

THE RIBBON

Years before 9/11, southwestern ranchers were already fighting their own war.

Words and photos by Tim Findley. Map by John Bardwell.

Night again in the Naco Corridor. The dome of stars seems to grow more intense as clear, cold skies suck the day's heat from the desert. On the far flat horizon of the San Simon Valley, a light-orange cloud appears and then fades, followed by the trailing sound of a muffled "puff." Someone has fired a flare that will cause intruders to suddenly freeze where they are, hoping to blend in with the thin surrounding fingers of hip-high mesquite.

In a turnout off Highway 90, Roger Barnett and his wife, Barbara, sit in their darkened pickup illuminated by the pale-blue screen of a flat TV monitor. A thermal-imaging camera mounted on the truck scans and focuses on targets up to seven miles away. On the screen, a walking group looks like a single-file line of ghosts, the heat of their bodies showing up nearly white against the cold dark trail. They are bent with the load of bundles on their backs. At least two appear to be carrying rifles.

In their own white-and-green striped trucks, Border Patrol agents wait in concealed dry washes or tucked up tight to the brush in the tan powder of dirt roads. They watch for a series of flickers that will tell them a group is triggering hidden seismic sensors in areas known to be favored by the "Coyotes." Elsewhere, an iron derrick of sorts fixed to a concrete foundation holds a strange box some 10 or 15 feet in the air. It opens to an eye penetrating the darkness in an infrared stare.

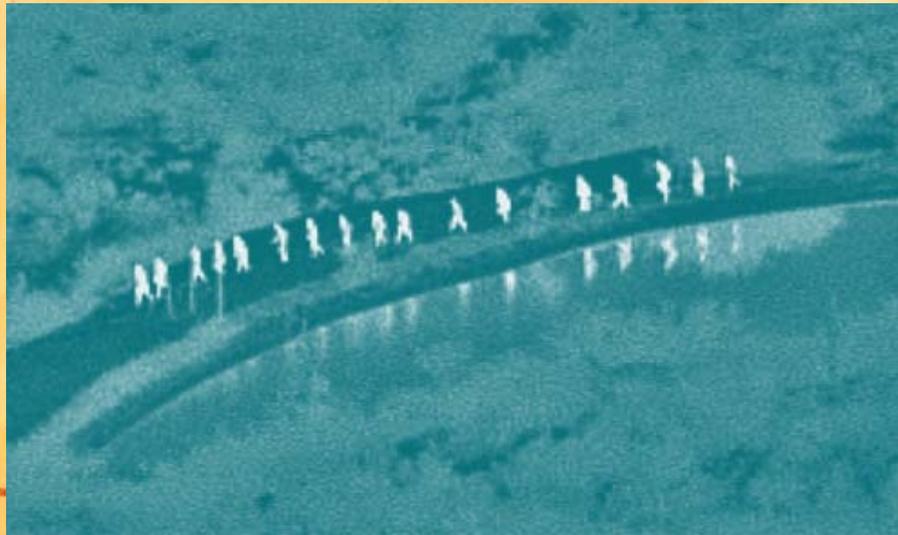
At the snugly remodeled ranch home she and Murray built in a bosom of the Pelo Nullo Mountains, Judy Keeler decides to lock the back door for the night. Only a few years ago, she didn't even know they had keys, and most nights she is still reluctant to lock herself out of the wild open country she loves. But some nights...

The Keelers live in what former Border Control supervisor David Stoddard calls "the Ribbon." It is the stretch of U.S. territory running for some 2,000 miles along the border between San Diego and Brownsville, Texas. Broken only by pockets of towns and cities often lined with border walls, the Ribbon is a wild place apart from law. It is the first stretch of U.S. territory that *cruceros*, as they are called in Mexico, must cover to reach cars or other vehicles promised to rendezvous with them at some secluded spot on a U.S. highway. In the most closely watched parts, the Ribbon may be only yards wide in a dash from the walls along border towns. But for hundreds of miles beyond cut and crushed cattle fences that mark most of the border, the Ribbon is 50 or more miles wide through an unrelenting mountain desert thick with

thorny brush, deadly snakes, and mind-warping variations of temperature in an already dry region that is now in its fourth year of drought.

Much of this is the Naco Corridor, running for some 400 miles across Arizona and New Mexico between Nogales, Ariz., and El Paso, Texas. In this intensely wild stretch, law is no better than custom and help is almost always a stranger.

Despite its natural dangers, *cruceros* have a better chance there of avoiding the Border Patrol and others who watch for them nearer the highways. Even if they are caught, neither the Border Patrol nor the aroused gringos on the U.S. side will harm them. For most of them, the worst that might happen is that they will be taken back to the Mexican border and released. They have promised a Coyote



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The Ribbon is perhaps the deadliest international boundary in the world. More bodies are found there each year than the total number known to have died trying to cross the Berlin Wall. In just the last seven years, the Border Patrol has found more than 2,000 dead, one for every mile of the border. Many of the finds have been only animal-strewn remains of the dead left there by the "coyotes." No one knows how many more might simply have vanished. Yet they keep coming, in numbers more incredible than ever.

El Paso

San Antonio

Brownsville

\$1,500 or more to guide them through the wilderness. But if they become lost or if, as happens too often, their Coyote is a thief who abandons them, the desert itself may kill them.

The Ribbon in general is perhaps the deadliest international boundary in the world. More bodies are found there each year than the total number known to have died trying to cross the Berlin Wall. In just the last seven years, the Border Patrol has found more than 2,000 dead, one for every mile of the border. Many of the finds have been only animal-strewn remains of the dead left there by the human Coyotes. No one knows how many more might simply have vanished.

Yet they keep coming, in numbers more incredible than ever. Most of them are young men, under 30 years old. Surprising numbers of them are pregnant women, hoping to bear an "anchor baby" that will be granted U.S. citizenship. More and more are smugglers, by choice or by necessity, carrying heavy burlap bundles of marijuana and other drugs on their backs. These are guarded, and watched, by pairs of "Madrinas," or cartel thugs, carrying AK-47 or SKS automatic rifles.

On an average night, the Border Patrol might intercept 200 or more in the Naco Corridor alone, often along with hundreds of pounds of quickly dumped drug cargoes. But federal authorities acknowledge that they probably only catch a third of those running the border. The rest will blend into the subculture of 12- to 20-million illegal aliens estimated to be living in the United States. It is a staggering figure, equivalent to more than the entire population of Mexico City or Los Angeles.

Demographers have concluded that 61 percent of U.S. population growth since 1990 has been due to immigrants and their children, at least a third of them illegal. The foreign-born population of the United States is estimated at over 32 million, more than a 57-percent increase since 1990. Population scientists, basing their estimates on only eight million illegals in that number, estimate that the U.S. population in 2050 will be over 400

million, with crushing effect on the density of coastal cities especially.

You don't have to live in the Ribbon to understand it, but if you do, it's easy to feel the agonized frustration of trying to sound some alarm.

"It's a passive invasion," says Rob Krentz, a rugged, friendly man whose family has ranches almost at the center of the Naco Corridor for a century. "Don't get us wrong, we're 'campos' [fellow farmers]. We understand



In the most closely watched parts, the Ribbon may be only yards wide in a dash from the walls along border towns. But for hundreds of miles beyond cut and crushed cattle fences that mark most of the border, the Ribbon is 50 or more miles wide through an unrelenting mountain desert thick with thorny brush, deadly snakes, and mind-warping variations of temperature in an already dry region that is now in its fourth year of drought. Much of this is the Naco Corridor, running for some 400 miles across Arizona and New Mexico between Nogales and El Paso, Texas. In this intensely wild stretch, law is no better than custom and help is almost always a stranger.

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"Sure, by the numbers alone, you can call it an invasion," agrees former Border Patrol agent Stoddard. "But you can't solve it with a wall or a 'guest worker' program. The real problem is in the north where 'globalized' big corporations outsource jobs and import labor. It's the packinghouses and the restaurant chains and the motels that send word down, practically advertising for people willing to work for \$5 or \$8 an hour at jobs that used to pay \$10 or \$15."

The Ribbon in these skull-dry, starkly alluring parts has always been a killer. But not since it was controlled by Geronimo's Chiricahua renegades has it been so much of a no-man's-land fraught with fear and tension among widely scattered ranchers unsure of what to expect next.

Dressed in blue jeans and a bright flannel shirt, 30-year-old Micaela McGibbon seems perfectly named for her lyrical country charm as she prepares a cake to surprise her husband on their seventh anniversary. They have a fine large kitchen in the place they built above his father's home near the edge of the Coronado National Forest almost 50 miles northeast of

the border at Nogales. Micaela is clearly suited to the place. It was these bald-boulder mountains and thorny thickets of wilderness that raised her with the animals she loved on her parents' ranch, "just 60 miles west of here." Happy and devoted to her husband and their three-year-old daughter, Micaela seems to have found her dream. If only the nightmare of unwelcome border crossers would stop.

"When me and my brothers were young, we ran for miles around the house without a care in the world," she says, "without our parents being nervous about us being abducted, raped, killed. Now, it is the first thing we think of when one of the kids leaves the house without us." Her husband is nervous even when Micaela herself goes out to tend the horses.

"I had Elizabeth in the truck with me one day while we were cleaning up below the barn," Micaela says, "and all of a sudden there were seven of them staring at us through the barbed-wire fence. I called the Border Patrol from the truck and they could hear my little girl crying, 'Mommy, are they going to hurt us?' 'I hope not, baby, I'm getting help.' They could hear all that and still they said if the men were on private property they couldn't



respond. I would just have to call the sheriff. I told them, 'These are your people to deal with. I have a three year old and I need help.' But nobody ever came."

Now Elizabeth is closely watched, never allowed outside without an adult. That is true even when she visits her grandmother on the ranch 60 miles west on the other side of Nogales, just a next-door distance in this arid, sparsely grassed country where ranches are measured not in acres, but in 640-acre sections across hundreds of square miles.

Micaela's mother was caring for Elizabeth one day earlier this year when they went out together to a clothesline. Four men rose up from the brush. "They told her, 'We want to go to Phoenix, and you're going to take us there,'" Micaela says. "Thank God Elizabeth did not run ahead of her as she usually does or I'm certain they would have grabbed her and used her to get what they wanted. My mother managed to hold Elizabeth and ran back into the house to call the Border Patrol."

Their foreman's house has been fired on at night apparently by aliens shooting at the family's dogs. Micaela's husband has had the chilling experience of seeing evident drug

smugglers aim at him with automatic weapons when he surprised them on horseback. Volunteer Minutemen came upon 70 aliens one night near her parents' home last fall, and bales of marijuana have been found stashed or abandoned in the hills.

"At night, sometimes several times a night, the dogs will sound and we'll know," Micaela says. "We just hold our breath and wait for them to be gone. This isn't the way we meant to live. It's even worse for my daughter who I had to warn to be afraid of 'bad men.' Now, she sees somebody in town and wants to know if they are 'the bad men.' I don't want that. I don't want her to feel that way."

Micaela's great-grandfather settled the family ranch 120 years ago in wild country then only recently surrendered by Geronimo.

With an odd similarity, it had been the custom of settlers to win the trust of the Apaches by offering them food and water. Yet local historians say Geronimo still burned the little village of Tubac at least four times before he surrendered in 1886. Tubac, south of Tucson but still 30 miles from the border, has been largely restored in the last few years. It is now a red-adobe arts center selling rugs and pottery along with other fine art to the flocks of retirees and real estate-rich newcomers who have swollen the population of metropolitan Tucson by over 50 percent in less than 10 years.

The McGibbons list their address as

Green Valley, but that deceptively denotes the planned community some 20 miles down the mountain from their ranch. It is a groomed and gated new development with golf-cart trails and pricey restaurants built in the easier lowland long preferred by cruceros making their way up from the border.

Part of a baby-boom generation who grew up with liberal ideals and steadily earned equity are now silver-haired snowbirds living on slabs of southwest stone that look on post-card views. The boomers and their variously accepted counterculture of the '60s and '70s



Murray and Judy Keeler and daughter Brandi and her family ranch in a wild place apart from law. It is the first stretch of U.S. territory that cruceros must cover to reach vehicles promised to rendezvous with them at some secluded spot on a U.S. highway. Twelve years ago, Murray and Brandi held 15 Chinese illegals until the Border Patrol could come and pick them up.

are still the largest generation of U.S. born. Yet, few are aware of the potent subculture slipping past the picture windows of their dream homes, following newly dug water lines toward the barrios of Tucson and beyond.

Don Bell, who runs a ranch just five miles west of Nogales, came home from the Cattlemen's meeting in Denver last winter knowing what to expect.

"I heard they caught a drug runner crashing my fence," Bell says, climbing into his pickup with resignation for what has become an almost-daily chore.

The iron gate to his nearest pasture is bent and mangled, but at least it still stands. Behind it, grazing among Bell's

carefully bred Black Angus, is a Mexican steer, obvious from its horns and brown hide. "Happens all the time," sighs Bell. "I know the lady who owns them. We talk on the phone. It's not really her fault."

Bell is not so concerned about disease that may be inadvertently brought in from Mexi-

can cattle in the relatively "clean" state of Sonora, but the damage to his herd is obvious in the white, skunklike stripe running down the back of one of his black calves.

"I have a bull that went to visit her herd once," Bell jokes. "I think she may be getting the better part of the problem."

Up ahead, through the intricate shade of a dry orchard covering the dusty flat floodplain of a drought-drained stream, the characteristic debris starts to show up. Discarded water jugs and empty backpacks, scraps of clothing and light paper floating away on the breeze of the passing truck.

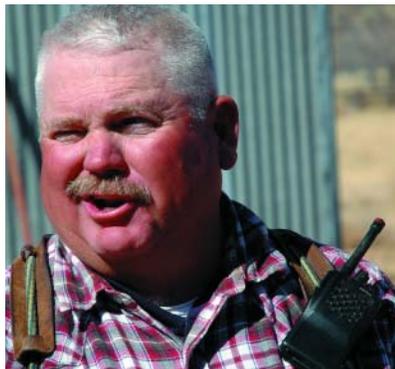
The border here, just five miles northwest across the low mountains from Nogales, is marked by a four-strand wire fence that crosses the dry riverbed. It is flattened. To the left, in a gully falling from the nearest hillside, is what appears to be a dumpsite, but it is only further evidence of the trail where aliens have spilled down, leaving more plastic jugs and trash behind them. In the flat, amid the stench of still more waste, a laconic white Mexican steer rests and watches.



Micaela McGibbon was raised in these bald-boulder mountains and thorny thickets of wilderness with the animals she loved on her parents' ranch. She and her brothers used to run for miles around the house without a care in the world. Now they are worried about their children and her husband is nervous when Micaela goes out to tend the horses.

"I don't think you could build a wall here," Bell says. "Or if you did it would be incredibly expensive for not much good." Nobody claims the heavily patched wire fence that is there now. It was built by federal agricultural officials years ago to control cattle, but now the Border Patrol and Homeland Security take no responsibility for it. They leave that to the rancher, but they tell him the fence is not "his."

"We tried using nine-strand once, but that just made for more work to repair it," Bell says. He is a patient, quiet young man who,



Rob Krentz's family has ranched almost at the center of the Naco Corridor for a century. "It's a passive invasion," says the rugged, friendly man. "We are campos [fellow farmers]. We understand their problem. We used to hire them. But now, they intimidate and threaten us. It's like we live in a war zone."



Roger Barnett and his wife Barbara often sit in their darkened pickup and watch the TV monitor. A thermal imaging camera mounted on the truck scans and focuses on targets up to seven miles away. They often see a single file of ghosts, the heat of their bodies showing up nearly white against the cold dark trail. Some carry guns. RIGHT: A Coyote checks for federal agents, ready to bring another string of illegals across the border into the United States.

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like his father, concentrates on the business, not the politics. In a remote little spot at the center of his low pasture is a short rock-lined trail leading to a monument that commemorates the spot where a Border Patrol agent was shot and killed in 1998.

"We've probably triggered a sensor by now," Bell says. "We'll see them soon."

As he drives out past the monument, the white-and-green-striped Bronco pulls out of the trees and cuts him off. Border Patrol agents are frequently rotated in this sector. They're not supposed to get to know the locals. So, for an uncounted time, Bell is questioned again about what he is doing on his own land.

"It's frustrating," he says, "but you just have to learn to live with it."

Like every rancher in the Ribbon, Bell has encountered border crossers for years. In the past, he gave them water, maybe some food and maybe even a job. But those he sees now are different, more demanding and not interested in work. "I had one come to my door once and ask me to call a cab to take him to Phoenix."

Absurdly, tragically, and too often dangerously, has custom and country hospitality changed along the border in the last 15 years. When once it was just a relative few seeking a better life, now it is more like a social tsunami unrecognized in Washington for its full his-

toric potential.

The appearance last fall of volunteer Minutemen was welcomed here as bringing national attention to the problem, even if that was accompanied by politically agitated accusations of racism and vigilante motives.

But for years before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 focused even minimal attention on border security, many in the Ribbon desperately tried to attract federal attention to the waves of incursions that were forcing them to defend themselves and their property from destruction.

Roger Barnett accepts the mild "King of the Hill" joke about being the propane and propane-accessories dealer in Sierra Vista, Ariz., who emerged as a local folk hero after 1995. That was the year Barnett bought his ranch outside Douglas, virtually at the heart of the Naco Corridor.

He had by then become a successful businessman with interests in several parts of the Southwest. It enabled him to pursue a passion for hunting that brought trophy

heads from Africa and elsewhere to the soaring cathedral walls of his ranch home. He knew what some more "politically correct" might say, but he valued the skills of tracking and concealment that he had learned on his grandfather's ranch. It was almost by instinct that he could sense trails being broken across his own property, but he needed no tracker mystic to find them. Most often, he just followed his nose, and he soon realized he was not alone in his disgust.

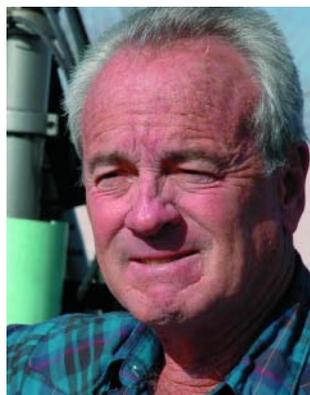
"They were strewing trash, human waste, baby diapers and soiled clothes as they went, leaving it for us to clean up just to protect our

stock," he says. "Some spots were so foul even our horses wouldn't approach them."

More than three years before the attack on New York's trade towers alerted the nation to a terrorist threat, Barnett organized neighbors and friends along the border for a trip to Washington, D.C., where they appealed to every member of Congress who would agree to meet with them. "A few of them seemed willing to listen," Barnett says, "but more were just hollow headed. What we said went right through."

In Douglas, the head of the Tucson sector of the Border Patrol, David Aguilar, tried to back Barnett off. "We have the situation under control," Aguilar assured the propane dealer.

Barnett and other ranchers weren't buying that. Not only could they see the lines of trails crisscrossing through their own land like ant nests, but they needed only to drive along remote stretches of State Highway 90 to spot groups of people crouched in the



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brush behind a water bottle or a bit of clothing left by the road as a marker for the vehicles they expected to pick them up. The ranchers watched as a strange truck or car drove up sometimes in broad daylight with the driver honking the horn. Quickly, the cargo of human beings or evident bundles of marijuana and drugs would emerge from the brush and be driven away.

It would be useless to pursue the vehicles, but Barnett and the others knew the unexpected presence of witnesses on the highway alone would prevent the transfer. "When we found them, we just told them to sit down and wait while we called the Border Patrol. They didn't argue. They knew we were armed, but nobody ever needed to point a gun at anybody."

In one instance, a man threw aside his heavily loaded burlap sack and ran off into the brush. Barnett and his dog chased him a short distance before the man turned and began throwing rocks. Captured later by the Border Patrol, the illegal immigrant contended he was attacked by Barnett and demanded hospital care. It wasn't the only false accusation aimed at halting the rancher's actions. In Tucson, a human rights group tried, but failed, to bring Barnett to court on charges of kidnapping. "They said they'd kill me with paper cuts," Barnett says.

After 9/11, the Bush administration did at least give lip service to improving border security. More border agents would be hired and patrols would be dramatically increased under the leadership of the new Homeland Security Border Patrol chief, David Aguilar.

Last February, in the deep darkness that falls like a quick winter curtain on the desert, Barnett and his wife Barbara sit in his heavy extended-cab pickup at a narrow turnout along Highway 90. The truck lights are out, and except for the rustling settles of their collie dog in the back seat, the early night is silent and seemingly empty. The Barnetts watch the light blue flicker on a laptop monitor receiving thermal images from a camera mounted on a hydraulic pole behind the cab. The camera can be swiveled and focused on targets as far as seven miles away. The heat of their bodies reveals anything living in sharp black-and-white contrast to the pale chill of the desert around them. A group of cattle settled in a wash for the night, or a Coyote chasing a field mouse through the sage. Even an owl perched in the mesquite shows brightly. A line of people walking on a trail miles away stands out like a parade.

"They know where they're going," says



The iron gate closest to Don Bell's ranch is bent and mangled and his fence, above, is trashed so often it hardly keeps anything in or out. His carefully bred Black Angus cattle are being mixed by wayward Mexican bulls. "I know the lady who owns them. It's not really her fault. I have a bull that went to visit her herd once," Bell jokes. "I think she may be getting the better part of the problem."

Barnett. "We watch to judge where they might be crossing the road, and then we sweep that area looking for the heat of a truck or a car." Often, Barnett will work with his brother who has similar thermal-imaging equipment on his truck to triangulate the crossing. If the Border Patrol cannot reach the region in time, the Barnetts will go themselves, intercepting and holding the group at the intended highway rendezvous until feder-

al authorities arrive.

"I totaled it up the other day," Barnett says. "In the 10 years we've been at this sort of thing, mostly on weekends, we've found more than 12,000 border crossers—most of them just on my ranch alone."

Fifty miles by highway from the exceptionally equipped Barnett, a neighbor climbs the boulder-braced hill behind his home and watches as he has for six successive evenings.

Henry Harvey

The original Minuteman.

Henry Harvey was a quiet, good-natured man who served with the U.S. Border Patrol in Texas and the San Bernardino sheriff's office in California before retiring with his wife, Kathryn, in Tombstone, Ariz.

From that time in 1995 until his death last year at age 71, the mild-mannered Oklahoma native who loved to hike and explore became one of the most admired and appreciated characters of the border region. It was Harvey who inspired and trained leaders of the Minutemen, the volunteer organization formed in the image of Harvey's own Citizens Homeland Defense Patrols.

Working with ranchers like Roger Barnett and others, the former lawman instructed his neighbors in tracking and spotting illegal aliens and in confronting them in a

lawful, nonviolent manner.

We are grateful to his widow and to Harvey for night photos used in this issue. Former Border Patrol supervisor David Stoddard called Harvey, "one of the finest men I ever met."

He was a true western hero.—*Tim Findley*

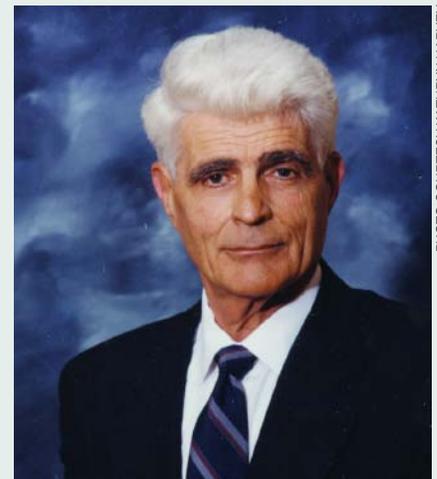


PHOTO COURTESY KATHRYN HARVEY



Palomas, Mexico, is a thriving town on the border. The central square offers shopping and great dining. The town also boasts a statue of General John "Black Jack" Pershing shaking hands with Pancho Villa.

A heavily burdened line of men crosses again in the last light of day through a thick tangle of shoulder-high mesquite and sage that he had thought impassable. Since being alerted by the rancher, Border Patrol agents have been waiting further up near the tree line to confiscate what they say was hundreds of pounds of marijuana that, amazingly, just kept coming night after night. From his concealment in the rocks, the rancher peers through his 30-power spotting scope, panning along the line of 20 or more men bent by the loads on their backs. To his right, he thinks he sees a glint of something in the failing light.

Instinctively, he swings the scope that way and comes eye to eye at a sniper's distance with a man watching him through binoculars. The rancher holds the gaze for only an instant before scrambling back across the hill to his house.

"Don't use my name in this," he says. "If they know who I am, they'll come back and burn my house down. I know they'd retaliate."



Joe Johnson can see the dust trails from the yellow buses and knows it's another group being brought to the staging area. A Coyote will pick them up and lead them to a spot to cross the fence. It's often his. "You get to a point where it's just too much," he says. Some ask, "How far is Denver?" or beg Johnson to "Call the Border Patrol, I want to go home."

Across the border from Bisbee, Ariz., in the still sleepy-seeming Mexican town of Naco, those few who will talk at all blame most of the trouble on "OTMs," short for the Border Patrol designation of "Other Than Mexican" illegals. They are Central Americans for the most part, although several Brazilians have been picked up at crossings and even a group of Iraqis was arrested earlier this year by Mexican authorities. At least 16,000 of the OTMs detained in the Ribbon in the last two years have been Salvadorans, part of a continuous rise in numbers from that country since civil war broke out in El Salvador in 1979.

In part for humanitarian reasons, the Salvadorans and other OTMs are not treated with the usual "catch and release" procedure of merely taking Mexican immigrants back across their own border. OTMs are more frequently given a citation and told to appear at a hearing some weeks later. Few show up for it.

U.S. officials seem even more reluctant than largely indifferent Mexican authorities to

suggest that the Salvadorans may be linked to the murderous street gang, MS 13. Named in slang for Salvadoran army ants, "Mara Salvatrucha" has spread from its origin in a Los Angeles barrio back to El Salvador, and in recent years to gang-run neighborhoods in nearly every major city of the United States. They represent a sinister, but still largely mysterious, criminal syndicate with links to prisons and to what some investigators say is an internal war for control of drug cartels broken up in Columbia.

If so, some investigators suggest the surge of cruceros may represent something more than just a rush for jobs north of the border. "I think they're probing," says one investigator, "testing us for weakness. They'll work for anybody with enough money, including Al Qaeda, and a lot of them already hate the United States."

In February, U.S. authorities in Texas uncovered a cache near the border that included hand grenades, automatic weapons and explosives. It has not been explained, but rumors are that MS 13 is planning some kind of murderous attack on Texas authorities.

Earlier that month, Hedspeth County, Texas, deputies raced after a top-of-the-line 2006 Cadillac Esplanade SUV that had burst by them with two other vehicles. The Cadillac made a sharp turn and headed back toward a crossing of the Rio Grande. Suddenly the trailing deputies halted within yards of an apparent ambush set on the U.S. side of the river by men in Mexican Federales uniforms driving a Mexican Army Humvee mounted with a .50-caliber machine gun.

The deputies were obviously outgunned and could only watch as the apparent Mexican soldiers unloaded bundles from the new Cadillac where it had become stuck in the river. Then the brown-uniformed men torched the SUV and stood offering defiant gestures to U.S. officers videotaping the incident.

Two days later, U.S. Border Patrol chief Aguilar seemed to agree with Mexican President Vicente Fox in suggesting that the men had most likely been drug-cartel members "posing" as part of the Mexican Army. Aguilar stopped at his old Tucson-sector headquarters in Nogales to say that escalating violence on the border is ironically a sign that his reinforced agents are "getting control" of the situation. During the last year in the Tucson sector alone, he acknowledges, there were 778 incidents of violence including gunfire and fuel-soaked flaming rocks thrown at his agents, a 100-percent increase over the previ-

ous year. (Flaming rocks are part of Salvadoran festivals celebrating survival from volcanic eruptions.) Aguilar says the attacks indicate that “our agents are doing their job and we are being effective in our approach.”

In the pleasant little town of Palomas, Mexico, older men enjoy a warm afternoon sun in the plaza while a woman in colorful Indian dress works on a hand loom she has set up at the corner. The visiting gringos are drawn to the best combination shop and restaurant in town, the Pink House. There they dine on excellent Mexican meals served in front of a plate-glass window that looks out on a courtyard where stands perhaps the most impossibly fantasized statue on either



Aging yellow school buses leaving from a back street in Palomas, Mexico, sometimes several times a day, do not seem to carry school children. They head for Chepas, a few miles down a dusty road that parallels the border. Chepas is a settlement granted to a group of Mexican citizens in the 1960s who hoped to sustain themselves from their own small plots and seasonal work with ranchers just across the fence. This is the town New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson wanted to bulldoze out of existence as a solution to his state's problem with illegal immigrants. Mexican authorities seemed ready to agree but nothing has happened yet.

The “Green” Card

By Tim Findley

Rachel Thomas performs a thankless but essential role from her home near the border by using the Internet to keep her neighbors advised of every event and political move made on the immigration question. She hates hypocrisy and has found plenty of it on the issue, but nowhere so great as from one source.

“The Nature Conservancy,” she says. “They are everywhere—working with the Army, advising the military at White Sands, lobbying the politicians and pushing their own ranch. They could help, but they stand in the way.”

As with almost any crisis, the big “greens” like The Nature Conservancy (TNC) stand smugly on the sidelines, awaiting their own opportunity. One of their own environmental pressure groups, Negative Population Growth, surveyed enviro organizations like “Nature’s Landlord” this year and found that most of them, also like TNC, have “no formal policies regarding U.S. population growth, international migration or U.S. immigration.”

If not just a flat-out lie, that at least is a spin on the position of the world’s largest nonprofit environmental organization and its role in the creation of United Nations Agenda 21, specifically calling for population control as part of “sustainable development.” It also belies TNC’s role in the so-called “Wildlands Project,” intended to contain up to a third or more of the United States in an uninhabited wildlife corridor from the Yucatan to the Yukon.

The path of the Wildlands goes right through the Naco Corridor and TNC’s own pet project in the Malpais Borderlands Group of ranchers. But TNC offers no help on the ille-

gal immigration question. Neither does the TNC offshoot, Conservation International, or Greenpeace, or Friends of the Earth, or the Environmental Defense Fund, or the Southwest-nagging, sue-crazy Center for Biological Diversity.

The Sierra Club, one of the few environmental organizations that actually listens to its membership, nearly tore itself apart in 2004 trying to come up with some position that eventually resulted in a convoluted statement suggesting that birth control should be a priority of the United Nations, and that countries which can’t afford population control programs should be funded by other nations “with available resources.”

The political hypocrisy is made even larger by the fact that well-meaning U.S. citizens given the message to limit their families in the 1960s actually did so. The largest generation in U.S. history, “baby boomers,” has reached its senior years after producing fewer children than were expected. If the U.S. population was counted by their reproduction alone, we would be just about at zero growth now, standing at 230 million Americans.

But even at the lowest estimated figures of legal and illegal immigration, demographers estimate that the midcentury population of the United States will be between 400 and 530 million.

The effect of that, it is generally agreed, will be a step backward in consumption of energy, land, water, and food that will make the environmental movement of the last 30 years practically meaningless. Population scientists say up to 61 percent of that growth will be due to illegal aliens and their children.

Meanwhile, the Center for Biological

Diversity insists fences cannot be built along the border because they might inhibit the northern migration of the Mexican leopard or jaguar. The Nature Conservancy, and others, support the property-killing Wildlands Project as if it has been given congressional approval. Arrogant, nonaccountable organizations like TNC preach to U.S. citizens on “saving” the “best places” from themselves. Then they use undereducated illegal immigrants for their own purposes, like feudal lords presuming to control the poor.

Defenders of Wildlife, based in Washington, D.C., did produce its own “comprehensive plan” to address illegal immigration and its ecological impact on the border. Defenders suggests that the Border Patrol be trained in “environmental sensitivity” and that “conservation groups” be made “meaningful partners” of the Border Patrol and land-management agencies.

Are they all just so bleary-eyed that they think the basic problem can be left to their self-righteous intentions? Or does it have something to do with major funding for TNC and others that comes from the same sources, such as Pew Charitable Trust, that put money into easing the ordeal of an illegal border crossing with water stations and cell phone communications? Could it be because TNC includes among its governing board some of the most powerful corporate agricultural organizations that are suspected of actually “recruiting” cheap labor from south of the border?

Might it be that major and especially radical green organizations are so dedicated to undercutting the democratic system of the United States that they would gladly choke on their own hypocrisy in order to “win” what they will have wasted?

Ask them. ■



Rachel Thomas



side of the border. It presents the oversized figures of U.S. Army Gen. John (Black Jack) Pershing shaking hands with an equally confident figure of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa.

The Pink House was a bordello in 1916 when Villa used it as his headquarters for a raid across the border on Columbus, N.M. The pre-dawn attack on a U.S. Army munitions storehouse resulted in a wild gun battle that left 18 U.S. citizens and 75 Mexicans dead before the Mexican “bandit revolutionaries” fled back across the border. Within days, President Woodrow Wilson dispatched Pershing from Yuma, Ariz., with a first-of-its-kind partially mechanized cavalry troop to catch and punish Villa. They never caught the former outlaw and were strictly forbidden from doing any damage to Mexican property or civilians. At last, after an encounter with Mexican Federales, the troopers withdrew to the U.S. side of the border, still in no mood for a handshake with Villa.

As World War I began in Europe, a force of more than 116,000 U.S. military was based along the Mexican border. In addition to Pershing, their officers included Omar Bradley, George Patton, Douglas MacArthur and George C. Marshall, a list of what would become a majority of the best-known U.S. military leaders in history. Pershing was soon leading the U.S. Expeditionary Force against the Germans in France.

Even in the little museums on both sides of the border, that part of it seems almost forgotten. Now children from Palomas attend school with kids from Columbus. The portal seems among the most relaxed on the border. Yet the aging yellow school buses leaving from a backstreet in Palomas sometimes several times a day do not seem to carry schoolchildren.

They are bound for the little adobe village of Chepas, a few miles down a dusty road that parallels the border. The buses leave a reddish



brown dust cloud behind them easily seen from the highway on the American side.

Chepas is a settlement granted to a group of Mexican citizens in the 1960s who hoped to sustain themselves from their own small plots and seasonal work with ranchers just across the fence. But the little houses and tumbled-down yards seem largely to be abandoned and crumbling now. There is a small store, but no hotel and no children to be seen. The adults sit in small groups leaning against pale-painted clay walls.

This is the town New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson wanted to bulldoze out of existence last year as a solution to his state’s problem with illegal immigration. Mexican authorities seemed ready to agree, but so far it has not happened.

Outside his trim brick house, rancher Joe Johnson can just about see the dust trails of the buses. He knows it is another group being brought to the staging area. Tonight, maybe even this afternoon, a Coyote will pick them up and lead them to a spot to cross the fence. It may be miles away, or it may again lead to a break only yards from where his family is sleeping.

“You get to a point where it’s just too much,” says Johnson. He too has found them at his door wanting directions, “How far is Denver?” or begging him to “Call the Border Patrol; I want to go home.”

Day after day, he checks and repairs the fences, roughly counts his stock—he’s missing two cows, two calves and a bull that he



The fence stretches for miles around border towns, but most of the border is open. With 12 million illegals in the United States, including people from all continents, all the local ranchers and Southwest travelers get is a warning. BELOW: The Mexican army patrols the border. Or are they criminals with machine guns posing as Mexican soldiers?

does not expect to see again—and worries over new breaks in his water lines. “There’s no sense of accomplishment when you know it’s just going to be torn up again,” he says. “If I see some tracks in that direction, I have to wonder, ‘Who’s in my barn? What will they do?’”

His place is nearest Chepas. It is where many of the *campesinos* there used to work before U.S. law in 1986 made it impossible for him to hire them. The storeowner in the little village acknowledges that there are people waiting who do not belong there. “But it’s no worse than Juarez,” he says. “Why don’t they tear down Juarez?” As weeks go by, Richardson’s idea of bulldozing the town fades away. The yellow buses keep coming regularly.

This early evening, like nearly every evening, the groups will leave from Chepas or some other town like it in the Naco Corridor to begin their long, hazardous trek that may take three days to reach a highway rendezvous. There, when they are gone, the ranchers or the Patrol will find the same familiar debris—the half-gallon plastic water jugs, some filled with urine, the bits of clothing, and almost always the strangely out of place pastel backpacks in baby-blue or blushing-pink colors. Most of them are empty, but all of them are the same, as if part of outfitting an army. The trash piles amount to a crime scene, but the Border Patrol only looks and moves on, not seeming to want to know who is the “quartermaster” who supplies even boxes of cheap cell phones found at some sites.

The night will end, as nights most often do along the Ribbon, with the Border Patrol returning their night’s “catch” back across the border. “*Hasta mañana*,” some illegals will say. “*Hasta mañana*,” the grimly discouraged

agents will reply. "See you tomorrow."

Murray Keeler speaks in a kind of deep croak that, like the lines on his leather-brown face, suggests a life in wild New Mexico sun. But he is a remarkably gentle man who worries most about the Border Patrol helicopters and the rooster-tailing four-wheel vehicles running off his stock in what seems like a game of federal agents. He speaks Spanish as well as English, and has known cruceros near-

ly all his life, though never like this.

"We made these people, really," he says. "I don't have the word for it, for promises they believe, but now it's out of control. Now, something else is taking over, and everybody is suspect, even us."

Naco is just a word combining the last two letters of Arizona and Mexico to name the area below Bisbee that has given its name to the intense corridor of incursions. It is a

sad coincidence that linguists say Naco has entered the lexicon of slang "Spanglish" to mean "vulgar," "indigenous," or "poor." An equivalent, one translator suggests, to the American English term, "redneck." ■

Tim Findley spent his first summer after graduation from college training antipoverty VISTA volunteers. He helped improve housing and sanitation facilities for post-Bracero migrant workers in the Southwest.

PRIDE & PREJUDICE

Governments just don't get it. By Tim Findley

You won't find many living along the U.S. side of the border who will say they "hate" Mexicans or Hispanics. To the contrary, especially among families with more than just a few years experience there, most speak with respect and even admiration for a "Spanish" culture that is in many ways more easily defined and unified than what can be explained as the "American way of life."

On the Mexican side, you won't find general agreement either that the border is worth running for a better way of living. Many regard those who go to the United States as something like "hicks" or even criminals motivated by greed disguised as cultural devotion.

You will, though, find something similar among both the "gringos" and the "chicanos" that can be defined at least roughly as "pride." It's not just waving flags in each other's faces as a nationalist expression, it's more like a posture—a stance that comes with more casual freedom on the American side and can be seen in a low-eyed "macho" swagger south of the line.

They are really more similar than they seem. The unforgiving border regions have always been a tough place to settle. If you wanted to live there, the land and the people would expect you to earn it. So attitudes were born out of similar experience and, often as not, led not to discrimination along the border, but understanding among those who shared it.

The problem is, governments don't get it. When Mexican President Vicente Fox tells a PBS interviewer that Hispanic workers in the United States are "doing jobs even blacks won't do," he reveals his contempt for his own people as well as ours.

And when our own president and opposite ranks of democratic party leadership each try to pander for votes with "guest worker" proposals that are obviously nothing more than amnesty for illegals in the U.S., they are expressing about the same "cultural" values as a used-car salesman at a convention.

It's their integrity that should be questioned, but they won't allow that to happen. While whole industries of American jobs are "outsourced" even to Mexico, politicians on both sides of the border know that "Coyotes," as well as drug smugglers, operate as well-paid middlemen for the wealthy on both sides of the border.

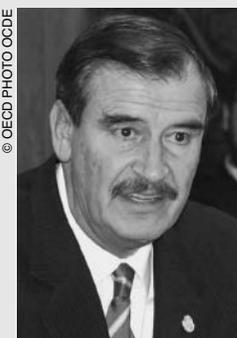
American politicians from states with industries like the meat packers or the discount chains essentially underwrite the \$1,500 a Coyote charges for a border crossing. Yet they pose in pompous indifference to the corporate abuses, like southern colonels defending the plantation. Real Americans, they say, won't work that cheap. "Jaimie Cuervo" works for them.

The outcome of the media-conscious debate in the Senate has already predictably been demonstrations organized and provoked by those with agendas of their own. Those in the political extremes of left or right who actually want to foment discrimination and hatred have been handed a power tool by the cheaply elected mechanics in charge of both countries. Small wonder that the only way it will work is to jam it into both sides of pride and crank out prejudice.

Slick-suited statesmen on both sides of the border are already lined up and loaded with platitudes to cover their own venality. If

the payoff in votes isn't enough, then at least the campaign contributions from corporations raking profit out of cheap labor will make the political hypocrisy worthwhile.

What's to worry about? A mere 12 million or more people living in the United States and adding more babies and more votes in a time when another three acres of agricultural production is lost every day and when outsourcing fits the global image by enslaving more and more to desperate wages? A few more barrios run by ruthless



President Vicente Fox says that Hispanic workers in the U.S. are "doing jobs even blacks won't do."

gangs who, thank God, don't really bother the rich in their gated communities? Corruption that digs deeper every year into American society like a runaway infection? Real racism and bigotry on both sides that will inevitably emerge out of frustration?

None of that matters nearly so much as electing the right people next time, does it? At least you can't call them cowards. It takes a special kind of courage to set off a society-wrenching crisis while maintaining cover for yourself.

Bigotry is not the problem on the border. The border is not the problem. When bad things happen, and they will, pride will be blamed, but as has become our custom, arrogance and greed and the pandering pimps of political power will be the real cause.

For the truly honest people both north and south of the border, elections are not the solution. When will we realize that there are enough of us being used by this incompetence and fraud to demand that our politicians be required to learn our language? ■



New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson has a major problem with illegal immigration. It has to stop.

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