Vista, San Diego, and everything between the border and LA. Pretty soon I spotted Eli, crouched and running nervously across a cow pasture shaded by old avocado trees, trying an end run. What a weird, self-loathing game, I thought. The brothers and uncles they were pretending to be had to hide and run simply because of who they were. Merely existing as a Mexican allá was a crime. On the other hand, most of the men seemed to get away with it sooner or later. Cofradíans loved laughing through the stories of outwitting La Migra. Eli had zoomed in on an undeniable kernel of fun buried in the tragedy of the border. But if these particular mojudos thought they were going to slip by this particular Migra agent they had another think coming.

“Halt!” I called in English in a mean loudspeaker voice. “This is the United . . . States. . . Border. . . Patrol!”

Eli shot her hands into the air as though struck by lightning. Her friend, Alma, tried to make a run for it, but Eli grabbed her and whispered fiercely in her ear.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Run!”

“No,” Eli said, wagging her finger like a metronome needle. “You never run when you’re caught by the Migra. If you run, they’ll shoot!”

There was a lesson to remember.

“Okay,” I said “Keep your hands up and walk straight ahead. We’re going to the deportation center!”

I herded them back toward the lane, sticking close, feeling ridiculous, but hooked on my role, still half-expecting them to try and bolt. They were disciplined. They marched solemnly along with their hands on their heads. Alma’s sister, Tere, had already arrived at the pond. She lay on her belly on a sagging pier that juttred over the water, happily swiping at goldfish with a plastic cup. The ducks and geese were honking and flapping at her. “I won!” she shouted. “I was running all the way, straight up hill. I didn’t know where you were.”

“Next time I’m going to have someone make me false papers,” groaned Alma, flopping on the pier. “I’m going to cross at the line.”

“Ah, no,” said Tere. “It’s worse if you get caught. You go to jail.”

“Well, you guys are being deported,” I said, putting a hand on Alma’s and Eli’s sweaty heads. I couldn’t believe I was arguing my part so vociferously.

“No importa,” Alma jeered. “We’ll just try again tomorrow.”

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I could go on. Whether we use these particular anecdotes or not, this was just to give you a sense of the series' sensibilities and the level of detail we'll deliver.

The overarching theme of the series will be that "the border" is code for a bigger phenomenon: the rapidly morphing mutual revulsion and interdependence of the United States and Mexico. I've long thought that we will someday look back on the border the way we now look back on the Berlin Wall, with a vague sense that at one time people were all excited about it but wondering just what in the hell that was all about.

The first part of the series would be largely what you read above: Who These People Are. We have major misconceptions to shatter. To write this one, I would visit some of the Cofradíans that I know in their US jobs. At least one is in Virginia. Others are in Memphis. Some are working on the railroad in southern California. I'd look for a combination of representative circumstances. Some cross "mojado." Others have crooked papers. Still others use their brothers' legal papers, figuring correctly that they look enough like the picture on the green card. We'd also stop in on a complicated Cofradían who's been living, legally, outside of Sacramento for 25 years, earns more than any of us installing bathroom tile, and scorns those who "can't make up their mind" and go back and forth. On

the other hand, most of his savings is going into a palacial house in Cofradía to which he intends to retire. Nobody we know – but nobody – dreams of dying of old age in the United States.

I'd not only illustrate their stateside life, but also talk to their employers and American friends, and delve briefly into the complicated economics of immigration. Entire industries – agriculture, hotels, etc. – depend on illegal immigrants. They lobby for more orderly “guest worker” laws. And now Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas, a longtime build-a-wall-and-keep-them-out conservative, is introducing such legislation. Fear it: it would make staying in the United States conditional on the employer's good will, which has the potential of becoming indentured servitude. Still, the chaos of current immigration serves nobody and is killing people. Mexican President Vicente Fox is angry enough about it to propose giving illegals survival kits to get across the desert. (I think he might agree to be interviewed for this.)

The politics and economics of illegal immigration is extremely tangled and ambiguous. Somehow, many of the same conservatives who depend on undocumented immigrants to man their businesses can also mount an argument that indocumentados are a tax burden, or are “taking jobs away from Americans.” This article will demonstrate the dollar value of

undocumented workers in the American economy, and also show the value to the Mexican economy of their wages. At the same, it will address how the huge number of Mexican nationals living in the U.S. are warping politics on both side of the border, with Hispanics now outnumbering blacks and rendering no racial majority in California, but also the prospects of Mexican absentee voting (which would make California the most populous electoral state in Mexico after the D.F.)

American overall border policy is inextricably bound up with the drug war, leading to a terrifying but largely secret militarization of the border. Most Americans, I don't think, have any idea how militarized the U.S. side of the border is, how much firepower and high-tech weaponry is being deployed against illegal immigrants. The human and economic cost is high, and the environmental cost – such as defoliating big swaths of desert to make tracking immigrants easier -- is undocumented.

All of this, of course, will be told at the level of personal detail above. We have an opportunity to go deep inside the mentalities of everybody involved in this phenomenon we call the border.

The first part: Who These People Are, could be finished by the end of July were I freed from the drug-policy interviews, the debt story, and the teenage-crackdown story. I hate to let those go. I was looking forward

to writing them. So alternatively, I could write all those pieces by the end of July and begin the border series when I return from vacation on September 1.