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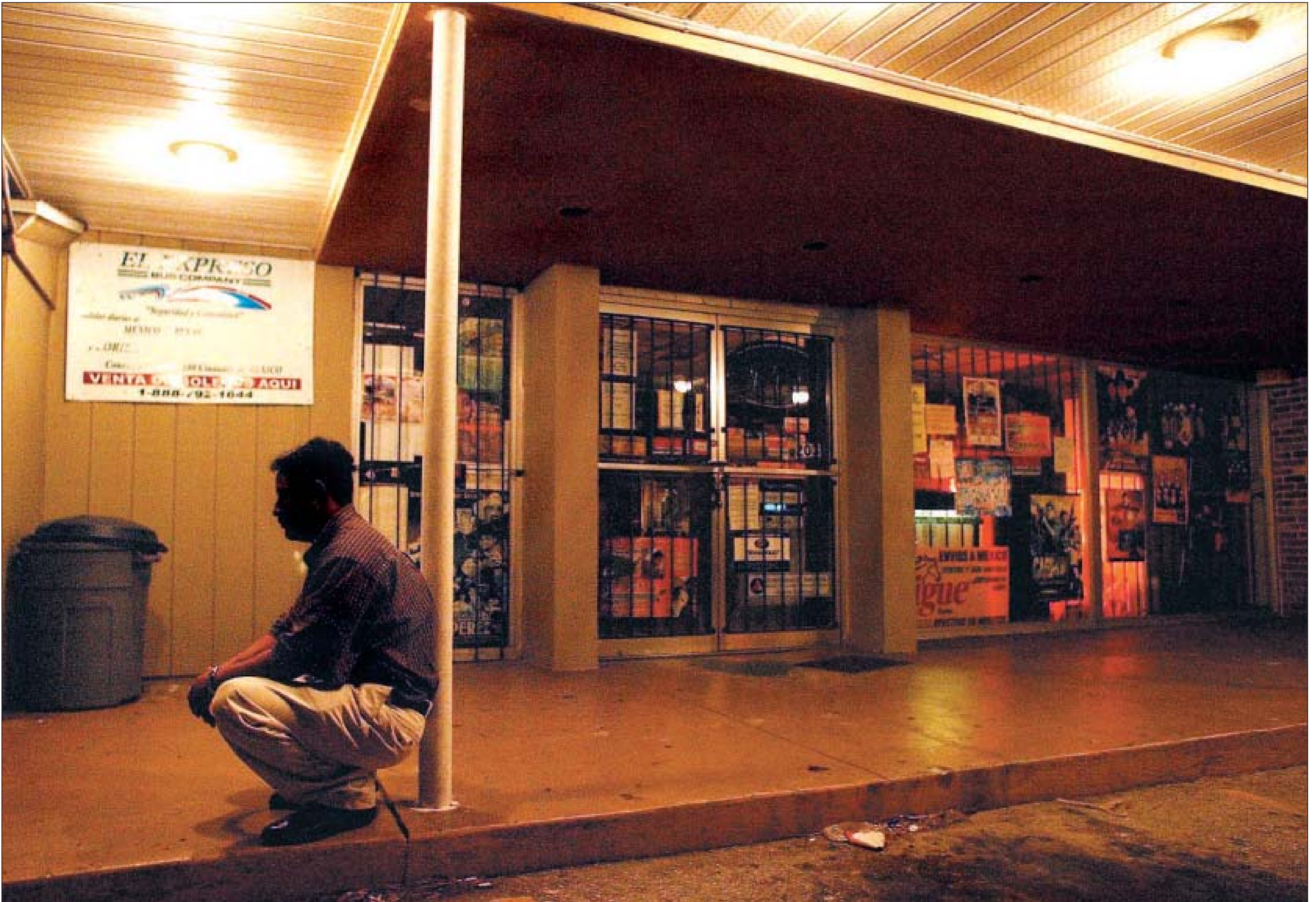

PAUL J. MILETTE/Staff Photographer

Newfound freedom: A Mexican worker, using the name Jose Moreno, sits outside a grocery in Wimauma. Labor contractors locked Moreno and others in a trailer at night until they paid their debts in full.

Labor under lock and fist

Migrants sealed in a trailer tell a clergyman that their labor contractors have 'bought' them from a smuggler.

By JOHN LANTIGUA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WIMAUMA — On an evening last December, Helion Cruz, youth pastor at the Good Samaritan Mission, went fishing for souls. What he found instead was the dark underside of Florida agriculture — a case of modern-day slavery.

"I was told there were Christian boys from Mexico living in a trailer over on Route 301," recalls Cruz, 55. "I was told they wanted to come to church but had no transportation."

The following Sunday, Cruz sent a church elder to pick them up, but a farm labor contractor employing the migrants denied them permission to leave. Two days later, Cruz drove to the trailer to investigate. He says he found its front door chained and secured with a large padlock.

"But there were people inside," he says. "I went to a window and saw it was nailed so that it couldn't be opened all the way, and nobody could get out. All the windows were like that. I called in and spoke with the young men who were inside. I asked them, 'What are you doing in there?' They said the men who usually watched them weren't around, so they were locked in."

Cruz asked what men they were speaking of and why they were being guarded. The answer he received still astounds him.

"They told me that these labor contractors who ran the trailer had 'bought' them from a coyote, and that's why they couldn't go out without permission.

"Can you believe that? Somebody *bought* them. I told them, 'We don't do that in this country.' "

Cruz, like the church elder, Victor Pecina, 47, would eventually make contact with the contractors. They both found the men surprisingly brazen about the control they exercised over other human beings.

"When I got to the trailer, several of the boys said they wanted to come to church but they couldn't," recalls Pecina about his initial visit. "A man guarding them said they were not allowed to leave the property. I spoke to him through the window. He said they couldn't leave. I told him that if he was afraid they wouldn't come back, he could come with them. He said no."

Pecina continued to press his case. Finally, he was allowed to take one particularly religious migrant, after promising on his honor to bring him back.

Two days later, when Pastor Cruz found the migrants locked up, he told them he would call police right away.

"This one kid . . . he said to me, 'I am not a slave. Call the police!' But the others said that if the police came, they would all be deported because they were illegal. Instead, they gave me the phone number of one of the contractors, and I called him."

Cruz says he left a message, and the contractor called him back in the morning.

"I asked what he thought he was doing," Cruz recalls. "And he said to me, 'They owe me money.' I told him, 'I don't care what they owe you, if I go back there and find those kids locked up, I'm calling the police.' "

LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

No exit: A door is chained and padlocked on a trailer near Wimauma where Helion Cruz, a minister at Good Samaritan Mission, says he saw migrant workers locked inside last December. Laborer Jose Moreno takes his religion seriously and was angry when he was not allowed to go to church.

'I went to a window and saw it was nailed so that it couldn't be opened all the way, and nobody could get out. All the windows were like that.' — PASTOR HELION CRUZ

Eventually, as often happens, the young men paid off their debts and followed the long vegetable harvest north.

Months later, in Ohio, *The Palm Beach Post* tracked down the one migrant who went to church with Pecina, the same one who asked Cruz to call the police. He told an angry story of being locked up and mistreated not just once, but many times.

He is from Chiapas, Mexico, undocumented and calls himself Jose Moreno, although he admits that isn't his real name.

Like many undocumented workers, he always uses a false name in the U.S., so that if he is caught and deported, he can return under yet another false name. But he says he is also afraid of his former bosses and doesn't want them to know who he really is.

"They are extremely bad people, violent," Moreno, 28, says. He identified the three contractors who kept him and the other workers locked up as David, Agustin and Olegario Marquez, brothers from Veracruz, Mexico. He said they have three half-brothers, whose names he doesn't know but who were also present at times.

Moreno believes the Marquez brothers are all in the U.S. illegally. No one with those three names is licensed to work as a contractor in the state of Florida.

Moreno says the men also work as coyotes, or people smugglers, and that it was David Marquez who smuggled him and nine others across the sweltering desert from Mexico in September 2002. Moreno had made his way to the border by himself. The others might have been brought there by another coyote and "sold" to Marquez, but they crossed the border together near Sasabe, Mexico.

"We walked for two days," he says. "We drank water from puddles on the Indian reservation down there."

Then 10 of them crossed the country in a Ford camper driven by David Marquez, arriving in the first days of October, Moreno says. He was charged $1,300 for the trip, $800 of which he paid up front, leaving him $500 in debt. The other migrants owed more.

"Marquez said the work in tomatoes was good," Moreno recalls. "He said we would pay what we owed easily. But when we got here, there was little work, only eight or 10 hours per week. We were being paid about $50. Out of that, we had to each pay $70 per month for rent." This is the precise scenario that has led to other cases of slavery in Florida.

Moreno says some of the migrants in the trailer had mattresses, but others slept on blankets on the floor. "And he was taking money out that we owed him. I couldn't send anything to my family," complains Moreno, who has a wife and a child.

With no clothes, except those on his back, Moreno went to another nearby church, the Beth-El Mission in Wimauma, where used clothes are distributed to the poor. He did so without permission.

"After I went there, they thought I was going to try to escape," he says. "David said, 'You can't go out any more.' "

That was in November. Moreno says after that, the Marquez brothers always had someone guarding the migrants and refused to let them leave without escorts. Moreno says he and the other migrants were locked up at least once that month when no keeper could be found. Moreno, older than most of the others, complained.

"David threatened to hit me," Moreno recalls. "He said, 'We're going to beat you. You don't leave here until you pay everything.' I told him, 'If you hit me, I'll go back to the mission and have them call the police . . .' He never did hit me."

But toward the end of November, Moreno says, the others started getting restless because of the shortage of work and the time it took to pay off their debts.

"Some of them also started to complain, and they hit some of them," Moreno recalls. "I saw it happen various times. There are six brothers altogether, and they would surround a person, threaten him and sometimes hit him."

Then, the youth pastor and the church elder showed up. Moreno comes from a part of Mexico where minority Protestants at times have been subjected to violence by majority Catholics. He takes his religion seriously and was incensed when he was not allowed to go to church. "I told the pastor, 'I am not a slave. I am not a cow. I am not their property.' "

In his rage, he refers to the Marquez brothers as *changos* — apes or monkeys. "Those apes were denying me my right to worship." But he agreed to go along with the others and not call the police.

Shortly after Cruz found them, Moreno says, he was finally able to pay off his debt. The tomato harvesting work had picked up, and he had a large check coming.

"David tried to take it all," he recalls. "The owner" — he does not know his name — "was there giving the checks to David, and I said, 'Don't give it to him. I don't owe him all that. Give it to me.' "

"(David) was trying to cheat me, and with the others he took almost everything they made," says Moreno. Once he paid off his crossing debt, Moreno says the Marquez brothers let him leave the trailer when he wanted. And since the work was plentiful, he stayed there.

"I'm a good worker, and they didn't bother me after that," he says. But he says he continued to see instances of violence. In March or April, Moreno says, another migrant argued with the Marquez brothers about lack of pay.

"His name was Gustavo. It was a weekend, and he was drunk. They were drunk, too. They got into an argument, got all around him. He fought them, and they broke his arm."

Several attempts by *The Post* to reach the Marquez brothers failed. Moreno says he understands the Marquezes are in Arizona at the moment, in the process of bringing another shipment of migrants, but are expected back in Wimauma.

And although Moreno agreed to speak with *The Post* under his assumed name, and Cruz and Pecina confirm his story, Moreno has been afraid to go to authorities.

"Maybe you put three of them in jail, but how about the other three," he says. "Maybe they will come after me. These are violent people. I'm scared."

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MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

A PALM BEACH POST SPECIAL REPORT • PART 2

HOW THEY COME

Four nights in the unforgiving desert

A Palm Beach Post reporter follows nine migrants as they sneak into America from Mexico. PAGE 2

Photos by LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

Fearful vigil: Mexicans (above) hoping to cross the border into Arizona wait in the bushes near Naco, Mexico. One of the Mexicans said they were waiting for a guide to take them across, but they may have been bothered by the presence of journalists.

Faith and broken faith: At the migrant center in Altar, Mexico, a cross is covered with the names of hundreds of migrants who died after crossing the border into the United States. Their ages, home states and causes of death are also displayed. The center, run by the local Catholic church, provides services for those en route to the U.S. border. As many as 1,600 can pass through Altar on a given day.

Never before has the border crossing been as dangerous as it is today.

For decades, desperate men and women fleeing poverty crept across the Mexican border, hugging the established paths through Texas and California.

But a crackdown by U.S. authorities since the early 1990s has forced them onto more remote, isolated paths along the 1,993-mile border: across the deadly deserts and the wilds of Arizona.

Seduced by the dream, too poor to quit, the migrants continue to defy death. Hundreds of thousands made it last year, many on their second, third, even fourth attempt. The Border Patrol stopped them a million times last year. And still they come.

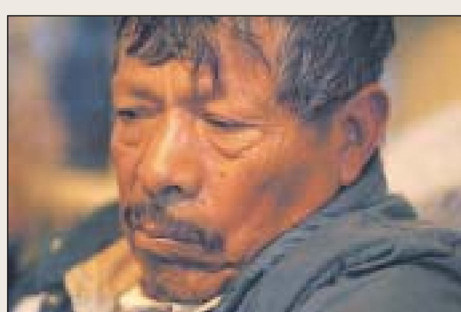
But the cost is high. The U.S. found 346 bodies in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30. The Mexican government, which keeps its own figures, says 398 people died from Jan. 1 to Nov. 15 this year. No one knows the true toll.

That's because the coyotes who are paid to get people across know they must stick to the wilderness, where no one will find the migrants.

Not even when they're dead.

Benito Muro is home in Guadalupe, Mexico, after a van wreck ruined his health and his plan to work Florida farms.

PAGE 10



Catholic Church officials side with the migrants. 'The right to feed yourself and your family comes first,' a bishop says.

PAGE 7

Immigrants pack into a rented Ford SUV headed for the East Coast — and the hope of decent paychecks.

PAGE 8

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Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

Where it all starts. Every day, desperate people are gathered at different points south of the border, preparing to risk it all for the chance to work in America. Shortly after sunset, these migrants have climbed out of a van on a road running along the Mexican side of the border near Naco. Dressed in long sleeves and jeans as protection against snakes, scorpions and cactus spines, they scramble across a fence to hide in the brush until dark. They can only hope that shoes and sneakers will protect their feet from rugged desert terrain and that the water they carry will last them.

This is where so many die

It's simply not possible to carry enough water to survive several days in the 100-plus degree desert. A Palm Beach Post reporter comes along as one group tries to beat the odds.

By JOHN LANTIGUA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

SASABE, Mexico — The nine migrants trudged across the border into the blazing Arizona desert just before sunset.

Eight men and one woman who wanted work in the U.S., they had traveled by bus some 1,500 miles from southern Mexico. But the next 50 miles they had to walk, and it would be, by far, the most difficult and dangerous leg of their journey.

It was late July. Temperatures reached 104 in the shade in Tucson, and several notches higher in the desert sun. Already in 2003, the Sonora Desert had claimed at least 99 victims who had dared the crossing, almost all of them dead from dehydration. According to Border Patrol agents, that many bodies had been found. They figured many more lay baking in thousands of square miles of wilderness.

The group, all but one from the same small town near the Guatemalan border, was led by a "coyote" — a people-smuggler.

His name was Cesar, 45, and the migrants — or "chickens," as they are labeled — had tremendous confidence in him. He not only lived in the same village as they, but for 20 years he had crossed the border to find employment. And he once had been a noted Pentecostal preacher.

They had all sought him out, and for this one trip, Cesar also agreed to take along a *Palm Beach Post* reporter.

After hiking 75 minutes over hills from the fly-ridden town of Sasabe, and just before crossing the unmarked border, Cesar asked the group to kneel. They closed their eyes, and he prayed for 15 minutes, invoking Old Testament figures such as Isaac, Jacob, Ezekiel and, of course, Moses.

"My Lord, you have led your people through the desert before," intoned Cesar. "Please, do it for us. Help us find our daily bread. I know it will not be me who gets us there. It will be you."

Cesar beseeched God to protect them from the heat, from "the snouts of poisonous snakes," from bandits, from *la migra* — immigration agents — and also from rains approaching from the south.

The migrants then stood up and entered the United States, the first steps toward finding jobs to support themselves and their loved ones, jobs that do not exist in Mexico. Their ages were 17 to 28, and their stories were much alike. All their families had once depended on the cultivation of coffee and corn, but the prices in Mexico for those products had plummeted in the past decade. A couple of them had been earning $5 per day in pickup jobs back home, and the others made even less.

"There are people in our village who some days eat only tortilla and salt," said Emigdio, 23, whose dream was to become a legal U.S. resident and join the U.S. military.

Their guide, or 'coyote,' was Cesar, a man who knew their families. They never worried he'd leave them in the desert to die.

Two of the men had young children, two had widowed mothers, others had lived with elderly parents or younger siblings who needed support. They also dreamed of making enough money to build small houses for themselves and some day starting their own families. They all had heard of the dangers of crossing but had decided to come anyway.

"Me, I'd rather die than go back," said Bestor, 24, the smallest of the migrants. He had more education than most, a high school diploma, and he wanted to be a physician but could not afford even to begin university.

The group that crossed: After traversing the desert from Sasabe, Mexico, into Arizona this summer, the nine migrants rest in a safe house — actually a run-down motel outside Phoenix.

Bandits find prey at the border

They carried swollen backpacks filled with food and water — each person lugging three or four gallon jugs, weighing 8 pounds apiece. Despite the heat, they wore long-sleeved shirts to protect against thorns and cactus. But the first danger they faced would be neither thirst nor thorns; it would be bandits.

Over the years, many would-be migrants had been ambushed by border bandits from Mexico who sneak across the U.S. line and lie in wait, knowing that most chickens carry some money.

Ten minutes after the group crossed the border, six young men suddenly leapt from behind boulders, all with bandannas concealing their lower faces and carrying pistols. Five of them stared down from above, but the nearest assailant was on the ground just 15 feet away, crouched and pointing a chrome-plated revolver, tilting it sideways. The American journalist happened to be the closest. Behind him the migrants froze in their tracks.

For several suspended moments, it appeared this desperate attempt to find new lives would end right there on a rocky hillside far from any dream. But the bandits didn't rob them. The man with the chromed pistol studied them with calculating eyes and finally said, "Move ahead."

Cesar, staring warily at the handgun, inched backward between the rocks. The others did exactly the same, in small shuffling steps along the curving trail, until they were out of sight of the assailants.

"Run," Cesar called out. For the next 10 minutes, the migrants ran as fast as they could, dodging behind clumps of chaparral and mesquite bushes, jumping into dry

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Cesar's route

Nine migrants crossed the Mexican border into Arizona this summer, accompanied by a Palm Beach Post reporter and led by a trusted guide, or 'coyote,' named Cesar. Here is the approximate route they took through 50 miles of desert.

Erected in the 1990s: As part of stepped-up enforcement, the U.S. government constructed metal fences in popular crossing areas of the Mexican border. That sent those seeking to enter the U.S. into the more remote and perilous, unfenced stretches of desert.

Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

DAY 4

The last hurdle

The pickup point was several miles north of heavily patrolled S.R. 86, which they'd have to cross.

DAY 2

'I use the mountain peaks to guide me.'

As long as Mt. Baboquivari stayed to his west, Cesar knew he was on the right track.

DAY 3

Two welcome sights

On the third night, Cesar's group finally spotted two sights that signaled they were nearing S.R. 86: An observatory atop Kitt Peak, and a radio tower in Three Points.

DAY 1

Leaving Mexico

Many coyotes head directly north from Sasabe, Mexico, taking trails that hug S.R. 286. Cesar headed west, into more rugged terrain and away from U.S. Border Patrol agents who frequent that road.

17, 10, Phoenix, 10, Marana, Tucson, 86, 19, Three Points, 10, Kitt Peak, Sells, Baboquivari Peak, 286, Sasabe, Nogales, ARIZONA, MEXICO, Altar

Graphic by STEVE LOPEZ/Staff Artist

Alacrán ¡No arriesgues tu vida! Víbora Cascabel Arañas (Viuda Negra, Tarántula etc.)

Snakes, scorpions and tarantulas: A poster at the migrant center in Altar, Mexico, warns of the desert's more exotic dangers, none of which Cesar's group ever encountered. But they did get pierced by cactus spines. Cesar's solution: Use a comb to rake them off.

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arroyos and scrambling up the other side. Finally, Cesar told them to stop and, out of breath, they looked back. The bandits were nowhere to be seen.

Later, they speculated that the thieves had seen the journalist among them and didn't want to risk assaulting an American, possibly drawing the attention of U.S. authorities.

Cesar offered his own explanation: "That shows you the power of God."

Then they set off again over the rocky terrain.

Enduring rain and bone-chilling wind

The first four hours of the trek, over low foothills of the Baboquivari Mountains, would prove the trickiest of the entire trip. The sun soon set, and rain clouds drifted over, blocking any starlight. The half moon was not due up until after midnight, and it grew very dark. The chances of stepping into a crevice and snapping an ankle were high.

But the nine chickens all had been raised in the countryside, and the silent line of humans, everyone within 3 feet of each other, moved slowly but steadily. Flashes of sheet lightning illuminated the way, although a moment after each flash, the migrants were thrown into even deeper darkness, the effect being much like that of a flashbulb.

About 10:30 p.m., they descended out of the foothills into a valley — the Altar Valley — and onto flatter terrain. But then it started to rain.

It began as a drizzle, and everyone agreed it felt refreshing after the grueling heat of the day. They continued to walk another half hour, but then it poured down harder, and a sudden wind whipped it at them. Cesar decided to take refuge in a ravine. He and Emigdio carried large plastic garbage bags, in which they tore head and arm holes, and wore them as rain gear. Nely, 18, the lone woman, carried a rain poncho, but everyone else was soon soaked to the bone.

After a half hour of downpour, the ravine ran with water, first a trickle, then a rush. The migrants scrambled out and stood silently in a tight circle in the open desert, trying to cut the chilling effects of the wind. Most of them started to shiver, given the drop of 30-plus degrees in a few hours, and some shook convulsively. Concerned with the blistering heat of the day, they were taken by surprise by the sudden cold of the night desert.

After midnight, the rain finally stopped. Cesar decided to build a fire in a drier, adjacent ravine in order to warm up and dry clothes.

"I don't want any of you people getting sick on me," he said. The wood around them was wet, and for kindling he used a box of Ramen noodles he had brought for food, employing both the cardboard container and the noodles themselves. He also had packed tequila in half-pint plastic bottles, and he passed one around to help heat up his charges.

The group huddled around the fire the next hour, and in that time the half moon came up. The clouds had dissipated, the night leveled off to a pleasant temperature and the walking was much easier.

They crossed a narrow dirt road, the kind the Border Patrol uses to search the desert. Soon, they spotted headlights, but they were miles away and no threat. The group crawled under the first barbed wire fence, entering private ranch land.

Cesar led them, stopping periodically to listen, as if he heard sounds no one else could hear.

"I use the mountain peaks to guide me, and I trust in God," he explained. He pointed in particular to Mt. Baboquivari, a domed peak that stood majestically above the surrounding mountains. If he left it to the west, he would be on the right route.

They walked until 5:30 a.m., when the sun came up, a gold fireball behind the buff-colored mountains to the east. Due to the rain delay, they were still traveling close to the Mexican line where many Border Patrol agents were assigned, and Cesar decided to hole up and avoid the daylight.

They found a clump of mesquite bushes that cast decent shade, and they ate breakfast — mostly apples and sweet bread. They swept away stones and twigs and prepared spots to sleep. They also removed much of their clothing, still wet from the rain, and spread it to dry on surrounding thorn bushes.

They settled in, but suddenly the sound of an approaching helicopter roused them. Cesar, who refers to the copters as *moscas*, or flies, scrambled into a crouch and ordered everyone to quickly retrieve the drying clothes. He also told them to hide the many jugs of water that could be seen easily from overhead. The migrants scrambled under the bushes and tensely waited. But the helicopter never flew directly overhead, and the thwacking sound died away, leaving again the throbbing silence of the desert.

That first day, some slept a few hours, but others barely at all due to adrenaline and the suffocating heat. Late in the afternoon, they ate. Cesar passed around foot powder: Damp sneakers and socks soften feet and lead quickly to blisters. He also noticed a dripping backpack: A thorn had punctured a water jug, and he produced a kit for plugging plastic.

The migrants were impressed by his preparedness and also discussed how lucky they were to be with a coyote who was acquainted with their families. One advantage: Cesar was charging them only $800 apiece to reach Phoenix, when the going price was twice as much. That is also what he asked the reporter to pay to make the crossing with the group.

Also, many migrants who contracted coyotes near the border — men they had never met before — eventually had been abandoned in the desert. Some had lived to tell the tale; others had died. The nine traveling with Cesar had no such fears.

In conversation between fitful attempts at sleep, Cesar admitted he had once done time in a Mexican prison, although he wouldn't reveal for what. And while some consider him and other coyotes to be criminals, his clients emphatically disagreed.

Marco Antonio, 24, who was entering the U.S. to try to support his wife and young daughter, spoke for the rest: "Cesar has helped many families in our town. Many. Many."

Crossing ravines, dodging thorns

Cesar waited until sunset to move. Clouds rolled in, and again the first hours of night would be very dark. Nonetheless, he set an ambitious agenda, pointing at Baboquivari in the distance.

"In two hours, I want to be passing that mountain," he said.

Again, before setting off, they prayed. Cesar pleaded for protection from the elements and from the Border Patrol. He also thanked God for saving the group from the bandits.

They set out, but the going was slow. The nine couldn't see clearly, and most of them simply tried to walk where the person in front had just stepped.

One ravine after another cut across the landscape. The migrants were forced to jump or slide down the sides of the ravines and often had to pull each other up the far sides. The flat sections were studded with chaparral and stunted mesquite. Thorny branches inflicted scratches and small puncture wounds, especially in their arms and hands, and made them advance carefully.

Cesar also struggled to find the way. "The darkness makes it hard to find the trails," he said, "and the desert plays tricks on you."

They walked six hours before they finally found themselves abreast of Baboquivari. Cesar complained of being behind schedule and pushed on.

That night, the Border Patrol vehicles came closer. Several times Cesar suddenly told the group to hit the dirt and stay absolutely quiet as the lonely headlights appeared within a few hundred yards of them. Occasionally, Cesar fell back to the end of the line, and after everyone had crossed a dirt road, he dragged a tree branch across it to erase the footprints. He said some coyotes go even further.

"They have their chickens walk across the roads backwards so that it seems they are headed back toward the border."

As the sun rose, Cesar announced they would continue to walk into the morning.

"We have to make up the four hours we lost the first night because of the rain," he said.

Evading the approach of danger

By 7 a.m., the slanting desert sun burned so strongly it seared eyelids and cheekbones. The American journalist alone carried sun block. He passed it around, and it was soon depleted. The line of march spooked jack rabbits and lizards, which hopped and scrambled out of the way. A 6-foot black snake was encountered sunning itself on the trail. Although summer is rattlesnake season, the group never saw one.

The migrants grew thirsty in the morning heat, but Cesar found a remedy for that as well. They reached a nopal cactus plant bearing spiny pink fruit, and he instructed everyone in how to make a whisk broom out of desert grass to brush off the spines. Once they were clean, the fruits were broken open and revealed a crimson-colored pulp that was full of seeds but still refreshing.

Not once during the three and half days of walking did the migrants encounter another group. But they found plenty of artifacts, especially discarded plastic water bottles. At one point they saw a jeans shirt hanging on a thorn, with a piece of paper

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'Nobody can match me. When it comes to walking, I am as good as a dog.' — CESAR

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HOW THEY COME | Desert crossing

Photos by LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

Propelled by hope and prayer: Carrying jugs of water and laden with backpacks, migrants (above) walk toward the U.S. border in the scrubby hills outside the border town of Sasabe, Mexico.

On perpetual watch: A U.S. Border Patrol vehicle (left) checks the American side. The fence is not the official boundary between the two nations, but rather is maintained by landowners to fence cattle. At far left is a manned portable tower used by the Border Patrol for surveillance at locations popular with undocumented immigrants.

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stuffed in the pocket: a man's honorable discharge from the Mexican army, obviously a document he meant to present in the U.S. to increase his employability, but which he had left in the discarded shirt.

They also saw something that scared them: a pair of sneakers.

"Maybe the person brought extra shoes," said Emigdio. But that was unlikely. It was probable that the sneakers caused blisters, were discarded and that the individual had been forced to walk through the spiny, scorpion-infested desert in bare feet. It was a harrowing prospect.

At 9 a.m., Cesar announced they would stop for the day and sleep. But it wasn't to be.

They were just settling in when, suddenly, they heard the sound of a vehicle nearby, a motorcycle or dune buggy. Cesar jumped up into a tense crouch. The group lay just off a wide ravine, and the vehicle seemed to be approaching right down the middle of it. Cesar ordered everyone to gather their things quickly but not to run.

He later explained that when people run from the immigration agents, tragedy occurs. "They get separated from the others and lost, and then they are out here on their own and they die of thirst."

Scuttling bent over, he led the migrants into thicker brush. But the vehicle changed direction and seemed to head again right toward them. Cesar retreated farther, but the vehicle still closed in.

Finally, Cesar ordered them to follow him in a line, and he set off at a trot. They crossed back through strands of barbed wire they had recently passed and then dove under bushes.

"That was public land," Cesar said. "This is private land, ranch land, and he won't come in here."

He was right. The vehicle went away and stayed away, but another problem had developed. The spot they now inhabited provided much less shade than where they had originally stopped.

They struggled all day to outwit the moving sun, shifting from place to place in their clump of mesquite, but the best they could find was dappled shade. The temperature climbed so high — well into triple digits — that one migrant, Onofre, 24, started to bleed from the nose.

The climate was not the only problem. Fire ants swarmed, biting several in the group. Many later complained of not sleeping at all that day and of not being able to think in the buzzing heat.

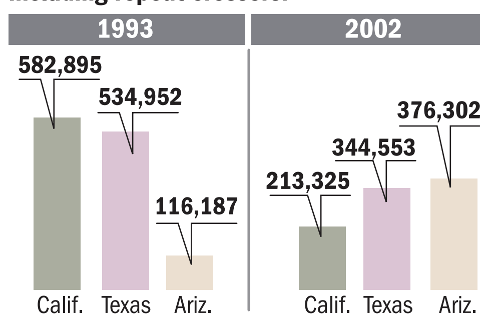
To pass the time, they conversed in whispers. Many had never left home before, and they talked and joked about characters from their small hometown they had been dying to leave behind. The precarious desert had made them homesick already.

And anything to laugh. At one point, the journalist complained about the "hotel accommodations," and the migrants would make it a running joke of the trip, rating the bushes they slept under.

More being caught in Arizona now

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Border Patrol stepped up enforcement along favored crossing areas in Texas and California. Since then, more people have been crossing through Arizona.

Total apprehensions, including repeat crossers:



Note: Does not include illegal aliens captured by the Border Patrol's investigative branch, whose offices are based in cities all over the United States.

Source: *2002 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*
Dept. of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics.

STAFF GRAPHIC

They spot the radio tower lights

Then Cesar shifted into high gear.

Before they set out at 6 p.m. he advised everyone to eat well "because we're behind and we're going to be walking many hours tonight." Again, they prayed for protection.

That night, the terrain and vegetation changed. They encountered fewer ravines but crossed more barbed wire fences between ranches. They squeezed through narrow trails bordered by cactus, the worst of which were the "jumping chollas." They are round balls covered with spines, and just touching one causes it to penetrate and stick to the skin. Trying to remove them by hand, the migrants found their fingers covered with the painful spurs. Again, Cesar had the solution:

"Use a comb and rake them off," he instructed, which the chickens did many times during the night.

In the early evening, large clouds caught up with them. The group stumbled on, many holding onto the shirttail or backpack of the person ahead.

Lightning flashed intermittently, creating startling and beautiful views of the valley. In the far distance to the east, they saw the lights of a building, the first they had spotted in more than 48 hours. Cesar said it was a ranch.

Then they were forced to stop. Nely was spiked in the thigh by a particularly large cactus spine, and she was in bad pain. Cesar recommended she go behind a bush for privacy and remove it. The extraction was difficult, but after 10 minutes, she returned and the march continued.

At about 10:30 p.m., they crested a rise and saw the red lights of a radio tower. Cesar told them it was located on Route 86 in the town of Three Points, near their destination and only four hours away. The group took heart; they now had a visible goal.

The clouds cleared, a sliver of moon came up, and they made good time. Cesar spotted the Kitt Peak astronomical observatory, atop a mountain to the west, another landmark. Cesar was trying to cross the highway before dawn and they walked much faster for the next two hours. When they finally lay down for a rest, some of the walkers were out of breath.

"Nobody can match me," Cesar laughed. "When it comes to walking, I am as good as a dog."

In the darkness, Cesar heard someone pour out water. His head snapped around angrily.

"What are you doing?" he called out. A voice answered that the rainwater collected from a trough along the way smelled bad.

"It's good, I tell you," Cesar insisted. "God has given us this water. We can't be throwing it away. We aren't there yet. That's how people die in the desert."

They set off again, following trails that headed, in general, toward the radio tower, but hour after hour it seemed to get no closer. It became clear that Cesar's estimate of four hours to reach Route 86 had been, at best, optimistic.

The migrants found more pieces of clothing as they neared Route 86. In one flash of lightning, they saw, just off the trail, a small shrine — a bouquet of flowers — apparently created for a person who had died there. Border Patrol agents say many people die within 5 miles of the road, having almost made it. They passed the shrine without comment.

As the eastern sky began to lighten, Cesar pushed them harder. But it soon became clear they would not reach Route 86 before dawn, and the trip would be extended by a day. Cesar was clearly irritated. They advanced another hour and a half, then he picked a spot to stop, although the shade was only partial. He told the nine they had to hide themselves well under bushes because more Border Patrol helicopters worked the area near the highway.

> **In one flash of lightning, they saw a small shrine apparently created for a person who had died there. They passed it without saying a word.**

Again, they struggled to sleep in the blistering heat. By this time, they appeared much more ragged than when they had set out. They were soiled from sliding under barbed wire fences, and some clothes were ripped. They had lain perspiring for long hours at a time, and no one had bathed.

Thorns had scratched them all. Some cactus spines, which had passed right through clothes into their flesh, began to reemerge as the body rejected them. Bestor, the shortest, suffered leg cramps from trying to keep up. Elvis, the lone Guatemalan, displayed severe blisters on the pads of both feet.

Others were simply weary, sleep-deprived, including Cesar. The good thing: They hadn't run out of food or water.

Sneaking beneath the state highway

That day, they lay low until almost 9 p.m.

"Usually, the best time to cross the highway is between midnight and 1 a.m.," Cesar said. "The traffic has died then, and the Border Patrol shift is changing."

But given the advantage of cloud cover, Cesar chose to move earlier. They crept close to the two-lane state highway. Border Patrol trucks with infrared cameras and sensors are posted along it. Road signs label it a "high intensity enforcement area," but it is impossible to monitor every stretch of it all night.

Cesar advanced and, once at the edge of the road, summoned the others. They did not cross the blacktop but sneaked under it, through a round corrugated metal storm culvert about 4 feet high, moving bent over, one by one, and dashing about 100 yards into the brush on the other side. They made it without a word and without incident.

Cesar said they were close now, but warned that they had to remain extremely quiet. They saw lights from residences, mostly trailers, not far away, and sneaked past them without detection, except for the distant barking of some dogs.

Cesar had estimated that the pickup point was about three hours the other side of the highway, but again that proved optimistic. It took twice that because Cesar had gotten lost again.

"I'm too tired. I haven't slept enough," he said.

They finally reached the pickup point. Just after dawn, Cesar used a cellphone to call a "pickup man" in Phoenix, two hours away, and told him where they could be found.

The truck did not arrive as soon as expected. Near noon, they heard a vehicle approaching without being able to see it. Cesar scuttled toward the road, and then the others heard his whistle. They emerged from hiding and ran toward a white, double-cabin pickup truck. Five of them piled into the front and back cabins along with the male driver, and four dove into the bed of the truck, which was as hot as a skillet. They covered themselves with sheets.

Everyone stayed down and out of sight as they rumbled down back roads and finally caught Interstate 10 to Phoenix. The driver stuck to the speed limit to avoid attention, and the last leg of the trip went without a hitch.

Two hours later, they were ensconced in a safe house — actually a run-down motel outside the city. They were excited.

"We made it, thank God," said Emigdio. "Now we'll see what he has in store for us."

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‘Tell your people up there to please, please treat our people well. You must understand that they don’t go because they want to. They go because they must.’

SEVERINO FLORES, 45
Mayor of the mountain village of Teotepec in Oaxaca, Mexico

Why they risk their lives

Source: The Associated Press STAFF GRAPHIC

A visit to the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero shows how poor the people are — and how dramatically their lives change when a worker sends money home.

REPORTED BY JOHN LANTIGUA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WHAT AMERICAN MONEY BUYS IN MEXICO’S VILLAGES

Many can’t afford clothes for their children.

Food and clothes for kids

In some villages, children go naked their first years because there is no money to buy clothes. Their diets consist largely of tortillas, beans and salt, and they very rarely eat meat. The children are mostly Mexican Indians, and centuries ago their ancestors fled genocidal Spanish soldiers and escaped to these arid mountains. The lands have never been generous with harvests, and in recent years drought has made things worse. Southern Mexico has been hard hit, but matters have been even worse across the border in Guatemala. There, dozens of people, mostly children, died during the drought of 2001-2002. Much of the money sent home goes to feed and clothe children and their mothers.

Migrants’ money drives Mexico‘s economy

Projections for 2003 indicate migrants’ money sent home will again be Mexico’s second biggest source of foreign income.

Sources: Pew Hispanic Center, Inter-American Development Bank, NAFTA Office, Mexican embassy and Mexico Tourism Board STAFF GRAPHIC

A brick house with a column

Most people in the mountains of southern Mexico live in adobe houses that are vulnerable to frequent earthquakes. Some have it worse, living in huts made of sticks. But Sofia Velasquez lives in a brick house paid for with money her husband earned by picking tomatoes near Fort Myers. Working in Florida allows her husband, Herminio Cortes, to “improve the life of my family,” he says. If he were home in Oaxaca, he wouldn’t be able to earn any more than “40 or 50 pesos per day — four or five dollars,” he says. “And that is working from dawn to dusk with a machete. But it isn’t enough to feed my wife and children,” says Cortes, whose sons are 1 and 5.

Herminio Cortes, 25, grew up in an adobe house but sent money home for a brick house with a column.

Thanks to her husband’s pay picking tomatoes near Fort Myers, Sofia Velasquez (holding Uriel, 1) has a brick house that most can’t afford.

Ambrosia Benito enjoys a modest affluence that would have been impossible without income from her son Cesar, who works in Immokalee.

A small store and ‘cinema’

Ambrosia Benito is illiterate and has no idea where Florida is. But her life has improved greatly in the past 10 years because her son Cesar, 22, picks tomatoes in Collier County and sends money home. She now lives in a four-room brick house, which replaced her traditional one-room adobe home. Her floor is concrete, not dirt, a bare lightbulb dangles in every room and she has indoor plumbing. All of these are amenities she didn’t have before. In one room (left), she sells sodas and snacks. In another corner, she has a television set attached to a VCR and a collection of video cassettes — including Schwarzenegger and Stallone films — sent home by her son. She screens them for her neighbors who receive no television signal and have little else to do in their remote village.

WHY MEXICO’S ECONOMY HAS GOTTEN WORSE

Dwindling coffee and corn crops

In the past decade, Vietnam and Indonesia greatly increased their production of coffee, international pricing agreements collapsed and the price paid to Mexican and Central American coffee growers plummeted. Before that, many peasants picked coffee on large plantations.

“I once produced 72,000 kilos of coffee in a year, and this year we produced about 200,” says Alvaro Ricardez, 53, owner of the Monte Carlo plantation in Oaxaca state. “We can’t get enough for the coffee to afford to harvest it. It rots on the plant. I used to employ about 200 people. Now, we can’t give anyone work.”

Ricardez recalls the effect on a nearby village that once provided him with pickers. “The men would go to the United States, find work and then call and tell their friends and relatives to go,” Ricardez says. “The town only had one telephone. The mayor finally cut the line and locked the telephone in a drawer so no one could use it. But they were still leaving.”

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the 1994 continental economic pact, was supposed to spread the wealth. But in implementing NAFTA, Mexico reduced subsidies to many corn growers and became obligated to import some U.S. corn. That drove many small farmers out of business.

Defenders of NAFTA maintain that free trade has worked both ways — Mexico now markets tomatoes and other winter vegetables in the U.S. But undermining the cultivation of corn caused havoc in Mexico.

This drying patio was once covered with coffee at harvest time. So few people work in these coffee lands now that jaguars and pumas, once believed extinct, have descended from remote heights and are being sighted.

Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

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Taking enforcement into their own hands: Chris Simcox (standing at left), president of Civil Homeland Defense, conducts a meeting before a patrol. Undocumented migrants head for predetermined spots to be picked up by trucks and vans. The migrants often leave behind belongings at those pickup points, like this one beside an Arizona highway.

Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

Citizen patrol: Chris Simcox investigates sounds in the brush near Tombstone, Ariz.. He saw no migrants, but called the Border Patrol and reported he heard people sneaking through a ravine.

Vigilantes sweep desert for 'chickens'

Arizona citizens' patrols regard those who sneak into the U.S. as national security threats.

By JOHN LANTIGUA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

PALOMINAS, Ariz. — It is 10 p.m., and Chris Simcox is hidden under a mesquite bush in the desert south of Tombstone. He wears a cap decorated with the Stars and Stripes and a T-shirt bearing the words "No Fear." He packs a handgun on his hip.

Other members of his citizens' group, Civil Homeland Defense (CHD), are concealed in nearby scrub. They lie in wait for undocumented migrants who have crossed the Mexican border in recent hours. They suspect the migrants will sneak up an adjacent ravine, heading north toward Tucson. If they do materialize, Simcox and friends will pounce and try to capture them.

They are called "vigilantes," armed private citizens who patrol the Arizona desert. They insist they must act because the Bush administration has not provided homeland security.

"Post-9/11, the president asked us to be vigilant about threats to our security," says Simcox, 43, CHD president and owner of the weekly newspaper, *The Tombstone Tumbleweed*. "But every week, thousands of unidentified people are crossing this border. Is that security?"

Local church and legal authorities estimate that during the peak winter and spring seasons, more than 2,000 undocumented migrants per day cross the eastern Arizona border. Simcox concedes he has made a very small dent in that flow. Between November 2002, when the group initiated its patrols, and mid-November 2003, he claims CHD apprehended 2,030 persons and turned them over to Border Patrol officers.

Advocates for migrants fear the vigilante patrols will eventually lead to tragedy. In at least two instances in the past two years, migrants have been shot in the Arizona desert, but police attributed both cases to conflicts between smugglers. Simcox insists none of his members has ever fired a shot at a migrant and would do so only to protect his or her own life.

"Not one time have we ever harmed anyone," he maintains.

Migrant advocates also accuse vigilantes of racism. On a night when two *Palm Beach Post* journalists accompanied them, one CHD member made a racist remark about a local black businessman. Simcox immediately distanced himself from the comment and insisted he is not prejudiced, although he couldn't speak for his cohorts.

"I understand that most of the people crossing are honest and hard-working and are just trying to feed themselves and their families," he says. "But we don't know who might be hiding among them. We all benefit from the labor coming across, but it's coming across unchecked. That's dangerous."

'The possibility of terrorism'

In the 1990s, the Border Patrol increased manpower along the Texas and California borders and made the Arizona desert the busiest crossing point in the Southwest. Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and greater fears about foreigners in the border region.

Simcox says his group has captured citizens of 24 countries, including Russia and China. Local Border Patrol agents say they have apprehended people from even more nations in recent years, including Pakistan and Iran.

> **'One thousand are caught, and at least 800 are back the next night.'**
>
> BOB DOLLARD
> Rancher

"There is the possibility of terrorism," says Simcox, "poisoning water supplies and other acts. We need the Army down here. I'm not stopping until I get that response, a military presence on the border."

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge has refused, citing cultural and political sensibilities. Troops on the border would certainly disturb the Mexican government, which counts on workers coming to the U.S. and sending money back.

Simcox also believes the Bush administration is unwilling to displease U.S. agricultural interests that depend on undocumented workers. One CHD member, Cindy Kolb, says President Bush especially doesn't want to irk Florida citrus growers.

"Around here, we think people like that are guilty of treason," says Kolb, referring to citrus growers and other employers of undocumented workers.

So the crossings and apprehensions continue in what some locals refer to as "a game of hide and seek." The great majority of those captured are Mexicans, and, unless they have criminal records, the Border Patrol simply sends them back to Mexico. Many turn around within days — sometimes hours — and cross again.

"I once captured the same guy three times in one day," says Border Patrol agent Dave Beemiller, of Nogales.

"It's absurd," says Simcox.

Bob Dollard, 55, an Arizona rancher, agrees. "One thousand are caught, and at least 800 are back the next night," he says, sitting astride a white horse on his Double D Ranch near Palominas. "It's a waste of everybody's time."

Dollard and other ranchers complain that migrants heading north often cause havoc on their ranchlands. Ranchers say they lose cattle because migrants leave gates open or topple fences.

"They turn on water and don't turn it off," he says. "And they leave garbage everywhere, plastic water bottles and food containers. It's a mess."

Dollard also apprehends migrants, in part because of the damage, but also due to the threat of terrorism.

"You have people walking through your back yard from any place in the world," he says. "Last December, I caught two people from Poland."

But, like Simcox, he says most migrants are poor Mexicans just looking to survive. He supports proposed changes in laws, like those currently before the Congress, that would allow migrants to work in this country legally.

"This (current system) doesn't make any sense," he exclaims. "Anything is better than this."

Agents encounter gruesome scenes

The Border Patrol enforces the present policies, employing 1,700 people in the Tucson sector alone. They are responsible for protecting 261 miles of border and an area as big as New Jersey, Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.

The number of people captured in the Tucson sector in the past four years has declined from 616,346 in fiscal year 1999 to 347,256 in 2003.

Frank Amarillas, a Border Patrol spokesman, says fewer migrants are crossing due to greater Border Patrol scrutiny. But migrant advocates say more migrants are crossing in the remote desert and are harder to find. That has also caused a sharp increase in the number who have died crossing just in eastern Arizona — from 29 in 1999 to 139 in 2003, according to Border Patrol figures.

"It's like sucking on a hair dryer, that's how hot it is out there," says veteran officer Vince Hampel, 42.

Border Patrol agents follow the sneaker tracks of migrants in the desert, an activity they call "pushing signs." But if a migrant becomes severely dehydrated, tracking him or her can be extremely difficult.

"They begin to walk in circles," says Hampel. "They no longer follow trails. They can no longer control what they are thinking or doing."

Migrants often take refuge by lying under mesquite trees, but since the ground is hotter than the air, it sometimes hastens their deaths.

"I hate to go and look under those trees," says Hampel. And he and other officers figure they find only a fraction of those who die in the vast wilderness.

Sometimes, the officers are haunted by what comes to them across the desert.

"We had a woman and her daughter who was about 13," says Hampel. "The daughter died on the way, and the woman sat next to the body for two days before she went looking for help.

"I can't take the cases that involve children," he says, shaking his head as if to dislodge the memory. "It's awful."

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The 'coyote' cuts deals with 'raiteros,' cross-country drivers who pack small vehicles with migrants and deliver them to relatives or farm contractors.

Weary and wary: Fearing arrest after sneaking into the U.S. from Mexico, an undocumented migrant peeks out a window of a run-down motel room near Phoenix. It serves as a safe house for migrants still tired and dusty from crossing the desert.

Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

Dispersing the human cargo

Zoning out in the U.S.A.: After arriving in their safe house near Phoenix, migrants rest and watch television. They have just trudged four days from Mexico through the desert heat of late July. The news includes reports about other would-be migrants who had less luck and died crossing the desert. While the migrants recuperate, a coyote and other smugglers plan the routes that the laborers will take cross-country. Most will proceed to states on the East Coast, including Florida. Some will end up having to work off smuggling fees.

By JOHN LANTIGUA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

MESA, Ariz. — For many migrant workers, the road to the farm fields of Florida runs through a fleabag motel room such as this one outside Phoenix.

Scarred by water stains, peeling paint and a splintered door, the room is designed for two people at most. But it is now crowded by nine undocumented Latins, just arrived after an exhausting four-day march across the Arizona desert.

Such low-rent hideouts serve as safe houses and secret depots for a very lucrative underground business. It is where poor men and women with hopes of brighter futures meet wheeling-and-dealing drivers who convey them clandestinely anywhere in the country — in exchange for big money. In the trade, such men who provide rides are called "*raiteros.*"

The nine travelers will spend only a day or two in the motel before being shipped out. They keep the door locked and peek through the blinds before allowing anyone in, including a reporter and a photographer for *The Palm Beach Post*. They pass the time staring at television, in particular frightening reports about other would-be migrants who died crossing the desert.

Meanwhile, Cesar, the smuggler who brought them across the border, helps plot their cross-country journeys with three other men — two *raiteros* and a dispatcher. Facing prison terms if they are caught, the four men are on edge. They negotiate, squabble and yell into cellphones, cutting the deals that distinguish this illegal industry. All business is conducted in Spanish.

"What is the number of your sister-in-law in Florida?" Cesar shouts above the sound of the television. He is screaming to a migrant named Onofre, 24, who has family in Hialeah.

Everybody takes a cut in smuggling work

Before a migrant is released from the motel room, his relatives must first wire the $800 that Cesar charges for the border crossing. Not all of that is profit: Cesar has already doled out $150 per head to the driver of a pickup truck who plucked them from the broiling desert near Tucson and drove them about 100 miles to Mesa.

Given the phone number, Cesar punches it in, reaches the woman, puts the young man on, who confirms he has arrived in Phoenix and is well. Cesar allows no time for chitchat. He grabs back the phone and gives the woman instructions for wiring the money to a nearby Western Union office.

"It has to be here before I can send him to you," Cesar says, not menacingly but firmly. He is assured the $800 will be wired that day, and he hangs up. The same procedure is followed family after family.

The *raitero* who will transport some of the group is nicknamed El Flaco (Skinny), a clever cover name because he is not thin. As Cesar proceeds, El Flaco figures out who he will squeeze into his Ford Escape, a small SUV, which departs the next day for the East Coast. Those who are left behind will leave a day later in another vehicle, to be driven by El Flaco's brother.

A Guatemalan, El Flaco, 26, is loud, fast-talking and high-strung. He says he first snuck into the U.S. when he was 14, crossing the border illegally with friends. Caught by the Border Patrol, he was shipped back across the line to Mexico and staved off hunger there by selling newspapers on the street until he finally arranged to cross again.

Dinner en route: Pedro (from left), Samuel and Onofre eat a Burger King meal while crammed into the back seat of a rented Ford Escape. The vehicle, made for five people, carries eight. Jose and his girlfriend, Nely, are traveling in the luggage area at the rear.

The past 12 years he has lived in the U.S. and once worked in Palm Beach County, harvesting tomatoes. In the mid-1990s, he took advantage of an immigration amnesty and is now a legal resident. He has smuggled migrants for several years, lives in Atlanta and is trying to choose his passengers so he can drop them all off and reach home "without having to drive all over the damned country."

But he must coordinate that with his two smuggling colleagues. He slips out of the room, crosses the motel courtyard and enters another equally seedy room, where the dispatcher is at work. His nickname is El Moro (the Moor).

An extremely slim, dark, 30ish Mexican with curly black hair, El Moro is dressed in a ratty T-shirt and slacks, no shoes. He stalks the room manically, barking into a cellphone. He is speaking to another coyote who is traveling by foot in the Arizona desert with 17 migrants and is

See CROSS COUNTRY, *next page* ►

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What the smugglers earned

Here is what the two principal smugglers earned to get their human cargo from the Mexican border to their new U.S. homes. The smugglers typically demand payment in full, but allowed a few of their charges to pay later.

	The 'coyote'	The 'raitero'
ROLE	■ To get nine migrants from Mexico to Phoenix – what turned out to be a four-day desert hike.	■ To get five migrants from Phoenix to Atlanta and Tampa, a 1 ½-day drive.
PROFIT	■ About $10,000	■ About $4,500
INCOME	■ $800 per person – nine migrants and one reporter; the money for the migrants was wired by relatives to the coyote. ■ $400 per migrant from the 'raitero' for providing people who need cross-country transportation.	■ $1,000 to $1,200 per migrant, paid by migrants' relatives upon arrival at their homes, and $1,000 each for a reporter and a photographer.
EXPENSES	■ $150 per head to the truck driver who picks the migrants up in the Arizona desert and takes them to a motel 'safe house' in Phoenix. ■ $100 to the motel owner, including room and payoff. ■ $20 a day per migrant for food.	■ $400 per migrant to the coyote who provided them. ■ $500 for one week's car rental. ■ Gas money and other expenses, including buying a McDonald's meal for all his charges.

▶ CROSS COUNTRY *from previous page*

expected in Phoenix the next day.

"What (pickup) point are you going to, and when will you be there?" The reception is poor, and he has to yell.

The other man in the room is El Flaco's older brother, who uses the name Ovidio. Even jumpier and louder than El Flaco, Ovidio insists on knowing when the second coyote will arrive so he can finalize how many "chickens" (migrants) he will be transporting. But the connection is lost and can't be reestablished. El Moro curses the coyote.

The two brothers storm out. Crossing the courtyard, they are stopped momentarily by a dark, nattily dressed man, the owner of the motel, who is originally from India. They converse with him briefly and reenter the first room.

"The Indian wants his money," El Flaco yells to Cesar. If large numbers of migrants are held in a room, the owner demands a payoff, Cesar explains later, revealing yet another level in the smuggling food chain. Cesar tells the brothers he can handle it for $50 and that they shouldn't worry.

Reckoning cost of delivery

The two brothers then set prices and settle accounts with Cesar.

"We charge $1,000 from Phoenix to Atlanta or to Florida," explains El Flaco. "To North Carolina, it is $1,200. To New York or Boston, it is $1,500." They will be paid by the family members to whom they deliver the migrants.

"But we don't keep all that money because we pay Cesar $400 for each of them," El Flaco explains. That is Cesar's cut for bringing the business to them and not other drivers.

All three men agree they must get the group out of Phoenix quickly. Not only do they risk raids by the authorities, but lately local Mexican-American gangs have invaded motels and kidnapped waiting migrants.

"Last week, a gang of *cholos* (Mexican-Americans) with guns kicked in the door of Room 15 right in this motel," explains Cesar. "They kidnapped a whole bunch. They hold them for ransom and collect from the families."

That night, the Guatemalan brothers divvy up the passengers. El Flaco will take two migrants heading to Alabama, one to Florida and two more men stashed in another safe house who want to go to Atlanta. That adds up to eight people, including the two Florida journalists and the driver, all crammed into the rented compact SUV designed to hold five. His brother, who drives a larger van, will transport the remaining members of the present group but will also wait for some of the 17 still crossing the desert.

"Some guys used to take 15 or 20 people in a van," says El Flaco. "They would take out the seats and lay the chickens in the back all the way across country. Some people still do that, but we don't. The vans ride low in the back, and it makes it easy for the police to spot you.

"If a cop stops you and sees those people lying there, he knows you're smuggling," he says. "Lots of *raiteros* have gotten arrested that way. If I get stopped, I just say I was doing someone a favor. I didn't know they had no papers."

He also explains why he uses rental vehicles. "It costs me $500 per week, but the vans are new, well maintained and good for long trips. Also, I change cars, and that is good if someone starts watching for one vehicle."

Bypassing agents on Interstate 10

The business agreements and passenger allotments go smoothly until almost the last moment. The next morning, shortly before the first vehicle rolls out, an argument breaks out between Cesar and the brothers. Two of the passengers have no family members to pay their cross-country fares. The drivers will have to trust that the migrants find work and make payments on their debt. Trust is not their stock in trade.

"You take these people all the way across the country, and then they are supposed to pay you every month," complains El Flaco. "But you drop them off, and the next week they take off, they disappear."

Cesar argues that the migrants are from his hometown, and one is his cousin.

"They won't let you down because they won't want to let me down," he assures the Guatemalans. But he finally agrees not to take the $400 up front for the two passengers, and the deal is sealed.

The eight squeeze into the van, including two in the luggage space at the rear. Baggage is tied on top under a tarp.

The two new additions are Samuel, 42, and his nephew, Pedro, 25, Mexicans who recently had been laid off in California — Samuel from a computer factory and Pedro, a cook, from a Mexican restaurant.

"When the war started in Iraq, a lot of people lost jobs out there," explains Samuel. They are heading to Atlanta, where they have family and where they hope to find work.

At 1:10 p.m. on Saturday, July 26, El Flaco and his passengers set off. In the parlance of the smuggling business, they are "*subiendo*" (going up). All trips out of Phoenix are "going up." On the console next to the driver's seat sit an empty can of Red Bull, a caffeine drink, and a plastic bottle of amphetamines. They help explain El Flaco's high-strung manner.

"We'll be in Atlanta in about 32 to 35 hours," says El Flaco. He says he stops to sleep only for an hour or two at a time.

Atlanta is east, but they don't head in that direction right away. Instead, they go north to Flagstaff and catch Route 40. El Flaco says smugglers used to take Interstate 10 directly east from Phoenix, but no longer.

"There are lots of Border Patrol vehicles on Route 10 and a checkpoint at El Paso," he says. "People have gotten busted there. This route is longer but safer."

Group of 17 busted en route to Phoenix

They will pass through eight states to reach Florida — Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. The speed limit, in general, is 75, and El Flaco does 80 max.

He tells a cautionary tale about another *raitero* who recently headed north toward Colorado but didn't drive safely.

"He rolled the van, and two people were killed and some were injured," says El Flaco. "He was all right, but he had to run for it — he got away."

El Flaco says he sometimes recognizes other smuggling vehicles on the highway or at rest stops. But the first vehicle they take special notice of on this trip is an Arizona Highway Patrol cruiser, sitting on a median near Flagstaff. They all watch the car circumspectly as they go by, and all through the trip the sight of a police car will make the passengers tense. They have come too far to be turned back.

Several hours into the journey, after sunset, El Flaco's cellphone sounds. His brother reports bad news: The group of 17 heading toward Phoenix has been busted.

"They picked up all those people in one vehicle so that it was riding really low, and the (Border) Patrol stopped them on Route 10," El Flaco recounts later.

The incident enrages El Flaco, and he yells into the phone: "Why didn't they send two vehicles or even three? That was stupid!"

His brother tells him he will head for the East Coast with the small group already at the motel, but that also angers El Flaco.

"No! That is too few people," he yells. "Wait two days, and another group will come. Don't be an ox! Just wait!"

They argue, and El Flaco finally hangs up, still fuming.

"Those people spend four days crossing the desert, and then somebody screws up, and they have to go all the way back and start all over," he grumbles. "That's f...... terrible."

'This isn't easy; you never stop'

The SUV exits Arizona, crosses New Mexico and enters Texas late at night. They stop for gas and quick bathroom breaks. At the first stop, a migrant accustomed to public bathrooms in Mexico, which often are not free, asks El Flaco how much it will cost. He is surprised to hear there is no charge.

El Flaco encourages everyone to get out and stretch.

"These people walk for days across the desert, and they get into the car and they get cramps."

El Flaco drives until about 1 a.m., then pulls into a rest stop among long-haul trailers and sleeps for an hour. He wakes, drives two hours and stops for one more hour.

"I have driven all the way across without sleeping at all," he insists. "I've had two hours sleep, and with that I'll make Atlanta."

The sun comes up over green hills in Texas. El Flaco pulls off the highway to a McDonald's, but he doesn't let the migrants get out of the car. They are in smalltown America.

"We don't want anybody getting suspicious," he says. He brings back Egg McMuffins for all and absorbs the expense because his passengers have little money. He limps slightly as he returns to the car: His own leg is cramping up from so much driving.

They roll again, and El Flaco turns the radio dial, trying to find a Spanish-speaking station. He settles for country music in English, songs about hard times that don't compare with the tough times the migrants in the car have seen.

They enter Arkansas at 11 a.m., the 22-hour mark, and approach Little Rock.

"There used to be sign here that said 'Welcome to the State of President Bill Clinton,' " recalls El Flaco,"but now he's gone and the sign is gone."

He speaks of other trips in recent weeks — one to Boston, another to St. Louis and Chattanooga. He's ready to spend a while at home in Atlanta.

"This isn't easy; you never stop."

> **'I have driven all the way across without sleeping at all. I've had two hours sleep and with that I'll make Atlanta.'**
>
> EL FLACO
> Drives migrants cross country

And lately it has gotten harder. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the vigilance by federal and state authorities has increased. At one point, officials established checkpoints at Albuquerque and Amarillo, but now they have taken them down.

"For a while, (drivers) were going all the way north to Nebraska in order to cross the country," he recalls. "It was taking 60 hours nonstop. We used to do these

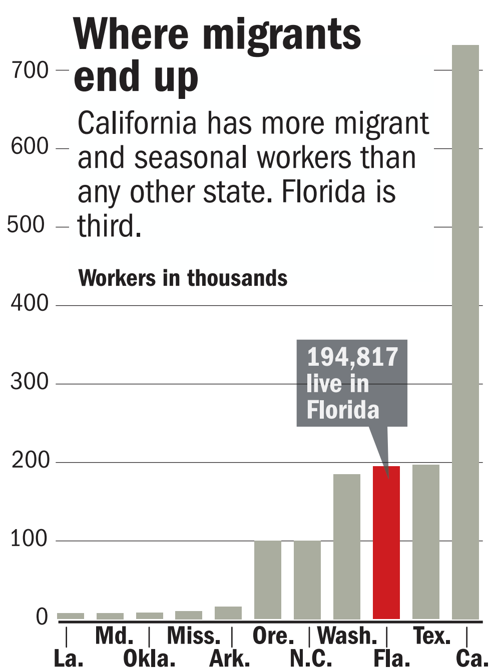
See CROSS COUNTRY, *next page* ▶

Staff photos by LANNIS WATERS

Sweet new home Alabama: After traveling from Phoenix with other migrants in a rented compact SUV, Jose (above) says goodbye to travel companions as his girlfriend, Nely, waits in a car with her relatives, who came to pick them up. The two groups met in an empty supermarket parking lot late at night in Anniston, Ala.

Mission accomplished: Pedro, 25, and his uncle Samuel, 42, (center and right) two undocumented Mexicans who recently had been laid off in California, are dropped off at a safe house in a middle-class Atlanta suburb, where they will eventually be picked up by relatives.

HOW THEY COME | Tragedy in Leesburg



Sources: Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers Enumeration Study, Migrant Health Program, Bureau of Primary Health Care, Health and Human Resources Administration.

STAFF GRAPHIC

Driver dreads Ala., Ga. police

▶ CROSS COUNTRY *from previous page*

trips for $800. That's why the prices have gone up."

Dropping off the immigrants

The SUV leaves Arkansas and enters Tennessee, crossing over the Mississippi River, which some of the passengers have never heard of. They cut across a small corner of Mississippi and then enter Alabama.

"The police here in Alabama and in Georgia are the worst," El Flaco warns. "They will stop you if they don't like your looks."

As they enter Alabama, El Flaco hands his cellphone to Nely, the only woman. She makes contact with her two brothers who live in small northern Alabama town and are waiting for her. She hands the phone back to El Flaco, who arranges a late night meeting in the town of Anniston.

At 11 p.m., they pull into the otherwise empty parking lot of a local supermarket. Nely climbs out and embraces her brother, Waldemar, whom she hasn't seen in several years since he crossed the desert. No money changes hands because Cesar has made arrangements that Nely and her boyfriend, Jose, will pay off El Flaco in payments. El Flaco reminds them of the agreement and gives them his phone number for when they have earned their first installment.

Then he climbs back into the Escape and drives through the night into Georgia. At 3 a.m., about 37 hours after leaving Mesa, El Flaco pulls into a suburb north of Atlanta, to an attractive house in a middle-class neighborhood. Several Mexican men, who have been waiting for the latest shipment of human cargo, emerge from the house to greet the new arrivals. Despite the hour, El Flaco calls the family of Samuel and Pedro to arrange for their payment and pickup. The relatives won't arrive until later that day, which means the men will have to sleep on the floor of the safe house.

"No sweat, it's carpeted," El Flaco tells them. El Flaco will get only a couple of hours sleep because he wants to see a girlfriend before heading to Florida.

It is 9 a.m. Sunday when he sets off with his last "chicken," Onofre, and the two journalists. On the streets, some people are already out. Almost everyone in sight is Latin.

"Atlanta is crawling with Latinos," says El Flaco. "This is a very good place for us because there is lot of work — landscaping, construction, warehouses."

Bad memories of Palm Beach County

As the SUV heads south toward Florida, El Flaco remembers his days in Palm Beach County in 1995. He doesn't have fond memories.

"We Guatemalans were always getting mugged," he says. "Bad guys knew that we couldn't put our money in the bank and carried it with us — sometimes in our boots. They would jump you and rip off your shoes. It happened to me one night as I was going into this lousy hotel I stayed in, the Hotel Patio. Three guys came out of the bushes. I lost $150, and they choked me, left me unconscious."

He says he never worked in Florida again. "But I have taken many people to Florida — Immokalee, Naples, Bradenton, Quincy, all over."

As he crosses the Florida line, El Flaco uses his phone to make contact with Onofre's family in Hialeah.

"Listen, I'm going to have to charge you $1,200 and not $1,000," he says. "He's the only one I have left, and I can't drive all the way to (South Florida) for nothing."

Onofre's sister-in-law says she only has $1,000 but promises to send him $200 the next week.

"Many people promise to send me money, and I never hear from them again," he complains. She pleads with him, and he finally concedes, because she agrees to meet him in Tampa. He has cousins near there who will put him up for the night.

El Flaco hangs up. After paying the car rental, gas and food, he will pocket about $4,500 for the week's work. He insists it still isn't easy money, but he isn't very convincing.

He waves goodbye and drives out of sight, barking into his cellphone.

Together again — for now: Benito Muro (left) lived to rejoin his family in Guadalupe, Mexico, and to tell the tale of his highway calamity in Florida. Beside him is his wife, Rebeca. His daughter-in-law Carmen Julia Alfaro Banuelos holds her infant daughter, Maria. At right, her husband, Jose Antonio Muro, who traveled with his father, holds an older daughter, Karina.

PAUL J. MILETTE/ Staff Photographer

Van flip upends hope of paydays for dad, son

Instead of finding work in Immokalee tomato fields, the pair from Guadalupe have their bones broken in a strange land.

By CHRISTINE EVANS
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

GUADALUPE, Mexico — In a poor barrio here, up a steep path, an old man sits alone on a narrow sidewalk, his back curled like a question mark.

He is a survivor of the American Dream.

Just barely.

The hospital in Florida patched him up, after he came to from the accident, and he was lucky, really, because two of his traveling companions died while others scattered, running like lost souls through the twilit scrub, praying for a dark night.

This, of course, is not what Benito Muro had planned — getting carried away on a stretcher, in a strange country, with his injured teenage son by his side.

The Dream, he would think when he came to, does not come cheap.

It was his son, Jose Antonio, so young and smart and eager, who had urged him to make the journey to *El Norte*, so they could pick the sweet red tomatoes in Immokalee, a dollar a bucket they had heard. Tonio said if they took a chance and chased the dream, they might catch it.

Let's go, Papi! Let's go!

Those words would echo a long, long time.

The dream sputtered out on a lonely patch of highway some 1,600 miles from home, with bodies strewn like trash along the shoulder, and befuddled troopers trying to account for all the passengers, and the local hospitals welcoming the nearly dead, then, upon discovering their illegal status, wondering what to do with them.

The driver, a shadowy fellow called Sergio, soon disappeared.

Benito and Tonio — mangled, starving, bone-sore from crossing the country flat on their backs in the dark bed of an old Chevy van — were totally alone in one sense, but not in another. Even in a state filled with gringos, good people would help.

The gringos would take the old man and his son into hiding, nurse them, protect them, and, when the authorities said time was up, sew $500 into the hems of their hand-me-down jackets.

After that, Benito and Tonio would go home, broken and infinitely wiser.

"Do you know what is happening?" Benito says now, spooning a bit of noodle soup in his tiny home on the back of a hillside here in the country's cool, mountainous heart.

There is a young Mexican woman present, a well-off student from the city, and when she hears what is coming, she starts to cry.

"It is the buy and sale of people," Benito says. "Yes! It's selling! So many people! I do not say it's good.

"I only say this is how it happens.

"We get bought and sold, and we do it to feed our families. Nothing more."

A good week brought $24

The poverty here is deep and hard and hungry. There is much of it, and it looks different from poverty in America.

"That is why some people must try to find their way to the States," Benito says. "Just to survive."

He is an old man now, 70 anyway — who bothers to keep careful track? — and his frame is short and settled, as if gravity had pulled him down. A thatch of bangs covers his furrowed forehead, and all his stored-up worry shows in his eyes.

He is not unusual in that he finished school after just the third grade, or that he made his pesos tending animals in the scrubby hillside here. As a family man, he did well, marrying his beautiful Rebeca, raising two children, finding work a few days a week as a bricklayer, setting small homes into the broad red earth.

A good week might bring $24.

Many weeks were not so good.

For extra money, Benito opened a small grocery, as so many families do, and it is here his story begins.

"That is how I heard," he says, "that there would be a group going to *El Norte*."

A man approached him, an older fellow he knew slightly from passing on the street. His name was Antonio Hernandez, but because he was a wealthy man by local standards, he had stature, so everybody called him "Don Antonio."

Don Antonio, in the account Benito will tell again and again, said precisely this: *Do you want work? There is a chance for you in the United States.*

"He was like a 'coyote,' passing the people," Benito adds. Not the kind who travels with people, but the kind who sets things up. "He has many sons in the United States."

One of those sons, it was commonly said, had connections in Florida's tomato fields. He knew where the work was, how many men were needed, how to get them across the border and signed up. And so, here in this hilly suburb of Zacatecas, the grandly sculpted city to the west, the poor people with big dreams knew whom to call upon.

Source: The Associated Press STAFF GRAPHIC

The work on the farms is terribly hard, and the men who do it need strong backs and fast hands, and for this reason Benito knew the job Don Antonio offered was really for his son.

"He said he would take me only if he has room, only if he had not met his quota. I said no, you take us both, or you take no one."

Then they waited.

Would they go?

Part was up to Don Antonio, yes, but part was up to them.

On the one hand, a trip to *El Norte* could mean . . . enough to eat.

On the other, the obvious risks: The chance that a coyote would cheat or hurt them; that the crop that season would not pay; that *la migra* would catch them and send them home defeated.

How do you make a choice like that?

The talk then in the Muros home — a tiny, borrowed row house cut deep in the hill on a street where dogs lie on rooftops, then poke their noses over to watch the laughing boys play soccer up and down the narrow lanes — went around in circles until the father and the son arrived at the only decision they could make.

You do not know how a thing will turn out until you try.

They packed: blankets for the cold desert nights, water for the insufferable days, an extra pair of pants. And that is all. Even the pants would become too heavy to carry: When you cross the desert and slip "the wire," you must be light.

On a Sunday in December 1997, they met their group at the appointed hour and place, a flat, gray house in a dingy barrio not far from their own.

Before he left, Benito kissed Rebeca.

"Did I worry?" she says, thinking about it now.

"Oh!"

It is a chilly gray day, and she is walking in her thick-soled shoes down the steep path in front of her house to buy a grilled chicken, and for a moment she pauses and looks skyward, because it was only God and the good Virgin of Guadalupe who kept her from worrying straight into her grave.

Good coyotes, bad coyotes

If this had been the kind of trip on which one carries a map, perhaps Benito and Tonio could chart for you the precise lines of their journey.

As it was, the lines followed a hazy path through desert and gully and country and state. America is such a big place! Where does New Mexico end and Texas begin?

Also, it is impossible to see the sights while squeezed flat on your back, sardine-style, in the dark hollow of a smuggler's van.

"Yes, like sardines," Benito says. "My head was next to my son's, like this."

Here, back at home, in his cozy kitchen where Rebeca's soups simmer, the old man draws a picture.

"Like this," he says. "The van. The people." One dozen illegal passengers made the journey, give or take, and in the picture, they lie straight and tight like toothpicks.

The journey began the usual way, with the nervous recruits boarding a bus in Guadalupe, switching in Guadalajara, heading up the vast country's western edge to the desert state of Sonora and the town of Altar, where in beat-up hotels men and women sleep on floors and huddle for safety, awaiting their assignments.

In Altar, a man that seems quite right given all the last-minute praying that gets done, a man can find a coyote and a coyote can find a man.

Throughout the dusty hotels, rough voices call out:

"Timber in Oregon!"

"Chickens in Vermont!"

Benito and Tonio did not sign up; they already knew their destination. Tomatoes in Immokalee. "Don Antonio told us," Benito says. "Everything was set."

One other thing.

In the hotel, too, young girls were called out for special jobs. When they tell this part, father and son do not look up, only at the floor, as if the pale linoleum holds special fascination.

"The girls and women believe they are going for jobs as maids," says Tonio, now 22.

The girls, he explains, think they are going to find work polishing some rich lady's floor, and sometimes this is the case.

But sometimes it isn't.

Sometimes it isn't a rich lady's house they wind up in, but a house of prostitution.

"Las engañan," Tonio says. They trick them.

"Hay coyotes buenos y malos."

Yes, yes, his father says. Good coyotes and bad.

A young woman is victimized

They made it, the old man and the young one. Somewhere in Arizona, they crossed the wire.

"After, we waited in a gully," Tonio says. "You have to hide and wait, and then a man comes and calls out your name, and then you run to the truck and hide and then they take you."

There would be a safe house, and more walking, and another truck, and then, before too long, there would be Texas. In

See BENITO, *next page* ▶