CORTIJONUEVO, Mexico — Smoke shrouded the late-afternoon sun as Jorge poured water into the radiator of a battered white Chevy pickup. His wife, two young children, mother, father, cousins, nearly a dozen in all, climbed in the cab and onto the rusted bed.

It was time to drive over a rock-strewn, rutted dirt road to the 17 acres the extended family has sharecropped for decades, to pick the lentils and garbanzo beans sprouting from the grainy, black dirt.

Moving past fields that had been set on fire to rid the ground of snakes and the roots of picked-over plants, Jorge and everyone else hung on to the sides of the old truck as it creaked and bounced its way around vast, jagged potholes, clouds of dust rising in its wake.

About that same time, 2,500 miles to the northeast, Jose was pulling up to the one-bedroom tin-roofed shack he shared with his wife and year-old son in a ramshackle mobile-home park outside of Orlando in west Orange County. His shirt stained with sweat, he got out of his compact, two-door Dodge after spending eight hours heaving one 40-pound concrete block on top of another, a slap of mortar in between. He was setting the walls of homes that sell for $150,000 to $300,000 and more.

At week's end, he would cash a check for almost $500, careful to set aside at least a few dollars for his parents, who live less than a five-minute walk from Jorge in the small, destitute village of Cortijo Nuevo.

That single paycheck beats by $200 what Jorge's family anticipates clearing for their entire year's worth of labor in the south-central highlands of Mexico.

It is a simple economics lesson that leads both men to share a common destiny: Orlando.

Mexico's migrants carve path of hope to Orlando

Workers risk danger of desert, arrest to find jobs with builders

Continued on A23
Sometime in December, Jorge will leave his home in Cortijo Nuevo, Mexico, and sneak into the United States. His ultimate destination: The home-construction job of a lifetime in Orlando, where he will work to buy a small farm for his family in Mexico.

Jorge's long journey

Jorge will live with his wife and parents in a small, rustic home in Cortijo Nuevo, Mexico. He'll be away for two years, if all goes well. He plans to earn as much as he can and bring it back home with him.

For work, not vacation

Jorge says he has no choice but to creep across the border into the United States. He needs the money to support his family back home.

Jorge's ultimate destination is Orlando. Members of his extended family live there, and he plans to work as a construction worker in the city.

There are more Mexican migrants working residential construction in Orlando than almost any other city in the United States. Many of these migrants work for wages below the minimum wage, and they often work long hours in dangerous conditions.

In less than two months, he intends to depart his village and, along the way, he will meet many other migrants working to improve their lives.

Jorge plans to leave Cortijo Nuevo and travel to Tijuana, where he will take a van to Tucson, Arizona. From there, he will cross the border into the United States. He will then head to Orlando, where he will work to buy a small farm for his family.

Jorge says he is determined to make a better life for his family. He plans to work hard and save as much money as he can, so that he can eventually return to Mexico and buy a small farm for his family.

Jorge's story is not unique. There are many other migrants working in the United States, hoping to improve their lives and return home with money to support their families.

As the most experienced in the ways of America, Gaspar acts as something of a godfather to those who come to the park from Cortijo Nuevo and environs. He dispenses advice when asked, and he usually starts at the bottom: cleaning up work sites or carrying heavy buckets of mortar until their muscles sore, their T-shirts grimy.

Residents pay $70 to $120 a week for rent, the amount depending on the size of their place. Although the trailers have running water and electricity, they don't offer air conditioning. Floor and ceiling fans provide only negligible relief from the stifling heat of Central Florida's summer and fall seasons.

At work, members of Jorge's family dress in work clothes and work in the fields of central Florida, erecting condominium towers in Cocoa Beach, framing houses in Winter Garden, building new shops at Orlando's Tanger Outlets. They work all day, as workers such as Gaspar and Jose pile into older-model cars and head to their jobs, mostly in construction. They work all day, and frequent lack of supervision have resulted in often-shoddy work. Without them to hammer nails, lay block and install windows, the industry would grind to a halt.

There are more Mexican migrants working residential construction in Orlando than almost any other city in the United States. Many of these migrants work for wages below the minimum wage, and they often work long hours in dangerous conditions.

The park is a place where the workers eat, sleep and socialize. It is a place where they can find a sense of community, away from the dangers of the border and the risks of exploitation.

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Migrants have a choice: stay poor or leave

For fear that they might be engaged in a conversation that they think of as ‘inappropriate’ — or that they get caught in a hard situation — they have to be careful.

"You can almost hear the echoes of the early 1960s," when the bracero program was in full swing. That was when the United States first started importing Mexican laborers for anything other than very limited agriculture harvesting. "It was the beginning of the end of the family's survival," said Antonio Maldonado, an anthropologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has been studying Mexican migration for two decades.

"The sacrifice," he said through an interpreter, "I am doing for my family."

Jose's family is a good example. His parents, Manuel, 83, and Consuelo Flores, 73, have 15 children, nine of whom are living in the United States. Jose's father worked in the States for more than 10 years, sending money home to a family that eventually would number 15 boys and girls. When he returned, Jose's mother had turned and had no clue he was her father.

The idea of having to reintroduce himself to his second daughter, treated as heroes upon their return. They are admired by friends and family, treated as heroes upon their return.

"They are better taken care of," he said through a translator. "They have had to live a very hard life."

Among those who have left is Temo, a 30-year-old laborer who once worked in the fields of Michigan and had no clue he was her father. His young children stayed behind, left behind, alone. "The sacrifice of the children," he said through an interpreter, "I am doing for my family."

Jose and his family are part of the Spanish-speaking community, the largest in the United States. They are part of the growing number of people who come from Mexico to work in the United States, seeking jobs that Americans tend to avoid: construction, land-clearing.

But for Jose, the sacrifice is even more acute. He has been away from his family for almost half of his life. He has left behind a wife and son who stay in Orlando with him, even though the United States disband. They haven't stopped, even though the United States disband. They are staying in Orlando, unable to return home.

"You're always afraid of being caught," Temo said through an interpreter. "I am doing for my family."

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Avoiding Border Patrol

And slowly, Jorge begins to learn survival in December, boarding a bus and heading to the U.S. border. He will spend 20-plus hours traveling about 6,100 feet above sea level in the Mexican desert. As it stands, Jorge expects to leave sometime in December, boarding an old bus with dozens of other men from his village, his destination: the town of Nogales, which sits on the border and surrounding towns and riding on bumpy, curving roads for 20-plus hours. They will pass from the highlands — the elevation above 5,000 feet — through the desert and mixing across the Rio Grande. Unless he could come up with an alternative plan, the children will have to stay in Cortijo Nuevo. She and Jorge have no medical insurance and are expected to pay upfront for exams or medicine, unless they can work out an installment plan.

Head of Family. Jorge’s father, Antonio, wanted to go to the United States in 1950 to work in the fields. He moved to California and ran cattle in Texas as part of the Bracero Program. Since then he has worked in several U.S. states. He says money that his sons send from the North is all they have left of home. They never thought they could return to Mexico. “We’d like to live in Mexico,” he said. “But we don’t have a choice. There’s no work in Mexico.”

It’s family tradition to head north

for their clothes. Families who have members working in the United States often are sent money. Some stay in Zacapu, a town of about 60,000 that’s 15 minutes east of their family home. Last time Jorge was away, she saved enough to buy a double bed. Whenever possible, she will put pesos aside for a larger purchase.

Dona, who wore a three-piece suit and 10-gallon hat on his head, thought of home: chicken broth and tortillas; the name of Corona, the popular Mexican-made beer; and thoughts of home: working in construction, laundry day. Her fantasy is to join Jorge in the United States and build a new life there, but Jorge and others living in the North caution that the cost of living — for everything from milk to rent to clothes — is far higher than it is in Mexico.

Sofía, said he and Jorge have no medical insurance and are expected to pay upfront for exams or medicine, unless they can work out an installment plan. Jorge’s cousin Julian has decided to stay permanently in great-grandparents’ hometown. He has married and has two children and a third on the way. Though he must struggle with the thought of leaving his children behind, he decided that he was more comfortable with his family in the United States. Jorge’s father, Antonio, worked in the United States working two full-time jobs to support his family in America. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico. "It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the whitewashed community center. "It's different here," she knew was ahead of the time.
By DAN TRACY
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

LAREDO, Texas — Parched and exhausted, the two young Mexicans stumbled along in the darkness of a desolate highway, hoping to be caught.

They were, in the estimation of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Ariel Perez, “road kill.”

Sure enough, when Perez spotted them and flipped on his flashing lights, the pair slumped to the still-warm asphalt and sat, docilely awaiting their captor. They gave no thought to running.

Ulises Mendez Tejeda, 21, and Cesar Enrique Zaera Martinez, 19, were headed 160 miles up the road to San Antonio, but they could just as easily have been trying for Orlando.

They're two of the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who cross the border illegally each year, hunting for jobs and opportunity in the United States.

Tejeda, a part-time busboy from the West Coast tourist destination of Acapulco, and Martinez, a drywall hanger from Puebla in the interior, had been walking for 18 hours when they were caught. They told Perez that they had become worn out physically several hours earlier and had been dropped by their smuggler, or “coyote,” who was leading eight other Mexicans who had paid $800 apiece to be led into the States.

Their last sip of water gone hours earlier, Tejeda and Martinez had wandered about a desert filled with cacti and thorny mesquite until finally chancing onto a two-lane blacktop road 10 miles north of Laredo. They walked onto the shoulder of the road and waited.

“They're ready to give up. They don't know the route,” said Perez, as he pulled a U-turn in his four-wheel-drive sport utility vehicle.

The two sat quietly, awaiting the vehicle that would take them to a holding cell. As they whiled away the minutes, Martinez took his empty water bottle and smashed a scorpion inching toward him.

6 million migrants in U.S.

Tejeda and Martinez were two of 254 illegal immigrants caught during one 24-hour period in May in and around Laredo, the border town famous in Old West lore for shootouts and cattle rustling.

It was, Perez said, a fairly typical evening, part of the continual struggle between migrants and the U.S. government along the 2,000-mile border that stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

Yet, despite the physical barriers and stepped-up Border Patrol enforcement, the migrants never stop coming. An estimated 6 million are now in the United States. On average, the Laredo division catches 225 a day.

Relying on their wits, knowledge of the territory and high-tech gadgetry, Border Patrol agents spend their time much like the cowboys of yesteryear. They fan out along the miles of rangeland and fences, seeking the telltale signs of human quarry rather than stray cows.

Last year, the Border Patrol caught a total of 82,095. But many more get through.

“Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose. You can't catch them all.”

— AGENT FRANK MARTINEZ

Orlando Sentinel Reprint
2003 deaths have passed 2002’s total

In Laredo, Texas, a border crossing agent directs an agent how to stop and take into custody a group of Mexican nationals trying to illegally cross the border. In the first 10 months of this year, 270 migrants have died trying to enter the United States.

Many ways to enter U.S.

Migrants get in any number of ways. Some walk through the desert to reach the border. Others are given rides in trucks and cars. Some are黑夜隐匿于沙漠中，用卡车或货车运送。还有一些会伪装身份，如使用假证件。

No one wants to get caught, so they often try to avoid detection. Sometimes, they will hide in the back of a vehicle, or in the engine compartment of a car. They may also try to sneak past checkpoints or border patrol agents.

Border Patrol agents are trained to look for suspicious activity. They use thermal imaging cameras to detect migrants trying to cross the border. They may also use dogs to sniff out drugs and humans.

Capturing migrants is not easy, but it is essential. The United States is a land of opportunity, and many people are willing to risk their lives to find a better life for themselves.

But the cost is high. In 2003, the Border Patrol recorded 1,128 deaths along the southern border. That's more than double the number of deaths in 2002.

It's a dangerous game, but one that many will continue to play. As long as there is a desire for a better life, there will be a risk.

In the end, the only way to stop the flow of migrants is to address the root causes of their desperation. That means tackling poverty, inequality, and the lack of opportunity in their home countries.

But that's a big order, and one that will take time to accomplish. In the meantime, the Border Patrol and other law enforcement agencies will continue to do their best to protect the American people.

Oscar Leeser

For more on this story, please see the Orlando Sentinel.

Orlando Sentinel
South of the border

Photographs by Roberto Gonzalez of the Sentinel staff

Top, Wedding day. When Americans Thomas Cordova and Sofia Fuentes decided to get married, they came back to his hometown so they could have a traditional neighborhood wedding in Cortijo Viejo. Center, Where money goes. With children sending checks from the United States, Manuel, daughter Elisia and wife Consuelo live in one of the nicer homes in Cortijo Nuevo. The family added a bedroom, sitting room and kitchen with money from the North. Bottom, Mexican sound. In an attempt to start a band, locals use the Cortijo Viejo community hall to rehearse. The band hopes to make money by playing at weddings and parties.