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BUILDING HOMES
BUILDING PROBLEMS

PART 5



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

A lonely future. Sonia, with her child, stands among the lentils in Cortijo Nuevo. She may not see husband Jorge for 2 years if he reaches the U.S.

Worlds apart: Laborers earn more in a week than their families do in a year.

By **DAN TRACY**
 SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

CORTIJO NUEVO, 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.

Their story is emblematic of the thousands of migrants who have left their homes and families in Mexico, braved the dangers of sneaking into the United States and ended up working in the construction fields of greater Orlando. They spoke to an *Orlando Sentinel* reporter on the condition that their full names not be used.

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Mexican migrants carve path of hope to Orlando

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



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Jorge's long journey

Sometime in December, Jorge will leave his home in Cortijo Nuevo, Mexico, and sneak into the United States. His ultimate destination: The home-construction jobs of Orlando, where he will make money to send home to his family in Mexico.



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At play. Jorge (right) waits for the ball as he competes on his town's soccer team in Mexico.

There are more Mexican migrants working residential construction in Central Florida — at least 25,000 — than any other ethnicity. Without them to hammer nails, lay block and install windows, the industry would grind to a halt.

Arriving in greater Orlando with few skills other than a willingness to watch and learn, they usually start at the bottom: cleaning up work sites or carrying heavy buckets of mortar until they have earned a chance at a better-paying position.

Along the way, they typically are exploited, working for \$10 or less an hour, with no benefits, no security and the constant fear, often reinforced by their deadline-obsessed bosses, that they can be arrested and shipped home at a moment's notice.

No one questions their work ethic, but their paucity of skills and frequent lack of supervision have resulted in often-shoddy new homes. A yearlong investigation by the *Orlando Sentinel* and WESH-NewsChannel 2 found widespread problems in homes built during 2001. The flaws range from leaky windows, block walls riddled with stairstep cracks and mold to wavy rooflines, bowed interior walls and cabinets without shelf supports.

Planning to be away 2 years

Jorge caresses the raven hair of his toddler as she sits in his lap. Will she forget me? is his constant worry.

In less than two months, he intends to depart his village and, with the paid help of smugglers, slip into the United States. His ultimate destination: Orlando.

Slight of build, his hair and eyes dark, Jorge looks younger than his 28 years. He'll be away for two years, if all goes well. He envisions wiring three out of every four paychecks back to his wife and parents, who all share the same rustic homestead.

The money will sustain the 15-member extended family, which subsists partly on sharecropping that, in a good year, might net \$300.

Jorge says he has no choice but to creep across the border into the United States. He would like to stay in Cortijo Nuevo or someplace else in Mexico, but there are no jobs.

In Orlando, he hopes to build houses. In time, he might earn \$10 an hour, without any benefits. Right now, that seems a small fortune to Jorge, who had to scrape to find \$16 to pay for a doctor to examine his flu-stricken youngest daughter and give her medicine.

Here for work, not vacation

It is no surprise that Jorge would choose Orlando. Members of his family and his village have been traveling to one of the world's most popular tourist destinations for at least two decades.

But they are not visiting theme parks or playing golf. They are in Central Florida to work.

Jorge's oldest brother, Gaspar, blazed the trail in the early 1980s, when he switched from picking fruit to construction because the pay was better and the work steadier.

Gaspar, 49, lives in the same grubby mobile-home park in west Orange where Jose resided for the past three years, until he recently went back to Cortijo Nuevo for a visit. Jose, 33, expects to return to Orlando soon.

The complex is similar in many respects to dozens of other Mexican enclaves scattered throughout Central Florida: run down and cheap, with about 50 mobile homes and dilapidated wood cottages. English is the distant second language to Spanish. During most evenings, the air is filled with the smells and sounds of such Mexican staples as frioles, tacos, sizzling spiced pork and *ranchera* music.

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 table fans provide only negligible relief from the stifling heat of Central Florida's summer and fall seasons.

The park empties early in the morning, typically before sunrise, as workers such as Gaspar and Jose pile into older-model cars and head to their jobs, mostly in construction. They work all over Central Florida, erecting condominium towers in Cocoa Beach, framing houses in Winter Garden, building new shops at the tourist attractions.

Typically, they return as the sun is setting, their skin burned, their muscles sore, their T-shirts grimy.

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, about where to find the best, least-expensive Mexican restaurants and grocery stores. Just as important, he counsels them to stay out of trouble because the slightest infraction with the law could result in deportation.

Such circumstances can lead to a form of paranoia. Most migrants — from Jose to Jorge to Gaspar — speak to Anglos they don't know only out of necessity. They usually avoid eye contact

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At work. Members of Jorge's family harvest garbanzo beans on land that they sharecrop.





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Main meal. Jorge (left) eats chicken broth and tortillas in his family's adobe kitchen in Cortijo Nuevo. He plans to send 3 of every 4 paychecks in the United States back to his wife and parents, who share the homestead.

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Migrants have a choice: stay poor or leave

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for fear that they might be engaged in a conversation that they may not understand — or that may get them in trouble.

"You're always afraid of being caught," Temo said through an interpreter. A 25-year-old carpenter who sets concrete forms in housing subdivisions, he has been living illegally in Central Florida since the late 1990s.

Gaspar, who picked up English largely by watching television and talking with Anglo friends he has made through the years, understands Temo's concerns. He hears similar worries, often when he gathers with others from his village to drink beer, reminisce and exchange gossip about who is doing what back home.

Of course, part of the talk now is the anticipation of Jorge's arrival.

Mexican policies hurt

Jorge, though, is conflicted. His determination to leave falters each time he gazes at the child in his lap or her 4-year-old sister, who darts in and out of the shade provided by a lean-to fashioned from discarded pieces of rusty corrugated tin and shaved tree limbs.

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

Jorge's situation is common in the countless hamlets and small towns scattered across the harsh, barren landscape of the south-central highlands.

Men, old as well as young, creep daily into the United States seeking jobs that Americans tend to avoid: construction, landscaping, harvesting — the kinds of dirty, sweaty and often seasonal work that combine hard labor with low pay. Their exodus has been intensified in recent years by Mexican government policies that encourage large-scale farming in the northern regions at the expense of the small plots cultivated in the central and southern sections. Depressed crop prices also have cut the income of growers such as Jorge's family.

"There just aren't a lot of alternatives," said Dr. Lois Stanford, a cultural anthropologist at New Mexico State University who studies Mexican migration.

Besides the money, there also are psychic rewards for Jorge, Jose and the others who cross the border. They are admired by friends and family, treated as heroes upon their return.

"It [working in the States] is becoming a way of testing. Do you have the guts to go?" said Sergio Zendejas, an anthropologist at the College of Michoacán in Zamora, about 90 minutes west of Cortijo Nuevo.

Long history of migration

Migration — some of it legal — has been a staple of Mexican life since Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845. But practically speaking, it started in large numbers during the 1940s with the *braceros* program, when World War II robbed America of much of its working-age male population. At America's request, about 3 million Mexicans streamed in to do farm work.

They haven't stopped, even though the United States disbanded the *braceros* program in 1964 and no longer welcomes Mexican laborers for anything other than very limited agriculture harvesting.

The 2000 census found almost 8 million Mexican natives living in America. Of them, only 1.6 million were U.S. citizens. More than 32,000 Mexicans are living in greater Orlando, according to the census, including more than 13,500 who are not citizens.

Many who work in America, such as Jose and Jorge, aren't interested in staying or becoming legal residents. They just want American dollars to send home.

Jose, even though his wife and son stayed in Orlando with him, couldn't get Cortijo Nuevo out of his mind. The result: All three recently caught a bus back to his hometown. They are staying in the new bedroom his parents added with the money he sent them.

Money from U.S. crucial

Rural areas, such as the mountainous Michoacán state, where Cortijo Nuevo is located, traditionally have lost the most sons and, increasingly in recent years, daughters because their local economies were — and remain — moribund.

Some experts estimate more than 60 percent of the households in Michoacán rely on money earned in the United States

and sent back across the border. Cortijo Nuevo, with a population of more than 1,000, is no exception.

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. One of their sons remains in Orlando, working on a crew that pours concrete street gutters and curbs.

Although Manuel still rides his horse to work in the fields virtually every day, he, his wife and their youngest daughter depend heavily on money coming from the States.

Along with the new bedroom, they have added a sitting room and kitchen, thanks to money from the United States. Parts of the new house, attached to the old adobe main structure by a breeze-way, have hard tile floors, instead of the dirt to which they and their neighbors are accustomed. They even own a television — complete with a satellite dish — microwave and stereo.

For Mother's Day 2002, the children chipped in to buy matching red sofas and a chair for Consuelo's front room. The set, which cost \$250, is one of her most cherished possessions — next to photos of her children and 10 grandchildren, nine of whom are in the States.

Manuel, who himself picked vegetables in Michigan and apples in Washington during the 1950s, is glad that most of his children have left Mexico.

"They are better taken care of," he said through an interpreter. "They have food to eat."

Like Manuel, Jorge's father, Antonio, first went North during the 1950s. Now 78, he proudly displays the alien laborer's card he was awarded as part of the *bracero* program. It shows a young man with wild, bushy hair who picked vegetables in California and ran cattle in Texas.

Back then, he would work, live as frugally as possible and send money home to a family that eventually would number 15 boys

Most migrants — from Jose to Jorge to Gaspar — speak to Anglos they don't know only out of necessity.

and girls. Now, nearly a half-century later, he has sons in Orlando, Utah, Idaho, North Carolina and California, living and laboring much the same as he once did.

"I'm happy that they are there working," says Antonio, the fingers and nails of his brown hands nearly black from decades of planting and picking crops. Money from *El Norte*, he said, is imperative to the family's survival.

Living remains a struggle

But even with the money, the living conditions of both families are primitive.

Antonio's home has no indoor plumbing, and water is provided by one outdoor tap in the middle of his meager compound. The floors of both small houses are dirt, padded smooth by the feet of children and adults.

The kitchen, separate from the two main houses, is built of adobe. Sunlight peeks through the slats of the roof. Meals are prepared over an open fire, in a stove also made of adobe. Ashes are saved; they are periodically spread over parts of the courtyard and watered down, drying to a thin, rough, concretelike surface.

Chickens, dogs, cats, even a pig kept in a small wooden cage share the courtyard with the family.

Electricity is routed through the houses with extension cords laid in narrow channels chiseled out of concrete or brick.

But Jorge will miss everything about his home when he is gone.

The first time he left, in 1999, his wife, Sonia, was pregnant with their first child. The little girl, Daniella, was 2 when he returned and had no clue he was her father.

The idea of having to reintroduce himself to his second daughter hurts deeply. He has talked to his older girl, explaining to her that he is leaving and why, but he is not sure she understands.

Sonia, however, knows exactly what to expect: long nights

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It's family tradition to head north

without her husband; weeks, sometimes a month, without hearing his voice over the phone.

"Those days are very difficult," she says through an interpreter. "I don't know anything about him."

She'll fight the depression she knows is ahead by immersing herself in the children and housework, all the while waiting for the infrequent calls from her husband.

\$1,000 to cross border

As for the money he'll wire back, she offers a lament familiar to homemakers worldwide: It doesn't go very far.

The first three or four checks will pay off the smugglers; the going rate is about \$1,000 to cross the border and get Jorge to California. He'll work the fields there until he can save enough money to ride a bus to Orlando, where he hopes to bunk with relatives and latch on to a job in home construction. He likely will start off as a helper, doing menial tasks such as cleanup and fetching tools and materials for more-skilled workers.

Once travel and smuggler expenses are paid, the next check he sends back will go to his parents. Only then will money flow to Sonia, who will spend it on food, clothes and other essentials. Whenever possible, she will put pesos aside for a larger purchase. Last time Jorge was away, she saved enough to buy a double bed.

She'll also bank money for possible doctor visits and hospital stays in Zacapu, a town of about 60,000 that's 15 minutes east of 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.

With young children and aging parents, Sonia knows her meager savings can be wiped out quickly by an accident or prolonged illness.

Her fantasy is to join Jorge in the United States and build a new life there. But Jorge and others working in the North caution that the cost of living — for everything from milk to rent to shoes — is much higher than in Mexico. Jorge figures he would have to work two full-time jobs to support his family in America.

Beyond the economics, there is the worry of trying to smuggle children into the States. It is dangerous enough for adults, Jorge says, crossing hot, snake-filled deserts and, sometimes, swimming across the Rio Grande. Unless he could come up with an almost foolproof plan, the children will have to stay in Cortijo Nuevo with Sonia.

Avoiding Border Patrol

As it stands, Jorge expects to leave sometime in December, boarding an old bus with dozens of other men from his village and surrounding towns and riding on bumpy, curving roads for 20-plus hours. They will pass from the highlands — the elevation about 6,100 feet above sea level — and wind through the desolate Mexican desert.

His destination: the town of Nogales, which sits on the border separating Mexico and Arizona. From there, he and a dozen or so other migrants will follow a smuggler — Jorge will pay him \$1,000 — across the miles of open desert, traveling only at night to avoid the heat, as well as the Border Patrol agents.

After two or three days of walking — subsisting solely on the water and bread he can carry — he is supposed to hook up near Tucson, Ariz., with a van or bus driven by a smuggler and ride to Santa Paula, Calif.

Once there, he will work in the orange and lemon groves and vegetable fields surrounding the city, 65 miles northwest of Los Angeles. He'll live with relatives, allowing him to save money for his journey to Orlando, where he'll join Gaspar and several cousins already working in construction.

While the hours will be long and the work arduous, Jorge will comfort himself with thoughts of home:

His mother's homemade chicken broth and tortillas; playing left defender most Sundays for his village soccer team, their uniforms bearing the name of Corona, the popular Mexican-made beer; and the annual spring rodeo, which draws more than 1,000 people from all over the area, wearing their best clothes and riding on freshly brushed horses.

He'll even recall the fledgling 14-member band — dubbed the *Peligro Guerrilleros*, or "Dangerous Guerrillas" — who are teaching themselves to play in the small community center that backs up to Jorge's home.

The group, which reads handwritten sheets of music, hopes someday to be good enough to play in parades and at parties, maybe even weddings, like the one earlier this year in the nearby sister village of Cortijo Viejo.

The groom, Thomas Cordova, said he and his bride, Sofia Fuentes, left the house they share in Idaho because he couldn't see getting married anywhere other than in his hometown. She is a U.S. citizen; he has a green card, making him a legal immigrant.

"Mexico is free," said Cordova, who wore a three-piece suit and 10-gallon hat on his



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Head of family. Jorge's father, Antonio, worked in the United States in the 1950s, picking vegetables in California and running cattle in Texas as part of the *bracero* program. Now, he has sons working in several U.S. states. He says money that his sons send from the North is vital to the family's survival.

wedding day. "I've got my family right here. I am comfortable here."

The bottom line for Cordova, 37, and countless other Mexican immigrants is this: America is where they work and live much of the time. But their heart never leaves Mexico.

"It's different here," said Cordova, as the band played in the background and he and his 34-year-old bride mingled with relatives and friends during an outdoor reception held near the whitewashed community center.

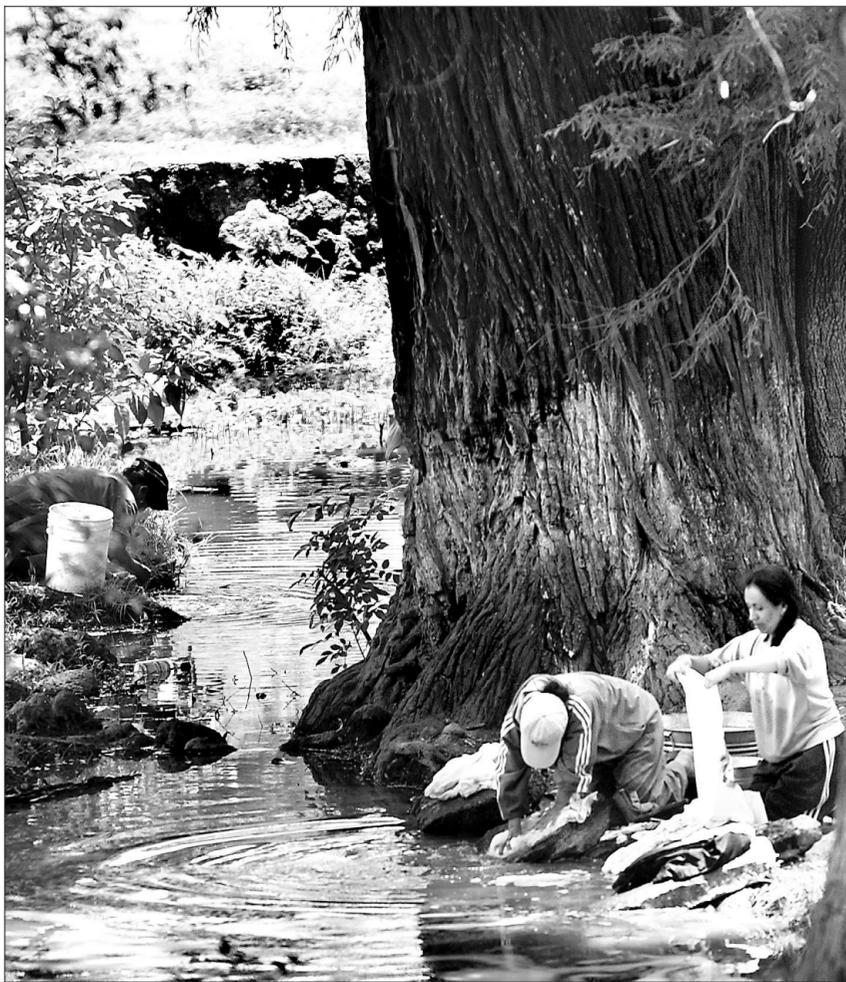
But sometimes even the lure of family and home is not enough to bring migrants home to Cortijo Viejo.

Jorge's cousin Julian has decided to stay permanently in greater Orlando. He has purchased a basic three-bedroom, one-bath house that seems palatial compared with the homes of his family and friends in the village.

Julian, who slipped his wife into the country five years ago, has two young children who were born in Central Florida, making them something their parents are not: American citizens.

"We'd like to live in Mexico," he said. "But we don't have a choice. There's no work in Mexico."

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ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Laundry day. Some of the families of Cortijo Nuevo lack running water and must use a stream to wash their clothes. Families who have members working in the United States often are sent money. Some construction workers in Central Florida send 3 of 4 paychecks back to Mexico, where several generations of their family share the same house.

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Near the Rio Grande. The Border Patrol apprehends Cesar Enrique Zaera Martinez (left), 19, and Ulises Mendez Tejada, 21.

Border Patrol's 10,000 agents catch only part of illegal influx

Spotting signs: Agents know migrants use many ways to sneak in

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 Tejada, 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.

Tejada, 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, Tejada 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.

Tejada 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.

The line separating Mexico from California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas features a variety of terrain: large expanses of bleak desert, numerous mountain ranges, rivers, wetlands and estuaries.

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

"They're pretty good people. They hardly give us a hard time. They come for a better life."

— AGENT FRANK MARTINEZ

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ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

At checkpoint. Border Patrol officers stop all vehicles recently near Laredo, Texas, in a search for Mexicans and drugs entering the U.S. illegally. On average, the Laredo Border Patrol division catches 225 migrants a day.

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2003 deaths have passed 2002's total

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them all," Border Patrol Supervisor Eugenio Rodriguez said.

And sometimes nobody wins. Hundreds of migrants die each year, of heat and thirst in the desert, beneath the treacherous waters of the Rio Grande or locked inside an airless tractor-trailer or locked boxcar. The Border Patrol logged 320 deaths along the border in 2002; the count this year stood at 340 through Oct. 1.

Migrants are well aware of the dangers.

"It's a risk I have to take," said Jorge, a 28-year-old farmer who lives in Cortijo Nuevo, a village in Mexico's south-central highlands.

Intending to slip into the United States next month, he said he prays almost every day that he will make it safely to his eventual goal, Orlando, to work in construction.

Rio Grande poses risks

In Laredo, one of the biggest hazards facing migrants is the Rio Grande. Its murky, brown waters can run fast and deep.

"You better be an Olympic-style swimmer. It'll suck you right under," Rodriguez said.

That's why Jorge, who has crossed to America twice before, prefers the Arizona desert.

Carrying only bread, crackers and bottled water, he will walk for up to 72 hours, resting during the day to avoid the heat and the Border Patrol. As many as 10 to 12 other illegal migrants will accompany him.

Their route is mapped by smugglers, who also arrange for a bus or van to pick up the travelers at preordained spots and take them to their final destination. The cost: usually about \$1,000, though Florida can cost nearly \$2,000 because of the distance involved.

Sometimes, the smugglers are a greater threat to the migrants than the Border Patrol or the harsh terrain.

Jorge's first cousin Julian said he had to fight one "coyote" who was making sexual advances toward his wife as they tried to steal into Texas. Julian, now a carpenter in Orlando, said the man quit after he knocked him into a cactus.

It is not unusual, Border Patrol agents and migrants say, for smugglers to rob or beat their clients and leave them wandering in the desert.

Like most migrants, Jorge has been caught several times trying to get into the country. Once, running from the Border Patrol

in the desert, he twisted an ankle and had to give up. Another time, his cousin hurt his hip, and Jorge waited with him for the Border Patrol.

Many ways to enter U.S.

Migrants get in any number of ways. Some walk through the desert or ride in truck trailers; others hide under false bottoms in cars and vans, hop a train, walk along the beaches of California or, less frequently, use false papers to walk or ride past immigration officials at checkpoints.

Veteran Border Patrol agents have seen it all. But the volume of traffic that streams across the border almost ensures that many migrants will make it. In Laredo alone, as many as 7,000 trucks a day cross into the United States.

"How are you going to stop it?" asked an immigration agent at one of the main bridges spanning the Rio Grande.

Not that the Border Patrol and immigration officials aren't trying. In the past decade, the number of agents was boosted to more than 10,000, and sophisticated equipment such as night-vision goggles and electronic sensors was purchased.

Border Patrol agents even have heat-sensing cameras mounted 30-foot-high on pickups that can spot a jack rabbit up to three miles away on a moonless night.

Dogs are used, too, to sniff out drugs and humans hiding in cars and trucks passing through checkpoints.

And luck doesn't hurt. Agent Perez just happened to drive up on Tejada and Martinez as he was making his nightly rounds.

Captured migrants are dealt with quickly. They're taken to a Border Patrol jail, where it takes about an hour to fingerprint them and run their names through a computer to determine how many times they have been caught before. If the total is more than a half-dozen times, they may be handed over to federal authorities and sentenced to a few months in jail.

Most often, though, they are loaded in a van, 10 to 15 at a time, and driven to the closest bridge. There, an agent walks them halfway across and watches to ensure they end up in the Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo.

"They're pretty good people," said Agent Frank Martinez, who escorts four or five groups of migrants a day. "They hardly give us a hard time. They come for a better life."

And no one kids himself: Most of those sent home will try to sneak back, some within a few hours.

"They have nowhere else to go," Perez said, "but to try again."



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

In Laredo, Texas. Border Patrol Agent Frank Martinez escorts 15 Mexicans back to Mexico over the Rio Grande recently after they were caught entering the U.S. He would take illegal migrants back to Mexico over the bridge 5 more times that day.



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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.

