

Alicia Richardson, "Boarding Crossing Experiences," December 14, 1998

Imagine standing with your arms raised above your head. There are people packed in front of you, behind you, next to you. The sweat is pouring from your body both from fear and from the tight quarters. You can't breathe. You are standing behind the false wall in a RV. There is very little air and no light. People are nearly fainting around you. They are panicking to the point that they are threatening to get out, but if they do you will all be found out and sent back. Your friends are calling out to you to make sure that you are still conscience. You will yourself to answer back, but nothing comes out. You pray that you will be able to hold on for just a little bit longer. You wait... You arrive at your destination. You are released from your hiding place. You are tired. You can't see, because you have been in the darkness for so long. You are gasping for breath and you can't put your arms down because they have been raised above you head for what seems like an eternity. Your legs shake beneath you, but you can't stop to catch your breath, the journey has just begun. You have made it across the border now you must somehow become a part of society.

This is the true story of a 40 year old Mexican woman and her experience crossing the border. This story is not unlike many that are told of crossing the United States-Mexico border. Rarely is it an easy journey or one that is fulfilling, but it is one that is fought relentlessly by thousands everyday. Many cross and are caught, but turn around and try again, and again. They risk their lives for a piece of the pie and a better life. They are willing to pay thousands of dollars, swim across the Rio Grande, or walk through the mountains for days on end, knowing full well that they may die in the process. They wait all day on the ridge of the border for night to fall so that they might have the aid of the darkness to hide them from the border patrol. They sleep in bushes, along the road, or wherever they might find a place to rest and wait. They may walk for days not eating, not sleeping, not knowing where they will end up. Miles and miles of nothingness, that will hopefully lead to a chance for a better life at the other end.

Why do they make such a journey, risking all that they have to come to a place that was once their's and was once freely accessible? Why do they come to work in menial jobs for little pay that no one in the U.S. is willing to do under the same conditions or for the same wage? One of the main reasons that they come here is for financial gain. "Half of the Mexican people are unemployed"(Anzaldua 10). The other half that are employed may hold jobs that would be considered to be upstanding such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. These trained individuals are more likely to earn a higher salary in the U.S. picking apples or cleaning a house than if they were in Mexico practicing their specialized skills . "For the able-bodied, there is often work to be had; still, wages remain about one-eighth the amount paid across the mountains or desert to the North"(Salgado 1). The U.S. knows that this is the case, and because of their poor state in their own country, Mexicans are a willingly cheap labor force to be acquired in this country. The U.S. feeds off of the necessity of others to better itself. The Mexicans have been brought here because of the "demand for cheap labor in the United States" (Samora 9). When the demand for such labor is high, they are encouraged to come, and when the demand is low they are ordered to return to Mexico and restricted from coming here. " The United States agriculture and agribusiness owes its success to two well known factors: the exploitation of cheap labor and government subsidies" (Samora 9).

In order to begin to comprehend the situation that exists along the border, it is important to first look at the history of the U.S-Mexico border. In doing so, it is possible to gain an understanding of why the border was set up in the first place. According to Gloria Anzaldua, "Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge... [and the area which surrounds it], a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (3). An imaginary line thousands of miles long separates "us", the Americans, from "them", the Mexicans.

The border region is labeled so only because there is an imaginary line separating two political entities, not because of any cultural, physical, geographical, or natural phenomena which make the territory distinctive and distinguishable.

The boundary line begins at the Pacific Ocean about fifteen miles south of San Diego and extends beyond Brownsville, Texas to the Gulf of Mexico.

Between the Pacific Ocean and El Paso, Texas, the terrain on both sides of the line is largely harsh, rocky country or desert land. The boundary line between these two points crosses the states of California, Arizona, and New Mexico. With few exceptions (where water is available), agricultural, mining, and industrial endeavors along the border are all enterprises. The one exception is the agricultural development of the Imperial Valley on the California side of the

boundary. (Samora 13)

The history of the U.S./ Mexico border is long and arduous. The freedom to walk from one country to the other has been taken away, granted, restricted and taken away again many times over. "The [actual] border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo", but the border line was being established long before the treaty made it official (Anzaldua 7). From the time that the explorers first set foot on U.S. soil, they have done everything in their power to push the existing populations out. The U.S. has also kept foreigners from entering by other means and continued to gain more land on which to settle, therefore increasing their wealth and power.

Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1823. At that time, the country of Mexico encompassed the land that is now known as Mexico along with the land that is now the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. It did not take long before foreigners were trying to take over parts if not all of the land.

"Many U.S. elites argued for taking part or all of Mexico's territory. Numerous prominent U.S. politicians, driven by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, considered taking Mexican territory 'a divine right' " (Jardine 1). In its efforts to save its land, Mexico ended up losing it. By allowing a small number of people to colonize part of the territory, Mexico hoped that it would be kept out of the reach of foreign powers. Instead the colonizers, in their efforts to gain land and continue westward, ignored the stipulations that were seaside by the Mexican government when it allowed for colonization. While this was taking place, the U.S was continuing its goal of obtaining land from the east coast to the west coast, The Manifest Destiny. President Jackson sent men to

Mexico City to make an offer of 5 million dollars for the state of Texas, but he was turned down. It would take the "Texans"(those that had moved in and colonized the area) thirteen years to acquire Texas from Mexico and the U.S. another twelve years to complete the Manifest Destiny and annex Texas. "To accomplish all of these real-estate transactions the United States used a variety of methods, including an unjust war. The history of the period shows without question the blatant determination of the U.S. to acquire this territory"(Samora 16). The "Mexicans" (some 100,000 Mexican citizens) that were swallowed up in The Manifest Destiny and remained in the U.S. after the new territory was obtained were generally ignored and left to their own devices (Jardine 2).

We can only guess that [these now] Mexican-Americans who lived in other areas supplied the labor for the developing region and were left to form their own ghettos, which are still evident today in all major cities. With few exceptions every town and city in the Southwest has its Mexican-American section, suggesting a long established practice of segregation in housing, employment and education. (Samora 17)

Because of the U.S.'s laissez faire attitude along the border and towards the Mexicans themselves, many still crossed the border on a regular basis supplying a work force to the southern region of the U.S. While we have always maintained a somewhat "open border" policy there have been times that the border was governed more open than others.

... [T]he "open border" has existed from approximately 1849, when the boundary was created, until 1930. After the repatriation of the Mexicans following the Great Depression in the U.S., conditions dictated a tightening-up of border population movements. World War II, however, created a demand for foreign labor which was met by contractual agreements between Mexico and the U.S. This demand for cheap labor gave further impetus to the internal population movements from central Mexico to the border region.

In historical terms both Mexicans and Americans have moved freely across the border, Americans in search of entertainment, tourist attractions, and investment possibilities. Mexicans have moved north in search of goods, some tourism, but mainly for employment. (Samora 31)

The Mexicans were not the only power that the U.S. worried along its border. Just after and at the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904, border enforcements were increased in order to keep the Chinese from crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

As early as 1903 the Commissioner of Immigration recognized the need for guarding the United States-Mexican border... [This came] as a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882, primary border problem became the issue of the smuggling of Chinese rather than the entry of Mexicans... [It] was in the interest of excluding Chinese that the first efforts were made to establish a border guard. (Samora 34)

Beginning with the Mexican Revolution in 1910 until the start of World War I, the number of Mexicans crossing the border increased greatly. It was after the Revolution in Mexico that the first large influx of immigrants from Mexico entered the U.S. Due to this sudden increase of migrants into the U.S., concern arose about their intentions. The Dillingham Commission

("...[which] reported on immigration in the United States and made recommendations on the basis of its findings") was called in to do a study of this increasing population. Their findings stated that:

Because of their [Mexican's] strong attachment to their native land, low intelligence, illiteracy, migratory life, and the possibility of their residence here being discontinued, few become citizens of the United States... In so far as Mexican laborers come into contact with natives or with European immigrants they are looked upon as inferiors... Thus it is evident that in the case of the Mexican he is less desirable as a citizen than as a laborer. (qtd. in Samora 17)

The next large influx occurred in 1914 with the start of World War I. With the draft taking away a large portion of the U.S. labor force, the U.S. was experiencing a labor shortage and had to look outside for replacements. This labor force was in large part replenished by Mexicans. Once the war ended in 1919 and the men came home, there was no longer a need for a foreign labor force and so the U.S. sent the Mexicans back to Mexico.

In the aftermath of the destruction of World War I, there was widespread fear that huge numbers of immigrants from Europe might try to enter the U.S. extralegally. In 1921 the U.S. government passed the first quantitative immigration restrictions in U.S. history. The Immigration Act of 1924 strengthened these restrictions, but also unintended consequences--a rapid rise in the number of unauthorized European immigrants who entered the U.S. from Canada and Mexico, countries not subject to immigration quotas. As a result the U.S. Congress established the Border Patrol in 1924. (Jardine 3)

"When the 1924 National Origins Act greatly diminished immigration from Europe and other parts of the world, Mexico, again was the great supplier of labor"(Samora 18). In 1942, the Mexicans were once again encouraged to enter into the U.S. to replenish the labor force that was engaged in the Second World War. The difference was that this time, in an act to control the amount of illegal immigration, the U.S. government created the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was looked at as a way to "dry out the wetbacks" and supply the U.S. with a temporary labor force during the war. From 1942-1964 when the program ended 4 million braceros were brought to the U.S. to work. "At its height, it employed over 400,000 workers annually, mostly in agriculture"(Jardine 2). It was during that height that on June 9, 1954 the Attorney General announced that Operation Wetback would occur on the 17th. Operation Wetback was a plan devised to rid southern California and western Arizona of Awetbacks.@ The plan included the use of 800 Border Patrol officers which began in El Centro and Chula Vista in California. They began by going around and securing an area and then rounding up all of the wetbacks they could find and sending them back to Mexico. "The peak in apprehensions was reached during the first week of operations when a daily average of 1,727 illegal aliens were apprehended"(Samora 52). The apprehension process continued throughout the U.S.

The Bracero Program, which was implemented to help control the illegal migration of Mexicans over the border, ended up having adverse effects. Farmers actually encouraged illegal immigrants to come because then they would not have to go through all of the red tape of applying for Braceros. With an increase in illegal workers, even those farmers that wanted to use the Bracero Program had to hire illegal migrants to stay competitive (Samora 45). This continued

until 1964 when the U.S. Congress officially ended the program and the previously legal migratory flow simply went underground. The U.S. would have liked to believe that with the termination of the Bracero Program the activity along the border would once again regulate itself. The government did not account for the fact that so many of these migrants had gained some permanence in the U.S. and others were proceeding to cross the border at increasing rates.

As the 1970's approached, and the level of unauthorized immigration from Mexico grew, calls to enhance enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico boundary increased significantly (Jardine 2). The attitudes which called for these actions continued throughout the eighties and into the nineties. The latest tactic to regulate illegal migration began in 1994. INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) launched "Operation Gatekeeper" as a strategic plan to reduce unauthorized or illegal crossing by migrants across the U.S.-Mexico boundary in the area of San Diego. The idea behind "Operation Gatekeeper" is to direct the illegal traffic over more rugged terrain and through more populated areas in order to defer more crossers as well as make those that do attempt to cross easier to capture. This most recent action appears to be just a pacifier for those U.S. citizens who want to see action being taken along the border. "Operation Gatekeeper's most important accomplishment thus far has been to make unauthorized migrants less visible, giving the appearance of a border region under greater control"(Jardine 4).

What does it take to come to the U.S.? In this hypothetical situation presented by Julian Samora in *Los Mojados*, it is possible to gain some insight into the process of coming to the United States from Mexico.

One day a young man decides the time has come to leave his village. He has heard the stories of others' experiences. He recognizes the hardship-yet, he has no job, his parents or his wife and children must be taken care of, or perhaps he wants to get married. His choice, since there is no work in the village, is either to move to the city-Guadalajara or Mexico City-or to move to the northern border.

In the interior of Mexico it is said that much work is available in the U.S. Everyone knows that the braceros made out well, and although the Bracero Program no longer exists, U.S. employers are eager for good laborers and almost anyone can get work if he can cross the border. There are a few technicalities involved however: One must get an immigrant visa if he is to work in the U.S. and perhaps live in Mexico; or one must get a border crossing permit in order to cross the bridges; or one may sneak across the border, taking the chance of getting caught. None of these methods are without problems, and they all cost money.

Unless the young man lives in the border area, he will face, at some point in his decision making process, the problem of cost of the trip to the U.S. In order to get the money for the trip he might sell a piece of land or a cow, or he might leave something valuable as collateral for a loan. In the latter case, he will have to pay a monthly interest rate of 10 to 15 percent on the amount borrowed.

If he gets the money for the trip, he may look for a local agent or just an informant who will put him in contact with a *pasador*. Arrangements will be made for the *pasador* to meet him at some Mexican border town. Depending on the formality of the deal with the local agent or informant,

the would-be alien will probably pay for this first service (usually a small fee from ten pesos to a hundred pesos). Or he may be charged a part of the total price agreed upon for smuggling him to the U.S. The local agent will give him an address, usually of a hotel in a Mexican border town where he will be contacted by the *pasador*.

If the would be alien is lucky enough to have friends or relatives in the U.S., he might obtain a tourist visa in any U.S. consulate and fly to some point in the U.S., preferably a place removed from the border area, where he will pass as a tourist. If he arouses suspicion by his appearance, he might be requested to exhibit money that he will spend while visiting the U.S. After passing the immigration inspection he will be welcomed by his friend or relative, who will get a job for him someplace in Los Angeles or Chicago. In this case, he will have legally entered the U.S., but will become illegal, that is a wetback, as soon as he begins to work. If the young man has no contacts either on the Mexican border or in the U.S., he may go to the border city on his own and begin walking around the main square (*plaza principal*) or along the river in search of *pasadores* or *enganchadores*, who will smuggle him to the U.S. and perhaps arrange a job for him. He might go to a bar and find someone selling false documents to use in crossing the border. Or he may try to find someone who will help him apply for a "green card."

The cost of the trip varies according to the place of departure and the destination.

If the Mexican lives in central Mexico—for example Guanajuato—he will need as much as 1,500 pesos (120 U.S. dollars). He will spend most of the money in the U.S. while looking for a job and the rest will go to the smuggler who will charge him for a "safe" crossing of the border. But, if the alien in Guanajuato and wants to go as far as Chicago he will need 320 U.S. dollars for expenses for the journey.

If the would-be cannot raise the money for the trip to the U.S., he will hitchhike to the Mexican bordertown and keep alert for those groups who are talking about crossing illegally (*"de mojados"*). There is no reason to talk secretly about crossing, since there is no apparent concern on the part of Mexican authorities to prevent the illegal crossing. It will be relatively easy to find those groups planning the crossing that night. Once together they will all follow the person who claims to know the best place for crossing, based on past experience.

The illegal crossing made with the aid of a smuggler otherwise usually takes place during the night, not only because it is easier to hide, but because there must be plenty of time to look for a job once in the U.S. or else to advance as far as possible from the border, going northward, in order to avoid the zone in which the border patrol is more active...

If a Mexican enters for the first time as a wetback and does not have contacts in the U.S., it is likely that they will look for a job in agriculture. The reasons for this seem to be that (1) the majority of wetbacks come from rural areas in Mexico, and therefore agriculture is what they know; (2) agriculture in the U.S. border area seems to be a place where a certain amount of socialization takes place, particularly in such things as how to behave and what places and circumstances to avoid if one wants to get away from the Border Patrol. In short, agriculture seems to be the place where newcomer learns about the unwritten code of wetback behavior (Samora 72-75).

Even for all of the struggle and the hassles that are faced they still attempt to cross the border. They risk their lives for a chance to better themselves or help out their families, yet everyday the headlines read, *Six Migrants killed while Sleeping on the train tracks*. Fearing the rattlesnakes and following old folklore that states that the rattlers don't come near train tracks, six Mexican men found a resting place which would be their last. Too weary from their travels, they did not hear warning whistles of the on-coming train. They never made it to their destination nor like many others will they go home. Unidentifiable is the state of most of the bodies by the time they are found, and so the family waits back home for any word from their loved ones not knowing if they will ever see them again. Other headlines read, *Hitting The Road In Search of Work, Mexicans risk death in a desperate quest for paying jobs in U.S.*

Two brothers on their way to join their father and another brother, who were working in a pizza shop in Tennessee, died of asphyxiation while hiding in the trunk of a car. They were on their way to Tennessee at the pizza shop to make enough money to go back home and build their own house and help support their family. According to a study done by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: Studying the Human toll of immigration, between the years of 1993 and 1996 there were roughly 300 deaths per year among migrants.

Many of the dead are young men who drowned in the Rio Grande or its canals, their shoes tied to their belts. Others were hit by cars or died of dehydration or cold. Their bodies were found, but their names sometimes were lost forever. The tally is by no means complete, says Dr. Rodriquez, an associate professor of sociology. Among those missing from the records are some "floaters," as local residents call them, whose bodies drift out to the gulf of Mexico. Others die alone in the desert or the mountains."(Cordes 1)

September 4, 1998. Juan began his journey to the United States. He was

twenty-one years old and attempting to cross for the first time. His father who is in

Pennsylvania was working at an orchard awaiting the arrival of his son not knowing if he

will ever see him. Juan paid a coyote \$1,400 and joined a group that was to be led across

the border safely and undetected, or so they had thought. What they came to realize a

short distance into their journey was that they had been set up. They were the decoy for

another group, and so they were sent out first in order to get caught thus distracting the

border patrol and the another group passed by undetected. Juan says that they were hiding along an embankment when a border patrol officer came down over the hill to go to the bathroom and spotted them; he apologized and said that he was not looking for them, but because he had spotted them he would have to take them in. Juan's group is taken to a prison in Texas where he says the prison was very clean, they were fed and kept there until enough people had been caught to fill a bus to be sent back to Mexico. Once he was back in Mexico he waited a few hours and then tried again. That time they made it a little farther, but their glowing green bodies were

spotted by the Border Patrol through their night vision as Juan and his group crept through the night. Juan would later be told by one of the officers that if he covered his body with mud he could pass by the night vision scope undetected. Once again he was sent back to the detention center and upon entering the facility was recognized for having been there before. Again they waited for enough people and then were sent back to Mexico. This time Juan called his father who told him to go to another city, which he claimed was only a few hours away, but was actually a few days away, and there he would be able to cross much easier. Juan made a few more attempts before he was finally successful. He walked through the desert for three days lost without sleeping or eating and finally found the Border Patrol so that he could be taken back and try again. He spent hours laying in the bed of a truck face down with a rather large man on top of him and others packed all around. He swam the Rio Grande with his clothes held above his head and saw and experienced things that most men his age will never know. On his last attempt to cross the border, Juan finally made it. This time he was lucky enough to be in the group that was sent second, and so the first group was sent out, they got caught and Juan's group was able to get past the border patrol and into the U.S. undetected. When they arrived they were given plane tickets and all they were told was that when their flight was called to get on the plane. Not understanding English, they didn't realize that women, children, first class and anyone needing assistance are called first and so they got on the plane and sat down, in first class. Juan said that they spread out so that they wouldn't be obvious. He said that after he sat down a woman and a man sat on either side of him. He was reading the material that they placed in the seat for you so that he would look inconspicuous. When the man sitting next to him began to ask him questions, Juan just nodded his head and answered yes to all the questions as if he understood. After a short time the stewardess came up to them and asked them to come with her. They assumed at that point that they had been discovered and were going to get shipped back once again, but as it turns out she was only moving them to their correct seats. They sat down with much relief and finally after two months of trying Juan arrived in Pennsylvania, on November 4, 1998. He has now joined his father, and they headed down to Florida to pick oranges and grapefruit.

The United States has taken the freedom of so many people in the name of power; the Mexicans are no exception. By taking and giving freedoms at will, the U.S. has caused an unstable environment along its southern border. As immigration has increased, so has the severity of the law. More walls have been built up and the Mexicans have been forced to find alternative routes, often at the expense of their own lives.

The Songs of The Immigrants

Que se vayan pare alla

Por que alla les tiene todo

Que no van a batallar

Pero son puras mentiras

Los que vienen y les dicen

Cuando ya estamos alla
Empiezan a reganarnos
Y luego les respondemos
"Nosotros nos regresamos
Porque alla en San Antonio
Nosotros solo gozamos
El 18 de febrero
Ah que die tan senalado!"
Cuando llegamos a Houston
No hallabamos ni que hacer
El tiempo estaba muy duro
No se queria componer.
Cuando llegamos a Houston
Trabajando noche y dia
No nos daban de comer
No mas que pure sandia
Al pasar del estado de Texas
A los dos de la manana
Le pregunte al enganchista
Que si ibamos a Louisiana
Llegamos a Kansas City
Gritaba Juan "El Coyote"
Con su sombrero de lado,

Yo no volvere a Kansas

A Trabajarle al condado

Gritaba Juan "El Coyote"

Con esa boca de infierno:

Yo no volvere a Kansas

A trabajarle al gobierno.

Despedida no la doy

Porque no la traigo aqui

La deje en el estado de Texas

Para que se acuerden de mi.

-Houston, Texas

That you ought to go up there

Because there you will have

everything

Without it to fight for it.

But these are nothing but lies,

And those who come and say

those things are liars

When we get there

They begin to scold us,

And then we say to them:

'We are going back

Because there in San Antonio

We just enjoyed ourselves.
The 18th of February,
Oh, what a day to remember!
When we arrived at Houston
We didn't find anything to do.
The times were very hard,
And didn't want to seem to get
better.
When we arrived at Houston,
Working night and day,
They didn't give us anything
to eat,
Nothing more than just water-
melon
On leaving the state of Texas
At two in the morning
I asked the boss contractor
If we were going to Louisiana
We arrived at Kansas City.
Juan, 'E1 coyote,' yelled out,
With his hat on one side,
'I will not go back to Kansas
To work for the country.'

Juan, 'El Coyote,' yelled out
With that mouth of hell,
'I will not go back to Kansas
To work for the government.
I shall not sing my farewell
Because I do not have it with
me;
I left it in the state of Texas
To make them remember me"
-Houston, Texas

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