A thousand little maps: Kindness on the border

by Gordon Atkinson in the April 4, 2006 issue

Summers are hot in South Texas. Unthinkably hot. Impossibly hot. Your skin starts to sting the minute you step outside. In the hottest part of the day, everything stops. Insects crawl underground. Animals run and hide. Mosquitoes go wherever it is they go when they're not making us miserable. The sun throbs and shimmers. It is so bright that your pupils squeeze shut and all the colors of the earth fade into olives, browns and burnt khakis. Cicadas hang upside down in the trees and emit a continuous buzzing noise that sounds too artificial to come from a living creature. It sounds like a broken smoke alarm that won't shut off no matter how many times you punch it with a broom handle. It's almost as if the heat has a sound of its own.

South Texas heat deserves an exotic label. The Spanish word *caliente* works well, I think. If you blow your exhaustion into the penultimate syllable and say it with some attitude, you get a sense of what it's like here in August.

CaliENte!

When the sun finally sets and the temperature drops to the low 90s, creatures pour out of their burrows to take care of the business of living. Humans spill out of homes onto porches. Dogs crawl out from under houses and burst out of doggie doors. Birds take to the air and insects come forth. South Texas is alive from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m., then again from 6 p.m. and on into the night.

As you head south out of San Antonio, you begin to enter the brush country. It's something of a cross between a desert and a briar patch. Cacti abound, and almost every plant has thorns or spines of some kind. Everything is armored and protected. As far as I'm concerned, some of the cacti are even on the offensive.

It is this brutal and scorched countryside that thousands of Mexicans brave each year as they cross the border looking for a share of the legendary wealth of los Estados Unidos. They travel mostly at night. During the day they lie panting under

thin and twisted mesquite or huisache trees, both of which have terrifying thorns that look like something out of the Old Testament.

With little or no education, many of them do not realize how far it is from the border to civilization. They cross in remote areas, sometimes without guidance and always without adequate water. Some manage to find isolated ranch houses. Terrified of the border patrol, they watch these houses closely before sneaking over to the faucet to slurp water like madmen until their bellies and milk jugs are full. Then they crawl back to the brush to wait for nightfall.

No one can estimate the numbers of Mexicans who have died under the sun in the thousands of square miles of open country in South Texas. They die every day. Very likely someone is dying while I am writing this. Sometimes their bodies are found clutching crude, hand-drawn maps and empty milk jugs. But mostly their bodies are never found. They die alone, of thirst. No one wants to imagine what the end is like for them.

Their families will always wonder what happened. Did they die, or did they find a new life and forget about their loved ones back home?

The border patrol claims to have captured and sent home 1.2 million illegal immigrants along the southern border of the United States in 2004 alone. These are the ones they caught. No one knows how many got away and either made it or died trying.

There are those who claim that they can take you over the border in safety, provided you can pay. They are called coyotes, and if somehow you can afford their services, you are placing your life in the hands of a stranger who does not care if you live or die. It’s a gamble that many take. In May of 2003, 70 illegal immigrants who were locked in the back of a truck trailer were abandoned near Victoria when the driver ran away, fearful of being arrested. The temperature inside soared, and their cries were not heard for a very long time. Nineteen died, including a five-year-old boy.

The safest way to sneak into the United States is in the company of an experienced guide. These are people who have made the trip successfully a number of times and bring others across with them. These guides know the landmarks and have little maps with water and safe hiding places marked on them.

Sometimes, when the stars are out and the humidity is holding the heat of the day close to the earth so that even darkness is not much relief, I think about the people who are moving northward under the cover of night. I think about their maps and the most basic of human needs that are expressed with pencil marks.

Water.

Safe place.

Danger!

Friendly ranch—food.

I've lived in Texas my whole life, and I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't have the greatest respect for the men and women who make this treacherous journey north, looking for work and a better life. The politicians are always upset about illegal immigration, but regular people shake their heads in admiration, understanding that gumption like that is a rare thing and deserving of our compassion and respect. Many illegal aliens live and work among us here in San Antonio. No one asks, and no one that I know tells. We have a mutual understanding of need and respect. All the other stuff is for the politicians to work out. We see things in simpler ways. Here is a job, and here is someone who desperately needs a job. Everything else seems less important.

Roger, a friend of mine, has a ranch about 40 miles north of the border with Mexico and 25 miles from the nearest town. There are no paved roads leading to his property. He is there about twice a month on weekends. I went with him once and was treated to a Texas steak cooked on an open grill over a mesquite fire. I won't try to describe it. I wouldn't do it justice, and you would begin to want something that you cannot have.

Roger showed me the simple house that was on the ranch when he bought it. It is made of wood and has a kitchen, some bunks and a bathroom. I asked him if he had ever seen any illegal aliens.

"Now and again," he said. "But not very often. They don't want to be seen. But sometimes you can tell they've passed this way."

When Roger goes home at the end of the weekend, he leaves the door to his ranch house unlocked and puts cans of food out on the counter. There is a sign on the door

written in Spanish. It says, “Please turn off the water and close the door when you leave. Thank you.”

Many people report destruction of property by illegal aliens, but in the eight years that Roger has owned his ranch he has not had a single incident of vandalism or theft. When he comes back to his ranch the door is always closed, the water is never running and the food is always gone.

I’m pretty sure that Roger’s ranch is marked on some of the maps that illegal immigrants carry north with them. It is likely marked with a big star and an arrow pointing to it. *This is a safe place*. *Water and food and a friendly rancher*.

How many desperate people have passed through Roger’s ranch? How many of God’s children have received a cup of cold water and an ounce of hope there? They are hungry. Their tortillas are moldy, their water gone. They stumble upon Roger’s house, read the sign, and go inside to find not only water but also food and a restroom. Imagine the stories that are told in shacks and adobe homes of the sign on his door and the miracle of food found in the nick of time. Can you hear their prayers of thanks for the blessed saint whose name they do not know?

We’ll never know how many have visited Roger’s ranch. But I believe the best acts of goodness and grace are of this kind—unknown except by those who receive them. Unseen by anyone else, and never celebrated by anyone else except in the kingdom of heaven where God sees all and counts even the hairs on your head.

When Roger dies, he will have accomplished a lot. He is a good man, a hard worker and a serious and gentle Christian. There will be many good things to say about him. But since very few people know about Roger’s ranch house and the sign on his door, it is possible that this good thing will be missing from his eulogy. In case that happens, I would like to say something now.

Roger’s house was marked on a thousand little maps. His home has been a point of grace larger than the land, larger than life, larger even than suffering. This kind of goodness is *con safo*, as they say on the border. Nothing can touch it.

Read more:
Information about and stories of undocumented immigrants
Border patrol statistics for 2000-2004
The Victoria incident