

RESEARCH

"ON THE BORDER"

GEO MAGAZINE 11/79

SOURCE:

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April 14 1980

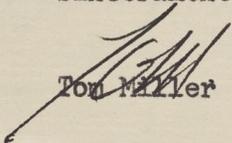
Dear Carlos,

In San Antonio you mentioned that you wanted a copy of that article in GEO magazine about the border. I've tried, and I can't get any extra copies from the publisher to send out. I think I've exhausted their supply with previous requests. So -- I xeroxed the copy I had, and am enclosing that for you. I hope its of some use. I'm glad that the NEW WEST article about Baja Calif. was helpful.

Ruben is supposed to be coming out here at the end of the week to help rally support in the effort to get the Justice Department to act on the Sinohui case. Is he taking part in your immigration meeting next month? When there's a printed agenda for that meeting, please send me one.

If there's anything else I can do for you over here, please let me know. I'm glad to have met you and Herman earlier this month.

Sinceramente,

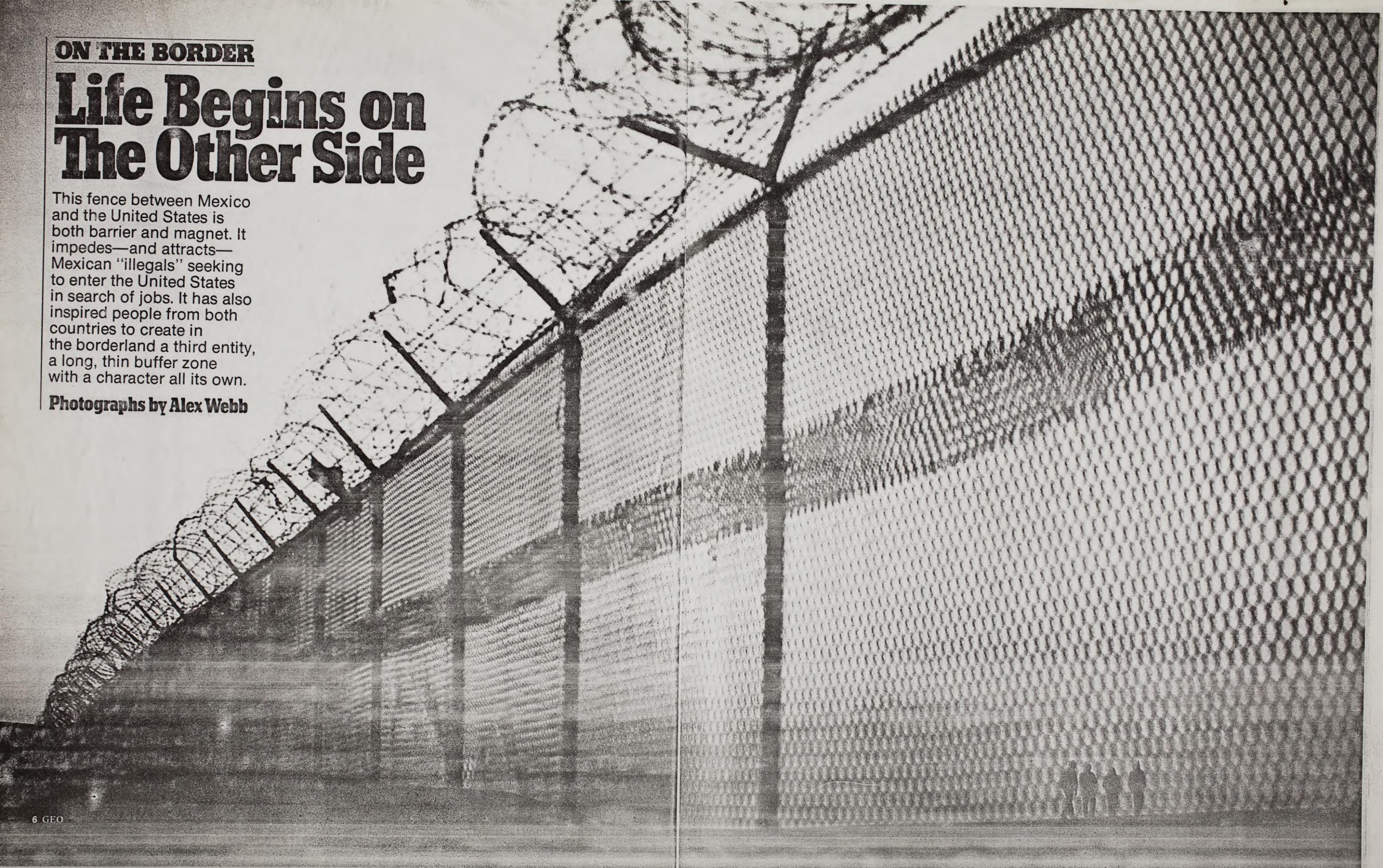

Tom Miller

ON THE BORDER

Life Begins on The Other Side

This fence between Mexico and the United States is both barrier and magnet. It impedes—and attracts—Mexican “illegals” seeking to enter the United States in search of jobs. It has also inspired people from both countries to create in the borderland a third entity, a long, thin buffer zone with a character all its own.

Photographs by Alex Webb



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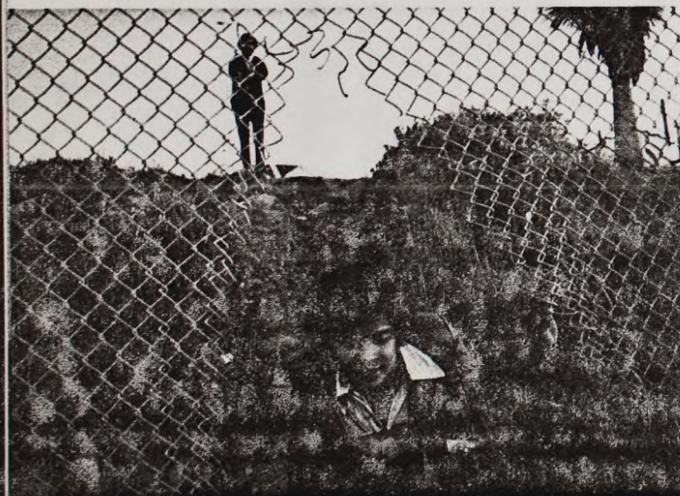
To millions of Mexicans, the United States is the El Dorado that the Spaniards once sought far to the south—a land of unimaginable wealth, not in gold but in the yearned-for jobs so scarce in Mexico itself. Border barriers only make El Dorado more tantalizing: easy to gaze at, hard to get into. If you can't cross legally, you wait under a rock until you feel brave enough to find an illicit doorway—a path over the San Ysidro Mountains, or a well-worn hole in the chain link fence near Tijuana.

It feels good when at last a Yankee stream quenches your thirst, when the Yankee sun dries the wet things you carry on your

head. The man with the headload, whose name is Agustín, came to the border by bus and thumb from his home 1,500 miles away.

He had heard there that he would find work in Los Angeles. A friend had told him that in English, unlike Spanish, the *g* in Los Angeles is soft. Agustín wanted to sound as much like an American as he could in case the Border Patrol picked him up, so he kept saying "Los Angeles" aloud and asking if he had pronounced it correctly.

Agustín had to decide whether to give money to a guide who promised to help him cross the border safely. Some guides, called "coyotes," prey unscrupulously on the "chickens," as the illegals are called, and abandon them after





taking their money. One spoke to Agustin. A coyote? "Yes," Agustin said, "and I am his chicken. And over there"—he pointed at the feared and hated Border Patrol, whose cars came by more and more frequently—"they are *cabrones*." Literally, that means "goats," but it's the equivalent of "sons of bitches." He added, "We are all animals of one sort or another, no?" In the end, Agustin made it safely past the patrol. So did these men, who waded happily across a river full of sewage and

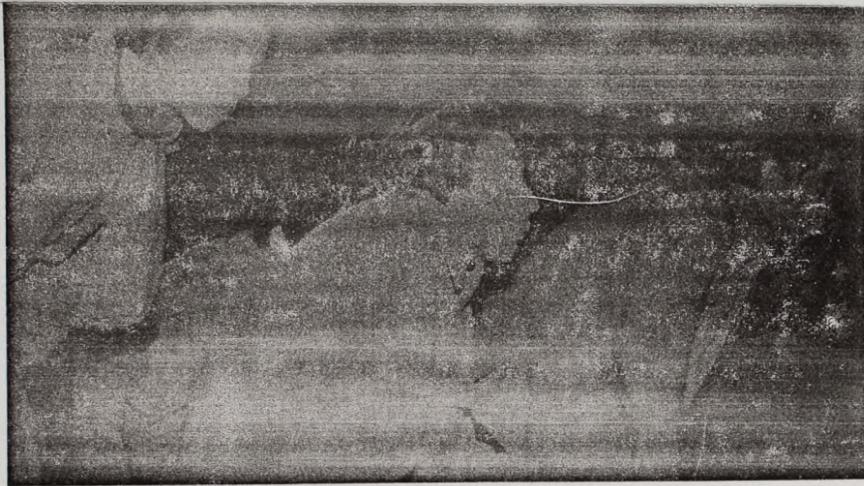
then proceeded to lose themselves in the barrios of San Diego or Los Angeles. Not everyone is so lucky. The men at bottom took a few drinks for courage and for warmth (the early-morning temperature was 30 degrees), fell asleep near Dulzura, California, and then were picked up by the Border Patrol.

The patrol maintains checkpoints as much as 100 miles in from the border and searches for aliens in the trunks or under the seats of vehicles chosen

at random. But it is strongest, and arouses the strongest fears, close to the border. The men at the top held their breaths as they waited at night for a patrol vehicle to pass (they were photographed by infrared strobe). Unhappily for them, they were spotted, and a helicopter clattered down to keep

watch in what seemed to them like a close encounter of the worst kind.

The patrol insists that if it had more men and more helicopters, it could do its job better. But to Mexicans for whom the most menial U.S. farm and factory jobs



hold enormous lure, the patrol's technology already seems overwhelming. Helicopters make it easy to spot people even when they stick to tall grass that would hide them from an enemy on the ground. Once illegals have been apprehended, patrolmen

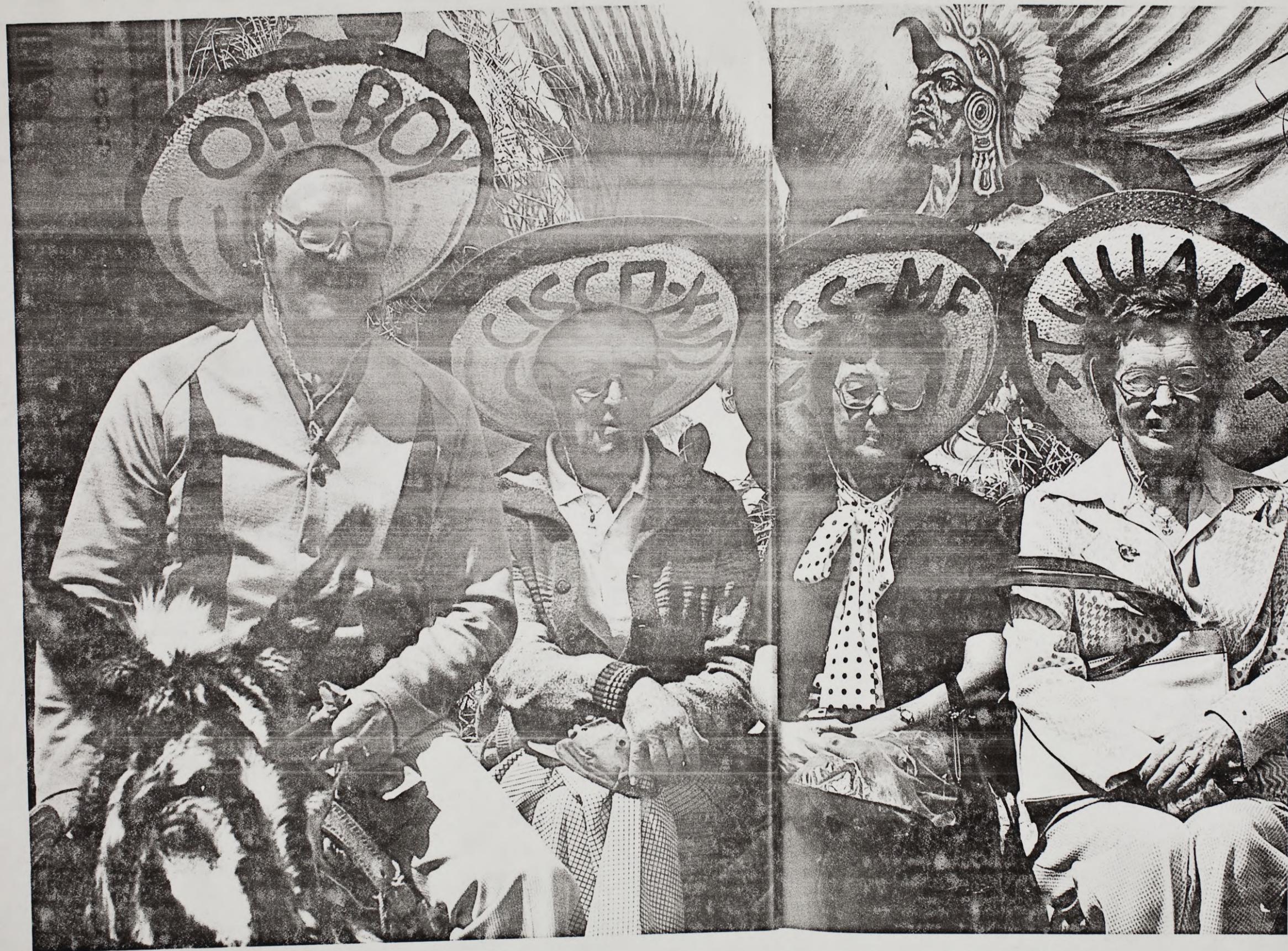




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frisk them. Generally, they offer no resistance, but at top right the driver of a car loaded with illegals tries to flee—in vain.

The sad journey home begins when illegals march, hands on heads, to patrol vans. They spend the night in a detention center; next morning they will be back in Mexico. But sooner or later, many—perhaps most—will try once again to make their way to El Dorado.



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One Land, Two Masters

Article by Tom Miller

It was in most respects a perfectly ordinary volleyball game. The rules were the conventional ones, and the contending teams—one composed of local officials from Cochise County, Arizona, and the other of their counterparts from the Mexican state of Sonora—indulged in the customary hustle and banter. The only unusual aspect of the game, in fact, lay in the “net”—the seven-foot chain link fence that runs along that stretch of border between the United States and Mexico.

The border fence there happens to be topped by three strands of barbed wire slanting toward Mexico, and on the barbs you could see shreds of clothing left by Mexicans who had tried to get into the United States by scaling the fence. On this occasion, however, the crown of thorns atop the holy

Americans seek their own obsessions in Mexico, said the poet Octavio Paz. These Middle Americans innocently seek out Latin gaiety in tourist-trap Tijuana.

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fence worked to Mexico's advantage: the Mexicans won the game 21-9. When play ended, both teams approached the net for gentlemanly handshakes. The game was, after all, the main event of a day set aside to mark Mexican-American friendship. On other days, the competitors might take issue with each other over problems of migrations, drugs, pollution, exploitation and smuggling, but on this day *abrazos* were clearly in order.

There was just one difficulty: how do you extend the hand of friendship through a chain link fence? There was a bit of nervous laughter as both Mexicans and Americans considered the problem, and then somebody found a solution. One by one, the players extended three fingers through the fence, rubbing them against the fingers of their opponents. It was an awkward substitute for a handshake, but it was the best they could do.

In its own twisted way, this cockeyed event symbolized the current state of affairs along the United States' southern frontier. The 1,900-mile border has come to represent many things to many people, yet it remains the most misunderstood region of North America. "In general," says Mexico's philosopher-poet Octavio Paz, "Americans have not looked for a Mexico in Mexico; they have looked for their own obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, hopes, interests. And those are what they have found."

All this is doubly true of the border region. The general impression of border towns is that they are sleazy and sleepy, dusty and desolate, places where the poor and criminal mingle. In truth, many are like that. But the border is also sexy and hypnotic, mysterious and magical, self-reliant and remarkably resilient. It changes pesos into dollars, humans into "illegals," innocence into hedonism. There is no other international boundary in the world where you find such a poor but developing nation side by side with such a wealthy and industrialized one, and the border must absorb the impact from both. The borderland popula-

tion therefore adapts, taking on the characteristics of both sides. The borderland is, in fact, a kind of third entity, a colony unto itself, long and narrow, ruled by two faraway powers. The relationship of the many twin border towns, such as McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, or El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, is symbiotic. The cities couple like reluctant lovers in the night, embracing for fear that letting go could only be worse.

I tried explaining this to the man who stopped at my table in the café at Roma, Texas. Uninvited, he sat down to describe his neighbors a half mile away across the bridge in Ciudad Miguel Alemán, in the state of Tamaulipas. "We're living next to a nation of criminals, really," he complained bitterly. "When we go over there, they take our money. It's a country of, well, bums. I'm trying to be polite. But when they come over here, why, they expect to be treated like visiting royalty!" He rose to tote up a Mexican diner's bill and give him change from the cash register. He was, as it turned out, the café's proprietor. He soon returned.

"I had one Mexican come in here and send her steak back to the kitchen three times. First she wanted it medium rare, then she wanted it well done, then she wanted it rare. I tell you, they're lazy and indolent. A Mexican customs man at the border makes as much as an army major in the interior. If they think you've got money on you, you've had it. I tell you, it's a nation of gangsters."

It was a curious introduction to racial hatred on the border, strange not for its venom but for its carelessness. In a region where race and class conflict are common, the café owner, part of the Anglo minority, felt no inhibition about expressing, glibly and to a stranger, his animosity toward his surroundings.

When William Emory passed through Roma, he noted that the town's prosperity was entirely due to the smuggling of goods into Mexico. Emory, a United States surveyor, established the boundary markings shortly after the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. "As might reasonably be expected in any country where the duties on foreign goods amount almost to prohibition," he wrote, "smuggling ceases to be a

Volleyball across the boundary: the Mexicans won, but only three fingers could fit through the wire of the border fence.

crime, but is identified with the best part of the population, and connects itself with the romance and legends of the frontier." The outlaw spirit that Emory chronicled 125 years ago is still with us today. It is what makes the border vulnerable to attitudes like the café owner's.

There are others who live in the border region who help make it work. I found one such man at Columbus, New Mexico, the town Pan-



cho Villa raided in 1916. Columbus, with a population under 500, is only a few miles down the highway from Palomas, in the state of Chihuahua. Its mayor, Carlos Ogden, appreciates the conflicts the border creates and does what he can to ensure that the fragile bond between Columbus and Palomas does not disintegrate. I met him at the Pancho Villa Cantina in Columbus.

"We have a pretty quiet town here, but we like it," he told me. "It's funny about border towns: they're not what they seem to be. You've got your tourist thing and your wet-back thing and your old-time rancher thing and your floater-drifter-newcomer thing—like me. The economists say Columbus is small, rural, poor and depressed. But it's really

a yeasty place with a good climate and the sparkle and excitement of a border town." His tone edged on sarcasm, but his eyes told me he meant it.

"We have thirty or forty kids from Palomas who go to school on this side," he went on, "and they get on the school bus like all the rest of the kids. Most of them use relatives on this side as their addresses. The fact is that our schools are better, and in many cases, if they want to continue on through high school, they have no choice but to attend in New Mexico. One guy was going to sue the school board saying that the Mexicans were, in effect, receiving welfare because they rode the school bus here. So we got the board to say that the Mexican kids were not entitled to

space on the school bus, but they could ride on a space-available basis. Since they use the same school bus they always did, there's always space available." Another border-town crisis resolved.

"Of course, that doesn't fall into my job description as mayor," Ogden said, "but you always have to watch out for things like that. My wife helped start a parents' club for the school kids, and of course a lot of the parents are from across the line, which makes getting together more difficult. We had to convince the immigration people to 'parole' the Mexican parents in for the evening so the International Parents Club could meet. We're always on the lookout for ways to bring the two towns together, because we're both

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so isolated from anywhere else in either country."

The desire to attend a parents' meeting may seem like one of the more innocuous reasons that Mexicans cross the U.S. border. Many Americans clearly believe the main purpose of Mexicans in coming to the United States is to burgle or to collect welfare. The truth is the opposite and the obvious. Mexicans want to enter the United States, legally or illegally, because there are more jobs in the United States than in Mexico, and they pay much better.

The Mexicans, moreover, are not the only beneficiaries of illegal immigration. Were it not for the abundance of available workers from Juárez, for instance, El Paso's middle-class homes would be without maids. Many domestics cross over illegally every day from Juárez to vacuum and launder El Paso's dirt. The early-morning crossers play an ongo-

worlds—a Mexican home and an American salary.

For the destitute, however, the situation is very different. When you are down to your last tortilla in Guadalajara, with an extended family of nine to feed, the border becomes your life's goal. Even in a country where literacy is not high, word spreads fast among the field hands and factory workers on the intricacies of northward migration. It is well known, for example, that Mexico's west coast state of Baja California has the country's highest minimum wage—and the golden land of California, U.S.A., just beyond. And it is equally well-known that opportunities to cross into the United States abound. The fence separating the United States from Mexico at Tijuana would act as a deterrent to tumbleweed and not much else. Thousands make it across every weekend in the Tijuana area alone. (Currently, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service is putting up 5.6 miles of new fence



ing game with the Border Patrol as they try to blend into downtown El Paso before they are picked up. Others, more fortunate, have green cards that permit employment in the United States. There are many, all the way from Matamoros in the east to Tijuana in the west, who flash these *pasaportes* at U.S. immigration officers every day on their way to work. They have the best of both

The borderland offers different goals for different souls. Mexicans, legal and illegal, shape up for farm work in Calexico, California; Americans shape up for pleasure in the Ciudad Acuña "zone of tolerance," across from Del Rio, Texas.



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there, but it is arguable how much difference that will make.)

In the first 10 years of this century, just over 11,000 foreigners were expelled from the United States for being here illegally. Last year the Border Patrol picked up more illegals than that on the Mexican border in just four days. For all of 1978, the number of illegals the patrol seized on the Mexican border came to 842,780. There is no way of knowing just how many people escape detection by the Border Patrol, but an educated guess might be that one in every five is apprehended. However, while it makes for good sensationalism to claim that millions of Mexicans annually are setting up house in the United States, it just isn't so. Of those who elude capture, most will return to Mexico within a year. As a result, while the number of undocumented Mexicans in the United States may be high at any given point, there is a constant turnover,

Today, complaints about the number of illegal aliens are widespread, but to most Mexican-Americans, the patrol is anathema—and Mexican-Americans are gaining a share of political power in the border states. Civil libertarians are also after the patrol, charging that its agents often make illegal searches of motor vehicles. If they turn up no illegal aliens, the complainants say, the agents try for possession of narcotics, mostly marijuana, or illegal possession of firearms. In any case, hunting down foreigners is not something most people feel comfortable about, so respect for the Border Patrol erodes easily.

The patrol itself argues that with more men it could reduce illegal immigration from Mexico. By my calculations, however, if the United States government were to line up Border Patrol agents shoulder to shoulder along the entire frontier, starting at the Gulf of Mexico, it would take 2,551,560 men to reach the Pacific. This seems neither likely to happen nor desirable.

In recent years, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has tried to increase both the efficiency of the Border Patrol and popular respect for it by developing "anti-smuggling units," which attempt to break up the practice of wholesale importation of humans from Mexico and Central America. Hugh Williams, chief of the Border Patrol sector at Del Rio, Texas, explained a recent case to me. At the center of one labor-importing ring was a junkyard owner in Waco, Texas, named Durwood Woosley. Woosley, who has been sentenced to five years in prison, used to tell his "recruiters" that he needed, let us say, 10 able-bodied Mexicans at \$30 a head. The recruiter went to the plaza or café or cantina in the nearest border town where migrants from the interior would gather and told them he had work for them in the United States. If they could get across to the U.S. side and call him, he'd arrange to pick them up. Some migrants always managed to cross over the border and call the recruiter, who took them to Waco, where the junkyard owner paid him \$300 on the spot.

The junkyard owner, in turn, had a string of farmers throughout the South who would "buy" Mexican workers from him at \$250 apiece. If, for example, a cotton farmer in South Carolina needed five field hands, he called and ordered them from the Waco man, who then shipped them out by car, van, mobile home or even plane. The South Carolina farmer paid the Waco man \$1,250 but then deducted \$250 from the wages of each of his new field hands. After the Mexicans had worked off their cost, the South Carolina farmer might sell them to another farmer for \$250 apiece, and then the deductions would begin again. "In effect," Williams explained, "each farmer is getting free labor plus the resale on each Mexican. There have been cases where we found Mexicans who were at their fourth or fifth farm and hadn't made a penny the whole time they were in the U.S. It is indentured servitude. These smuggling rings have been operating for years. We're looking at peonage. That's really what it is: peonage."

"Mexican laborers could be had



and the number does not rise nearly as fast as the rate of apprehension.

The Border Patrol is in an untenable situation, both victim and villain. When farmers on the U.S. side of the border wanted cheap labor not too long ago, the patrol tended to be blamed if it was too efficient in picking up illegals—and also if it was too easily encouraged to look the other way when migrants came across.

At a Mexican laetrile clinic, illegal in most U.S. states, American cancer patients hope against hope. A dentist's display offers a fast bite. One Mexican does her wash in a U.S. laundromat, another dries hers on the border.



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for sixty-two and a half cents a day," noted one observer at the border, "but men doubtless could be procured at even a lesser price." "The Mexican border," a second man stated, "marks the gateway to an inexhaustible thirty-cents-an-hour labor supply."

The difference between the two statements is not only the wages cited. The first observation was made by John Russell Bartlett, who traveled the frontier in the early 1850s. The second was made by an Arizona businessman in the late 1960s. Both add up to the underlying reason for the Border Industrial Program, an arrangement by which American firms establish assembly plants just inside the Mexican border and hire Mexican workers at that country's minimum wage. Products such as transistors, clothing and semiconductors are put together at the plants, using American-made materials, and then reimported into the United States. The parent company pays a customs duty only on the labor added, not on the product itself. The Mexican government offers generous tax incentives to U.S. companies that locate within Mexico's borders and ensures that the labor laws are as friendly as possible to management.

Of all the border cities, Juárez has the most highly developed assembly-plant program. General Motors, RCA and General Electric are among the largest employers in the city, where huge industrial parks house over 80 U.S.-owned plants. Border plants there and elsewhere have earned the name "runaways," because of the allegation that they are running away from U.S. unions, wages, environmental regulations and health and safety restrictions. In Agua Prieta, Sonora, opposite Douglas, Arizona, a U.S.-owned asbestos plant has been labeled extremely dangerous to its employees by an occupational health specialist because it far exceeds U.S. standards for permissible amounts of asbestos fibers in the air. An industrial accident at El Power, a Mexicali plant where batteries are made for use in the United States, prompted the par-

ent company in Santa Ana, California, to forbid me to visit the plant or to talk with employees.

Border assembly-plant boosters insist the program creates new jobs in the United States because of its unique export-import operation, but according to Sol Chaikin, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, for every American job created by the program, 19 are lost. Still, that is no particular deterrent from a corporate point of view. Convinced that Mexican labor is stable and that the country will keep its low minimum wage, more and more American businesses are relocating just south of the border.

"Oh, life," said Mr. Calloway in Laredo in Graham Greene's *Across the Bridge*. "That begins on the other side." And so we crossed over the bridge to find life. We drove down the main street of Nuevo Laredo searching for the Club Leones, the Lions Club. A traditional Mexican wedding was taking place there, grand and glorious in its celebration, colorful and noisy in its execution. The music could be heard blocks away. We had not exactly been invited, but some friends of ours had, and that made it all right. When we arrived, the huge hall was filled with some 500 celebrants in evening gowns and tuxedos, merrily drinking and dancing. On the stage a nine-piece band blared out enough of a melody to satisfy everyone's taste, from disco to waltz. At the head table sat the wedding party, almost obscured by the enormous wedding cake. My guide this evening was Joe Harmes, a local reporter whose carousing knows no end. "At Mexican weddings," he shouted over the din, "the number of people doesn't indicate the number of friends the bride and groom have as much as the number of relatives. The father of the bride is somber because of his investment in the reception. The mother is concerned about the old man's drunkenness. The groom's parents are usually the only ones at the head table having a good time. It's not like small village weddings where the in-laws get to eat the goat and the rest of the guests settle for what's left. Here, everything is on the bride's father." This was the



upper crust of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo, a social group as antiquated as it is accepted.

"It's like fifteenth-century England, the way people are aware of their class on the border. In Laredo, the high class doesn't recognize the low class. There is a middle class developing, but it is still very small. People are very aware of their place." Gary Payne was explaining the social structure of Laredo. Now in his early thirties, Payne is a former general manager of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce. Because of its geographic position as the main gateway between two countries, Laredo's commerce is inextricably tied to international trade. For generations, Laredo's politics and economy were ruled by one family, the Martins. The family's most recent leader, Pepe Martin, was Laredo's mayor and *patrón*. Virtually all jobs and funds had to be approved by him, and as a result, the Martin clan controlled law, order, society, elections, salaries and employment. The Martin regime was the last of those created by the *patrón* families along the border in the Rio Grande Valley, and it collapsed in 1978 when Pepe Martin was convicted of a mail-fraud charge. By coincidence, that happened not long after the Sanchez family, longtime working-class citizens, struck it rich with oil. The Sanchezes had been in the typewriter repair business and owned some oil leases as speculation. When they struck oil, they became a power in Laredo to rival the Martins, investing their newfound wealth in banks and a newspaper.

"You could live here for twenty years and you'd still be considered an outsider," Gary Payne continued. "The social consciousness is very acute here on the border. The Sanchez family is one of the few families that has gone from one class to the

One land, two cultures: the "Mexican" scene is indeed Mexican, an old plaza in Juárez where illegals often gather to plan their crossing. The "American" scene is also Mexican—a main street in Tijuana.

BOLEA



One land, two nations: in this El Paso street scene, the country is the United States, but the people are Mexicans and Mexican-Americans

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other. Years back, Tony Sanchez, Jr., wanted to marry one of the Martin girls, and that just couldn't happen because of the class system here. That's one of the reasons the Sanchezes set up the *Laredo News*—so they could get back at the Martins. There were a lot of hard feelings over that."

As the crowd filtered out of the Club Leones, Joe insisted that I come with him to Boys Town, Nuevo Laredo's fabled red-light district. Every border town has its brothels, but these were reputed to be among the best. Joe hadn't been there in weeks and was anxious to return. He insisted that it was not

were parked Cadillacs, pickups, Volkswagens, Winnebagos and a horse.

The inside resembled a downtown bar in any major city. Around the outer edge of the oblong club were booths and tables for groups of from two to eight. In the center was a raised dance floor on which no one ever danced. A jukebox played "Macho Man" relentlessly. At the far end was the bar itself. Waiters scurried about, filling orders for drinks, and prostitutes eyed prospective customers. They were decked out in every conceivable fashion, to appeal to a wide variety of tastes. Some were in little-girl clothes, others in peekaboo outfits. Their ages ranged from 17 to 45. Most had come to the border from

from the University of Texas, as well as a playground for state legislators. The evening I went, the men were oil hands, truckers, salesmen, ranchers, cops, students and hunters. The women slowly paraded around the room, eyeing the men, looking for likely prospects, waiting for an eye or hand to signal interest. They would come over to the tables and make small talk in halting English while caressing their targets.

It took on an air of innocence, a male fantasy playground where men were free to ignore come-ons. Crossing the border meant checking your inhibitions at the bridge. You might be a churchgoing, faithfully married man in the United States, but over here you were free to fondle or disregard the *putas*, all the while laughing and drinking with your buddies; you could grope and paw and make a fool of yourself and no one would say a word about it. Your reputation would remain intact.

Quite clearly, too, the women were not here to be sensitive or stimulating. The fact that they were foreign and spoke another language made them all the more enticing. If you did want a temporary liaison, your woman would take you by the arm and parade you by the rest of the crowd to the bar, where you paid \$23. The prostitute kept \$20; the other \$3 went to the management for use of the room. You headed out a back door to a promenade of rooms along a courtyard. After watching this ritual for a while, it became obvious: the biggest attraction was not sexual at all. It was psychological. No man is ever rejected in Boys Town.

From the back streets of Nuevo Laredo, it is more than a thousand miles along the border to the Papago Indian Reservation, the second largest in the United States. The Papago lived west of what is now Tucson long before the area was divided between Mexico and the United States. Their land is all sagebrush and mesquite, cactus and scrub. Their homes, their food and their lives reflect that they are people of the desert. Along with the Pima Indians, the Papago enjoyed the desert expanse unmolested for years before the Gadsden Purchase made some of



sexual indulgence that he wanted; he just loved the ambience.

The *zona de tolerancia*, as it is sometimes called, was situated on the outskirts of town, down some treacherous dirt roads. It was a walled-in compound consisting of five streets with some 25 bars, each with its own full-time staff of prostitutes. Each prostitute was licensed by the city and received a weekly gynecological checkup at a clinic—also located in Boys Town. The compound even had its own police force. Joe's favorite place was the Marabú Club, one of the classier establishments in the *zona*. Outside

Blending the two cultures: a sombrero passes an Arizona Safeway; a saint on a window shelf in Tijuana seems to dance on John Travolta's poster legs.

the interior to make money and found this the quickest and most convenient way to do so.

Almost all of the men at the Marabú were from the United States. Over the years, Nuevo Laredo's Boys Town has earned a reputation as a place for fraternity boys



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them Americans and some of them Mexicans.

Today the Papago jealously protect their desert turf. Where the boundary officially separates the two countries, the Papago from Sonora and the Papago from Arizona pass freely with no documents. Crossing the line can be as simple as walking sideways through a slit in the fence, and in some places there are openings wide enough to allow footloose Papago access by horse and car to their neighbors on the other side. The 75 miles of border that cuts through Papaguería, as the land is called, is not so much an international boundary as a fence to keep Mexican cattle separate from U.S. cattle. South of the fence are Papago villages such as Pozo Verde and S'gogogsig (Many Dogs). If the Mexican Papago need medical care or schooling, Papago on the U.S. side offer it. The Mexican Papago get their mail from the United States and often will use the address of tribal kinfolk north of the cattle fence when registering for welfare benefits in Arizona. The Mexican government delivers tanks of water to "its" Papago but other than that offers no services.

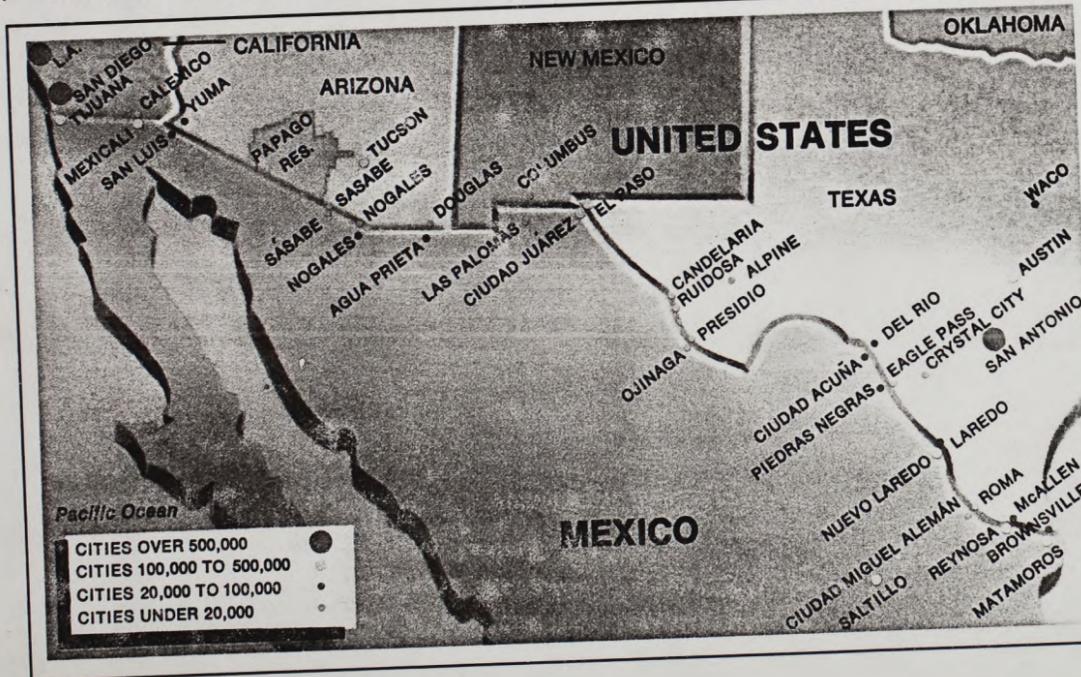
North of the cattle fence the

nearest villages are Newfields and San Miguel. Daniel Juan, a Papago in his fifties, lives in Newfields and rides his horse over to the weekly gathering at the border crossing. Right at the fence young Papago gather in the midday heat, strumming their guitars, singing *ranchero* songs in Spanish and country music in English. Fifty yards south of the fence, a few Mexican merchants who have driven the dirt roads over from nearby Sásabe sell their wares from the backs of their trucks. It is the most primitive shopping center on the border. Daniel Juan looks over the day's selection: squash, tortillas, fruit, peppers, cheese, lard, candy, flour and alcohol. Always alcohol. By tribal law the Papago may not buy or consume alcoholic beverages on the reservation. But here they are not technically on the reservation, so they can buy and drink as much as they want. It is, in reality, bootlegging, although no one calls it that. Daniel decides not to purchase anything and stays the afternoon to chat with his neighbors. "I like to live here." He smiles. "I like to be free."

The U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service find the 4,375-square-mile Papago reservation a headache. In recent years it has become a staging ground for smuggling undocumented Mexicans and tons of marijuana into

the United States. The authorities want to stop the smuggling, but the presence of uniformed officers on the reservation brings understandable animosity. In a compromise of sorts, the law enforcement agencies have agreed to limit patrols of the area, and the Papago have made the strip of land nearest the border off limits to non-Indians. So far, the tribe has held to its part of the agreement more than the law enforcement agencies.

What those who live far from the borderlands consider illegal or immoral, those who live there accept and encourage. Smuggling is a most acceptable form of employment. In the minds of border denizens, it is simply the most efficient way to transport a product from one side of town to the other. On the border, the shortest distance between two points is a smuggler. Appliances and weapons go south, humans and drugs come north. Those are the contraband items most commonly associated with border smuggling. In one remote stretch of the Texas frontier between El Paso and Del Rio, however, the chief contraband item is wax. *Candelilla* it is called, a special high-quality substance used the world over in waterproofing and cosmetics, for floor wax and in chewing gum (it puts the "chew" in the



The borderland twins Mexican and U.S. cities

The principle of one land, two countries is demonstrated in the way people settle along the 1,933 miles of border: pairs of towns that constitute single population centers, or single settlements divided by the border. Some share the same name, like Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico. Sometimes a Hispanic name has immigrated north, like El Paso, whose twin is Juárez. But no Yankee town has given its name to a twin city south of the border.

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Blending the two economies: union workers pick lettuce in California; a Mexican woman makes \$7 a day plus piecework for a nine-and-a-half-hour day at the U.S.-owned Olga factory in Mexicali, Mexico.



gum). The only place in the world where candelilla is harvested is in the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua and Coahuila. (It used to be harvested across the border in Texas, as well, but that ended years ago.) Because the harvesting and processing of candelilla is controlled by the Mexican government, and because there is a high demand for it among U.S. industries, *candeleros*, as the candelilla workers are called, bootleg excess wax to Americans. The entire affair, from harvesting and processing to smuggling and marketing, remains a primitive example of borderland economics at its most efficient.

Catarino and Adolfo have been in the candelilla trade all their lives, as were their fathers and their grandfathers before them. They both live at Vado de Piedra, an *ejido* upriver on the Rio Grande from Ojinaga. An *ejido* is land commonly held by a group of peasants who collectively harvest the crop or tend the sheep or do whatever the land is used for. They share in whatever profits there

are, though the income is usually subsistence-level, and have their own internal form of government. This particular *ejido*, one of a series along the Rio Bravo, as the Rio Grande is called in Mexico, is over 40,000 acres in size. Santiago, a man in his fifties, took us out to see Catarino and Adolfo. We drove over the most desolate backcountry I had yet encountered on the border, down arroyos where there were no outlets, roads where there were no roads. When we reached Catarino and Adolfo at the wax camp, we saw they traveled on horse and burro. Candelilla is a shrub that grows in pencil-thin stems anywhere from one

to four feet in length. When it is harvested, it is taken by burro to a pile at the wax camp. The heart of the operation is a huge vat atop a dugout fireplace. The vat, about five feet across, is filled with water, and the candelilla is dumped into it. A fire is started beneath the vat, and after the water starts to boil, more and more candelilla is pitchforked into the vat. When the water is at full boil, a can of sulfuric acid is poured into the cauldron, producing a loud hissing noise. The sulfuric acid starts a chemical process that loosens the waxy outer skin of the candelilla and allows it to rise to the surface. A large, ladlelike spoon with drainage holes in it is used to skim off the yellow wax from the top of the boiling vat and place it in an oil drum next to the stove. The remains of the shrub are dried for a week and then used to feed the fire beneath a boiling cauldron of fresh candelilla.

Catarino, who is 17, and Adolfo, two years younger, carry out this process every day from dawn to dusk. There is very little relief from the work, made all the worse because they toil next to a fire under a burning-hot sun. The cycle of boiling down the candelilla and skimming it out, which takes one hour, is repeated all day. They cook lunch over a small campfire beneath a nearby shelter, which like almost everything else in the area is made of candelilla. Even the burros eat the weed. Although they are only a half-mile from the Rio Bravo, neither Catarino nor Adolfo has been to the United States. Adolfo says he's heard stories about it.

There seemed to be little pleasure in the work for the two boys. But when the shrub was crammed into the boiling vat, Adolfo jumped to the top of the pile to stomp it down. Then he and Catarino mounted two metal grills placed directly above the boiling cauldron. At first they jumped and stomped on the grills to push the shrub into the boiling water beneath them, but after a short while the two started doing a sort of jig on the grates. Each moved in time with the other, neither one talking or smiling. It was a strange ritual these two

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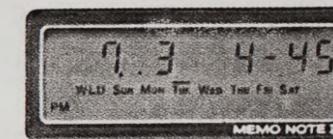
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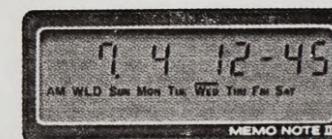
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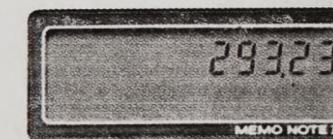
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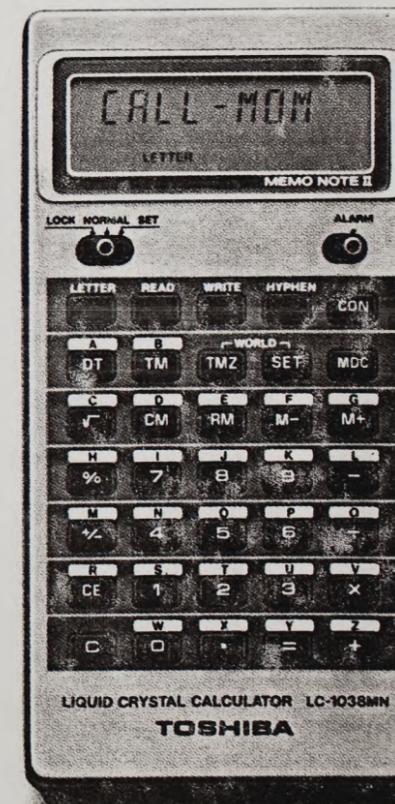
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ON THE BORDER

engaged in, as if dancing for the heavens. It was the dance of the candelero.

The borderland's economics hinges in this case on the quota of wax that the Mexican government allows each ejido to harvest. The wax is theoretically only for use in Mexico or for sale elsewhere by the Mexican government. But people know that if they produce more than their quota, they can smuggle the excess across the border to American buyers. In the 1940s and 1950s, the ejido people sold so much wax across the border that it ate into the Mexican government's exports, so the government sent "game wardens" to stop the contraband trade. Sometimes they shot it out with the ejido people, and sometimes the conflicts were resolved more amicably, by *mordida*, or small bribery.

After wax brokers in the United States won legal permission to buy candelilla harvested outside the country, wax wholesalers along the border developed strings of independent "agents." The agents bought wax from middlemen who bought it from ejido people who hauled it across the border. Thus, the broker kept his hands clean while still profiting from the smuggling.

Today, however, the profits from this particular bit of borderland economics are smaller. Only two people in this part of the country still buy wax from the Mexicans. One agent told me, "The people who buy the wax deliver it to me, and I store it until I have ten thousand pounds. Then I deliver it to Casner in Alpine, and he refines it out back of his office there." Casner is Jim Casner, the best known of the wax brokers, a man approaching 90 years of age.

The problem, Casner's agent said, is that some Mexicans "can register for food stamps on this side now, and there's a church up in Ruidosa that gives them secondhand clothes. Besides, the Mexicans get more from their own government for the wax now than they do from us. So why should they bother to bring it across? It takes me months to get ten thousand pounds now. In the old days I'd make the trip every week. It's not like it used to be."

At Vado de Piedra, where Adolfo and Catarino work, the candelilla

The border divides the more developed from the less. In this case, unexpectedly, the more developed is Tijuana, Mexico, and the less is San Ysidro, California.



quota is 800 kilograms a month. The ejido gets just under a dollar per kilo from the Mexican government, after social security is taken out—but nothing for any wax over the 800-kilo quota. So the excess wax goes across the border. Casner's agent pays about \$1.10 a kilo to his American middleman, but the middleman pays the ejido people who carry it across the river only a little over four cents a kilo. That means that for every 10,000 pounds of contraband candelilla wax smuggled, the American middleman receives \$5,000 and pays the Mexicans \$200. It should, after all, come as no surprise that the hardest-working people in the candelilla cycle—and the ones who take the most risk—profit the least.

What is most intriguing about the border is that, with all its sins and sinners, it works. Each side wants something from the other and is willing to give a little to get some more. Despite the controversies about illegal immigration, smuggling, *mordida* and rank corruption, the borderland has the capacity to make the most of the realities with which it lives. Repulsive to some, it serves as a magnet to others. It is a piece of the world unique for its character, where conflicting cultures bring out a charm seen nowhere else. This point was driven home to me in Coyame, a *pueblito* west of Ojinaga, when I wanted to make a long-distance telephone call. A man in a highway café pointed out where the *larga distancia* office was located, and I set off to make my call. As it turned out, the office was in somebody's house, so I asked a neighbor if the operator, a man known throughout the town, was home.

"Oh, no," he said. "He's away."

"I should make the call fairly soon," I said, checking the time. "When do you think he will return?"

"I don't know," came the response. "Probably in a couple of years. He went to the United States to work."

Tom Miller is the author of *On The Border*, to be published by Harper & Row next spring, 1981. Alex Webb, a Magnum photographer based in New York, frequently covers the American South and the Caribbean.

"Two words...proper nouns...meaning superb...hmmm..."

REMY MARTIN
COGNAC
FINE CHAMPAGNE

ACROSS

10 City (repeated)
11 Character of expression
12 Stereotyping device
13 Waterproofing for footwear
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COGNAC
FINE CHAMPAGNE

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