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Mexican Migration to the United States: A Long
Twentieth Century of Coyotaje

By David Spenner

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Mexican Migration to the United States, 1882-1992:

A Long Twentieth Century of *Coyotaje*

Report prepared by

David Spener, Ph.D.*

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* Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas U.S.A.
Direct correspondence to dspener@trinity.edu.

ABSTRACT

Coyotaje is the Mexican cultural practice of hiring an intermediary, known as a *coyote*, to get around an inconvenient or burdensome government regulation. The term also refers to the brokerage of commodities. In both these senses, *coyotaje* has played a fundamental role in facilitating mass Mexican migration to the U.S.A. since passage of the Chinese exclusion and contract labor laws of the 1880s. In this paper I review the history of Mexican migration, foregrounding the evolution of the practice of *coyotaje* across five distinct migratory periods—*el enganche* (1882-1921); labor recruitment, clandestine migration, and mass deportations (1921-1942); the Bracero Program (1942-1964); the return to undocumented migration (1964-1986); and the legalization period (1986-1993). My review documents a remarkable degree of continuity in the practice of *coyotaje* across these periods, as well as in the tactics used by government authorities to combat it. In the conclusion, I argue that although *coyotaje* begins as a way for U.S. employers to gain extra-legal access to Mexican workers, over time it evolves into an essential and strikingly successful strategy employed by Mexican workers to gain access to better wages in the U.S. labor market.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: *COYOTES* AND *COYOTAJE*

As any Anglophone reader of this report who is familiar with the issue of Mexican migration to the United States knows, the people who guide undocumented Mexican labor migrants across the border are known as *coyotes*.¹ As native speakers of Mexican Spanish know, this is but one of several common colloquial uses of the word *coyote*, beyond its being the common name for the mammal *Canis latrans*. In fact, within Mexican territory two other colloquial uses of *coyote* are more widely used than the one we migration scholars most often think of. *El diccionario breve de mexicanismos* defines a *coyote* as *un intermediario ilegítimo de trámites burocráticos* [an illegitimate facilitator of bureaucratic procedures] (Gómez de Silva 2001). This is the most common colloquial definition of what a *coyote* is in Mexico and its use in this sense dates back at least to the latter half of the 19th century (García Izcabalceta 1899). In Mexico, when people want to get around burdensome government red tape, which to them often seems arbitrary, capricious, and needlessly fraught with delays and stonewalls by unresponsive officials, they go to a *coyote* for help. While they realize that hiring a *coyote* to cut red tape is *illegal*, they are unlikely to view this widespread cultural practice as particularly *immoral*. A second widely-used colloquial use of the word *coyote* is to refer to the broker of a commodity, such as coffee, who serves as a middleman linking the direct producer to firms who consume it in their own production processes or carry out its wider distribution (see for example, Carlsen and Cervantes 2004).

Both of these two common colloquial uses of the term *coyote* are relevant to the history and current practice of Mexican migration to the United States. With regard to the first use, unauthorized Mexican migrants who attempt to enter the United States hire *coyotes* to help them get around the

¹ Other colloquial terms are also used to refer to this occupation, such as *patero* and *pollero*, but these have come into use more recently than *coyote* and/or are used mainly in specific regions of Mexico rather than country/border-wide.

bureaucratic requirements (which to them certainly can appear to be arbitrary, capricious, and needlessly filled with delays and runarounds) they would have to fulfill to enter as legal immigrants. Leading their clients on long treks through the desert away from the legal U.S. ports of entry is but one coyote-strategy for getting around the U.S. immigration bureaucracy. Others include obtaining false documents or paying officials to let them pass. With regard to the second colloquial use of the term, *coyotes* have also operated historically on the border and in the Mexican interior as brokers of a special commodity that has been in strong demand in the United States for over a century—the labor power of Mexican workers. U.S. employers have worked through *coyotes* to obtain this commodity on a widespread basis for a wide variety of types of production ever since the beginning of mass migration of Mexicans to the United States and some, such as the poultry-processing plants dotting the U.S. southeast, continue to do so today.

According to *El diccionario breve de mexicanismos*, the term *coyotaje* [ko-yo-tah-hay] refers to the “*ocupación y actividad del coyote*” [the occupation and activity of the coyote] (Gómez de Silva 2001). With regard to border-crossing, we might therefore think of *coyotaje* as the set of *strategies* and *practices* engaged in by coyotes to facilitate migrants’ unauthorized entry into the United States. Here though, we must remember that the *hiring of a coyote* is also a well-defined strategy and practice for border-crossing on the part of migrants, on the one hand, and for obtaining Mexican workers on the part of U.S. employers, on the other. Moreover, we must bear in mind that wherever *coyotaje* occurs, it involves coyotes, migrants, and U.S. employers engaging in *relationships* with one another, sometimes fleeting and anonymous, other times more intimate and on-going, sometimes solidary and collaborative and other times conflictive and exploitative. It is also significant that when *coyotaje* occurs at the border, it has typically been undertaken at the behest of either the migrant or the U.S. employer, or both.² I believe, therefore, that it is most accurate, for analytical purposes, to extend the definition of *coyotaje* to include the act of hiring the coyote and the negotiation of strategies to follow and practices to engage in that goes on *among* coyotes, migrants and their friends and family members, and U.S. employers. In other words, the participants in the elaboration of the strategies and practices of *coyotaje* include not only the coyotes themselves but also the people who hire them. Thus, I propose the following formal definition of *coyotaje* as it relates to Mexican migration to the United States:

Coyotaje is the set of labor migration strategies and practices elaborated by *coyotes* at the behest of and in concert with migrants, migrants’ friends and family members, and/or migrants’ U.S. employers.

² In many cases the “U.S. employer” is a Mexican relative, friend, or fellow townsperson of the migrant being “crossed” by the coyote.

I use this definition in the remainder of the report. Analytically speaking, I believe that it is more fruitful to focus attention on *coyotaje* as it is practiced on the border, rather than on the individual characteristics of *coyotes* as its professional practitioners, for two reasons. First, labor migration strategies and practices that include the hiring of a coyote involve a variety of actors in addition to *coyotes*, including migrants, their friends and family members in both the Mexican community of origin and in the U.S. community of destination, as well as U.S. employers and/or their Mexican *mayordomos* [foremen, work-crew leaders]. Thus, if we focus attention on *coyotes* rather than on *coyotaje*, we err by excluding from the analysis the roles played by other significant actors who engage in what Heyman (1998) has referred to as “conspiracies to avoid the law” with regard to Mexican migration to the United States. Second, a focus on *coyotaje* rather than *coyotes* foregrounds the processual elements of surreptitious border-crossing, permitting us to analyze the evolving dynamics of the *relationships* among the various actors who engage in this process, rather than the static, cross-sectional characteristics of the individuals identified as coyotes at any given moment in time.

INTRODUCTION

The history of *coyotaje* on the Mexico-U.S. border dates back to the beginning of Mexican migration to the United States in the late 19th century. Writing in the 1970s, Lewis (1979:40) reported that “[e]ven today, in some Mexican villages, men are old enough to remember paying a coyote to get them across the border for work in the early 1900s, just as their sons did in the 1920s, and their grandsons and great-grandsons do today.” *Coyotaje*’s prevalence and the forms it has taken have varied in accordance with periodic shifts in U.S. and Mexican migratory policies and the changes in migratory practices and patterns that have been provoked by these shifts.

Building upon earlier work by Durand (1994 and 1998), Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002), and Durand and Massey (2003), we can identify a number of distinct periods in the history of Mexican migration across the border which, in turn, define distinct periods in the history of *coyotaje* along the border. I will consider five of these periods in this paper. The first period, from the early 1880s until 1921, was characterized by the active, illegal recruitment of Mexican laborers by U.S. employers with weak enforcement of the statutes barring immigrant contract labor in both countries. The second period, from 1921 until 1942, featured the imposition of new restrictions on the entry of Mexican laborers into the United States, the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol as a migratory police force, and the mass deportation of Mexicans during the Great Depression years. The third period, from 1942 to until 1965, featured the importation of millions of Mexican contract laborers to work in U.S. agriculture, this time implemented within the legal framework of a bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments intended to address wartime farm labor shortages in the United States and the lack of

sufficient wage labor opportunities for men in rural Mexico. In spite of the binational program fostering large-scale, legal labor migration, this period also featured massive unauthorized migration by Mexicans and a second wave of mass deportations in the 1950s. The fourth period, from 1965 through 1986, was characterized by the absence of a legal program for the importation of laborers from Mexico and a consequent surge of undocumented labor migration as a means of satisfying U.S. employers' demand for low-wage workers. The fifth period, from 1987 until 1993, was characterized by the legalization of the status of over two million Mexican undocumented residents of the United States and the prohibition of employment of undocumented workers in the United States, both as a consequence of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. This last period set the stage for a sixth period, in which we find ourselves today, characterized by the dramatic militarization of the Mexico-United States border in a series of U.S. border control "operations" and other measures taken by the U.S. government to further criminalize unauthorized movement across its border with Mexico and to punish those who aid and abet it.

In sketching out the history of coyotaje on the Mexico-U.S. border from the 1880s to the early 1990s, I rely almost entirely on published sources in the extant academic and journalistic literature. Rather than present the results of any new primary archival or other types of research I have conducted myself, in this report I offer a re-reading of the history of Mexican migration to the United States that highlights the role that coyotaje has played in initiating, expanding, and sustaining it over the course of more than a century. In doing so, I point out that, in spite of the alarms sounded by politicians and the sensationalist accounts published in the press in the post 9-11 environment, much of what we observe today with regard to clandestine Mexican migration aided by coyotes has occurred repeatedly in the past, generating similar reactions to those we observe today.

COYOTAJE DURING THE PERIOD OF *EL ENGANCHE* (1882-1921)

Mass Mexican migration to the United States began in the last two decades of the 19th century as a consequence of the confluence of several factors. Within Mexico, the economic modernization policies of the dictator Porfirio Díaz, whose term ran from 1876 to the outbreak of revolution in 1910, resulted in dramatic increases in foreign investment, rapid industrialization, expansion of the mining industry, and the rise of a plantation-based agro-export sector in the countryside, featuring especially the cultivation of sugar, coffee, henequen, and cotton (Durand 1994; García 1981). The rise of this agro-export sector was achieved in large measure through the expropriation of communally-held lands known as *ejidos*, whose production was directed towards community subsistence and sale on the domestic market. These lands were transferred to Mexican *hacendados* and foreign investors in a move that proved disastrous for small-

scale farmers (Corwin 1973). García (1981:34) cites an estimate that set the number of farmers who lost communal lands during the *porfiriato* at as many as 5 million. Durand (1994:102-103) notes that the Porfirian economic model also had strongly differential regional impacts, such that agricultural areas the Western Central region of Mexico (including the states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas, among others) were especially hard hit. This area had been the traditional bastion of grain and cattle production for the domestic market through the middle of the 19th century, but saw its economy decline dramatically relative to other regions during the *porfiriato*. This region was also densely populated and, thus, it is not surprising that many of its residents began to seek economic opportunities elsewhere in Mexico and, subsequently north of the border in the United States (Cardoso 1980:1-2).

The second factor promoting emigration from rural areas in the Mexican interior towards the north was also an outcome of Díaz' development policies: the construction of rail lines that linked Mexico City and Western Central Mexico to the northern border with the United States. The first line to be completed connected Mexico City with El Paso del Norte in 1884, where it met with four rail lines in the United States: the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe; the Southern Pacific; the Texas and Pacific; and the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio. By 1888, Piedras Negras and Nuevo Laredo also had rail lines. By 1890, "virtually all of Mexico's principal population and production centers were connected to markets in all forty-eight contiguous U.S. states and territories" (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:27). The first rail line connecting Matamoros with the Mexican interior was completed in 1883 (Morales and Schmal 2004), but it would not be until 1904 that Brownsville was connected by rail to the U.S. interior (Montejano 1987:107). The completion of these rail lines provided displaced rural Mexicans with the means to travel long distances northward from their homes in the interior towards industrial growth poles in northern Mexico and beyond, into the United States.

Within the United States, a confluence of several political and economic factors encouraged the development of a migratory stream of Mexicans across the border by the end of the 19th century. Rapid expansion of agriculture and mining in the Southwestern United States required the recruitment of large migratory workforce of manual laborers. The region was sparsely settled and insufficient workers could be found locally (Reisler 1976:5). In addition, the dramatic increase in sugar beet production at the turn of the century "created a need for veritable armies of workers" in the Western Plains and Rocky Mountain States (Cardoso 1980:19). Expansion of cotton plantations into Central and Western Texas, and then into Arizona and California, which coincided with the population displacements of the Mexican Revolution, also contributed to the rise of a Mexican workforce in the Southwest U.S.A., entering through the land ports of Brownsville, Laredo, and Eagle Pass and concentrating in San Antonio, which shipped workers to the new cotton fields (Reisler 1976:5; McWilliams 1948:158). Added to this was the need for

thousands of workers to lay and maintain the rail lines that would have to transport the growing output of the region to markets in other parts of the country (Durand and Arias 2005).

Two political developments in the 1880s made recruitment of sufficient numbers of workers from “traditional” sources difficult or impossible. In 1882, the United States promulgated the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred the entry of Chinese workers into the country (Cardoso 1980; Durand 1994; U.S. Immigration and Citizenship Services 2003b). Later that same year, legislation was adopted that ordered that new immigrants arriving in the United States pay a “head tax” of 50 cents, which was subsequently raised to \$4 by legislation adopted in 1907 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2003b and 2003c). Given the geography of the United States at the time, the Chinese, who had been crucial to the development of agriculture and mining in California, were not easily replaced by European migrants.³ Next, the United States adopted the Immigration Act of 1885, which banned immigration induced by offers of employment, i.e., which banned the importation of contract labor and also accentuated the labor shortages experienced in key industries in the Southwestern and Western regions of the country (Cardoso 1980:28). Then, in 1891, legislation was adopted that “prohibited the importation of alien laborers by the use of advertisements circulated in foreign countries which promised employment” (Cárdenas 1975:67).

Taken together, these factors led U.S. employers to direct their attention to Mexico as a place to recruit the workers needed to fill the growing demands of agriculture, mining, and industry in these regions (Durand 1994:106). In principle, the ban on the importation of contract labor applied to Mexicans as well as arrivals from other countries. In practice, however, the ban, which could easily be implemented in U.S. seaports as migrants disembarked from ships, was quite difficult to enforce systematically on the nation’s porous and unfortified border with Mexico (Cardoso 1980:28; Clark 1908:471). In the second decade of the 20th century, two other developments would promote mass migration of Mexicans across the border. In Mexico, the outbreak of revolution led thousands to seek refuge—and work—in the United States. Towards the end of the decade, this “push” of Mexicans out of their country was complemented by another strong “pull” factor from within the United States: the labor shortages induced in the domestic economy by the country’s entry into World War I (Cardoso 1980; García 1981; Reisler 1976). Even before the U.S. entry into the conflict, submarine warfare in the Atlantic upon the outbreak of war in 1914 curtailed European emigration to the Americas, creating a shortage of migrant labor from other countries (García 1996:12).

³ California agricultural and mining interests sought to replace Chinese contract laborers with Japanese workers, but this met with limited success as Japanese proved to be more entrepreneurial and rebellious than their Chinese counterparts. In addition, the same racial prejudices directed toward the Chinese were applied to the Japanese. By 1907, the Gentlemen’s Agreement between the U.S. and Japanese governments put an end to Japanese labor migration to the United States as well (Cardoso 1980:20).

Coyotaje and the Chinese

Although this report concerns itself primarily with coyotaje involving Mexican migrants, it is worth examining the strategies and practices of the first coyotes to operate on the Mexican-U.S. border, who were dedicated to bringing “excluded” Chinese into the United States after 1882 (Samora 1971:34-35). As Lee (2002) has documented, by the early 1900s, extensive and sophisticated networks of Chinese, U.S., and Mexican entrepreneurs had organized to smuggle Chinese into the United States through San Diego, Mexicali, and El Paso to work and/or be reunited with family members in California. Indeed, prior to the 1920s, most of the United States immigration control efforts on the border with Mexico were oriented towards the detection and apprehension of Chinese rather than Mexicans, especially after cooperation with Canadian authorities reduced their surreptitious entry through Canada (Lee 2002:71 and 80-81; Samora 1971:34-35). From 1907 to 1909, for example, 2,492 Chinese were arrested by U.S. officials for illegally entering the country from Mexico, at a time when restrictions on the entry of Mexicans were weakly enforced, if enforced at all (Lee 2002:59). In much the same way as nationals of Middle Eastern countries are today viewed with alarm by U.S. immigration officials, Chinese “OTMs” (“other than Mexicans”) were seen as a particular menace to be dealt with early in the 20th century (U.S. Bureau of Immigration 1903:63, cited in Samora 1971:34-35).

The networks dedicated to leading Chinese into the United States were an “open secret” in border towns such as El Paso, where they operated with the cognizance and probable collusion of both Mexican and U.S. officials. In 1908, witnesses and U.S. government informants presented evidence to the U.S. Commissioner of Immigration that the former chief of police of El Paso was the leader of one of the “gangs of smugglers” in that city (Lee 2002:62-63). The coyotaje practiced by the multiethnic networks of this period appears to have been no less sophisticated than that practiced by contemporary networks dedicated to bringing Chinese into the United States. In addition to paying off government officials on both sides of the border, they provided their clients with false Mexican and U.S. immigration documents, U.S. currency, Chinese-English dictionaries, guidebooks to Mexico, and U.S. railroad maps. A frequent strategy employed by these coyotaje networks was to “disguise” their Chinese clients as Mexicans, which proved to be surprisingly effective in permitting them to enter the United States through legal ports of entry:

One of the most important steps in Chang’s [a Chinese coyote] operation involved disguising the newly arrived Chinese as Mexican residents. The Chinese cut their queues and exchanged their “blue jeans and felt slippers” for “the most picturesque Mexican dress.” They received fraudulent Mexican citizenship papers, and they also learned to say a few words of Spanish, especially “Yo soy mexicano” (I am Mexican).⁴ ... The

⁴ Those familiar with U.S. popular culture may be reminded here of the 1987 Hollywood film *Born in East L.A.*, starring the Chicano comedian Cheech Marín. In the film, Marín portrays a young Chicano from East Los Angeles who gets stranded in Tijuana without an I.D. In one hilarious scene, Marín is paid by a coyote to teach a group of

Mexican disguise was apparently quite successful. In 1907, the immigrant inspector Marcus Braun traveled undercover to Mexico to investigate Chinese, Japanese, and European immigration through Mexico to the United States. In Mexico City, he uncovered the use of fraudulent Mexican citizenship certificates and photographs by Chinese to facilitate their entry into the United States. On examination of the photographs, Braun expressed amazement that it was “exceedingly difficult to distinguish these Chinamen from Mexicans.” To make his point even clearer, he included in his report two “exhibits” of the fraudulent citizenship papers as well as photographs of Chinese on a steamship, emphasizing that the Chinese in question could easily pass as Mexican without detection (Lee 2002:61-62).

It also turns out that the construction of tunnels under the border to move drugs and people surreptitiously—something that features prominently in news coverage of the border today—is a strategy that has been practiced for over a century: Opium and Chinese migrants were being smuggled through tunnels dug under the Rio Grande that were connected to tunnel networks in El Paso’s Chinatown area in the 1880s (Farrar 1970, cited in Stoddard 1976:180). In addition to the more elaborate methods described above, the networks dedicated to bringing Chinese into the United States at the outset of the 20th century also engaged in a more straightforward form of coyotaje: the hiring of Mexican guides, including “river men,” to lead Chinese on surreptitious crossings of the border away from official ports of entry (Lee 2002:63 and 81).

The U.S. authorities’ methods for combating the clandestine entry of Chinese during this period were themselves quite sophisticated and intensively applied. Indeed, as indicated by this description of border control efforts in the El Paso area provided by the Commissioner General of Immigration, the U.S. authorities’ approach at that time bears a remarkable similarity to the one taken today by the Department of Homeland Security:

When Chinese smuggling was rampant on this border, a force at least approximately that required to cope with the situation was available. There were river guards to apprehend, if possible, the aliens and smugglers in the act of illegal entry; mounted men to pursue if the aliens eluded the vigilance of the officers at the points of crossing and proceeded overland by wagon or automobile; men to open and inspect freight cars before they left the border towns, and men to inspect all passenger trains leaving such towns. All these constituted the first line of defense. The second line of defense consisted of inspectors at strategical [sic] interior points on all railroads running north from the border, when another opening of freight cars and a thorough inspection of both passenger and freight trains occurred. The officers at these points, likewise, covered the highways for Chinese traveling afoot, by wagon, or in automobiles. ... It was found that smugglers accompanying aliens from the border unloaded them from trains—both passenger and freight—and detoured them around the inspection points. Third and even fourth lines of defense were therefore established on some of the railroads at points farther removed

Chinese migrants how to speak some Spanish and dress and act like they are young *vatos* from the *barrio* so they can blend in with the rest of the population in the East L.A. neighborhood where they will be living and working in a factory.

from the border (U.S. Department of Labor, Annual Report of Commissioner General of Immigration 1923: 18-19, cited in Samora 1971:36-37).

In the following year's report, the Commissioner bragged that the Immigration Service's force of approximately 60 mounted guards⁵ had done such an effective job of "apprehending smugglers and aliens" that "border running has come to be regarded as an extremely hazardous occupation" (U.S. Department of Labor, Annual Report of Commissioner General of Immigration 1924:23, cited in Samora 1971:37). Whether this was brag or fact, Lee reports that the price paid to coyotes by Chinese rose from \$25 to \$75 in the 1890s to \$200 by the mid 1920s [\$530, \$1,600, and \$2,200, respectively, in real 2004 U.S. dollars] (Lee 2002:60).⁶

U.S. immigration controls and Mexican nationals

Published historical accounts of this period (1882-1921) suggest that there were few controls systematically placed on the entry of Mexicans into the United States (e.g., Reisler 1976:12). In contrast with the considerable efforts made by the U.S. authorities to apprehend Chinese, Lee (2002:70-71) notes that Mexicans were generally waived into the country: "Mexican immigration was not wholly unregulated, but it did exist in a state of "benign neglect," and "little attention" was paid to Mexicans who crossed the border into the United States." Similarly, García (1981:37) states that until 1917,

... the only Mexican aliens who could not enter the country were the physically and mentally handicapped, paupers, beggars, all persons not capable of earning a living, convicted criminals, polygamists, anarchists, and prostitutes. Since 1885 immigration officials also had prohibited contract labor. Even under the 1907 Immigration Act [which raised the head tax to \$4 and authorized the President to refuse admission to Japanese laborers] immigrants from Mexico did not have to pay a head tax or any other entrance fee

In addition, there were very few U.S. government resources dedicated to migrant inspection and interdiction along the border at the turn of the century. In 1893, as Mexican labor migration was gaining steam following the completion of rail lines to Paso del Norte and eight years after the passage of the contract labor ban in 1885, there was only one U.S. immigration inspector present on the entire U.S. border with Mexico, who was stationed in El Paso. At century's end, there were only 4 inspectors, one each stationed at Nogales, Arizona, El Paso and Laredo, Texas, and in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. After the "Chinese Service" created by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was merged into the Bureau of Immigration in 1900, there were additional inspectors in Tucson, Arizona and San Diego, California.

⁵ These should not be confused with the Border Patrol, which was not created until 1924.

⁶ Here and elsewhere in this chapter I have inflated nominal dollars to 2004 dollars using conversion factors provided on-line by Dr. Robert Sahr, Department of Political Science, Oregon State University, retrieved on July 20, 2005 from http://www.oregonstate.edu/Dept/pol_sci/fac/sahr/cv2004.xls.

Following passage of the 1903 Immigration Act, the Immigration Service began recording entries and inspecting aliens—but not of Mexicans, who were not included in the statistics because they were not subject to the head tax levied on arriving immigrants beginning in 1882. Inspection of Mexicans at border ports of entry did not begin at all until 1906, and when it did, the majority were simply questioned, recorded, and admitted (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2004). Cardoso (1980:28) quotes one thirty-year veteran of law enforcement along the border from this period as stating that “the international line of demarcation remained largely unpoliced and unregulated before 1910 and for many years thereafter.” Reisler (1976:12) writes that prior to the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924, there were always fewer than 60 mounted immigration agents stationed along the border with Mexico.

Discretionary enforcement at local ports of entry

Although Mexican entry into the United States was not controlled in any systematic way prior to 1917, there is some historical evidence that restrictions could be placed on the flow on a local level, largely at the discretion of federal authorities in charge of a given legal port of entry. While Cardoso (1980:28) noted that 1885 legislation banning the importation of contract laborers was written with seaports in mind and, thus, was difficult to enforce along the border with Mexico, García (1981:51-52) reports that in El Paso, the biggest center for Mexican labor contracting on the border, local labor contractors and employers were on occasion prosecuted for violating the ban on importation of contract labor, citing specific cases brought in 1887, 1899, and 1902. Indeed, 52 out of the 175 contract-labor importation cases prosecuted by U.S. federal authorities between 1886 and 1890 originated in El Paso (Peck 2000:102). In response to this relatively intense enforcement of the contract labor ban in El Paso in the first decade of the 20th century, a substantial number of Mexican workers began to enter the United States at Laredo, many headed for San Antonio, the other principal labor contracting center in Texas (Guerin-González 1994:42).

Nonetheless, García (1981:53) notes that reports to the State Department written by U.S. consular officials in Ciudad Juárez that large numbers of Mexicans contracted to work in the United States had been entering the United States through the El Paso port of entry did not seem to bring about any special action on the part of the federal government. This incongruence suggests a substantial amount of discretion was exercised by local authorities in deciding which, if any violations of the contract labor law to prosecute. Indeed, from 1910 to 1912, the chief immigration inspector in El Paso negotiated his own local agreement with Mexican authorities to allow contract workers to be imported “legally,” if they were contracted to certain labor agencies that he had personally approved. This local agreement was overturned by immigration officials in Washington following legal complaints made by competitors of the approved labor agencies (Peck 2000:103-111).

It also appears that some significant number of Mexicans were denied entry to the United States by El Paso authorities on a discretionary basis. At times, denial of entry seems to have been based upon the immigration law's provisions banning admission to paupers and the diseased, although Reisler (1976:12) reports that the prohibition against the admission of paupers often went un-enforced. Still, in 1903 the El Paso Medical Association entreated the U.S. government to more vigorously enforce the law against unauthorized entry into the country based on its concern for an outbreak of bubonic plague in Mexico and its contention that "the most objectionable class of Mexicans did not cross over the international bridges but illegally waded across the Rio Grande" (García 1981:38-39). Peck (2000:70) reports that in the winter of 1909 El Paso's biggest labor contractor had a group of 15 workers to whom he had offered employment denied entry by U.S. officials at the border because they were not carrying sufficient funds (they each had less than U.S. \$2 on their person) to convince the officials that they would not become a public charge.⁷ Incidents such as this led El Paso contractors to instruct their Mexican *enganchadores* to be sure each worker had enough "show money" to convince immigration officials to admit them.

I have been unable to ascertain how exactly immigration inspectors in El Paso determined whether a given migrant was a pauper or not or whether she/he was healthy enough to be legally admitted to the United States, leaving us to wonder how many Mexicans might have had their legal admission to the United States denied for these reasons and, subsequently, attempted unauthorized entry. What is clear, however, is that immigration inspectors in El Paso did, on at least some occasions, deny entry to Mexicans seeking work when there were too few contracts available to accommodate them. This problem became acute, for example, in February 1907 when the immigration inspector in El Paso refused entry to Mexicans on a day when 250 new aspiring contract workers had arrived by rail (Durand 1994:113). According to Durand (1994), this problem owed to the migratory momentum that quickly accumulated following labor-recruiting coyotes' initial forays into Mexico, which at times resulted in many more migrants heading north than there were actual jobs awaiting them. The problem recurred with a vengeance in the summer of 1910:

In the middle of the summer of 1910, the season of strong demand for workers, [a newspaper reported that] "in Ciudad Juárez there are more than 2,000 laborers without work who have not been able to cross to the neighboring republic because they are not admitting any more people. The situation of these wretches is horrible. ... they walk through the streets begging for public charity." The large dimensions of the problem

⁷ In a separate account of this same incident, Guerin-González (1994:36-37) reports that the reason for the workers being turned back was that they were attempting to enter in violation of the contract labor ban. Without access to the original documents reviewed by these authors, I am unable to judge which interpretation is correct. More importantly, Guerin-González (1994:40-41) found that other Mexicans were denied admission to the United States in El Paso because they were paupers as well as cases where they were deemed to be in violation of the contract labor prohibition.

become evident if we take into account that at this time the border city only had 10,621 inhabitants (Durand 1994:114, translation from Spanish by Spener).

The El Paso restrictions on entry appear to have been sporadic and short-lived, however: After the outbreak of Revolution in 1910 and through 1915, the United States admitted “tens of thousands” of Mexicans as refugees, most of whom were economic rather than political refugees, i.e. had come to the United States to work (Cornelius 1978:14-15).

The Immigration Act of 1917 and its impact on Mexicans

1917 marked the beginning of the end of relatively unrestricted entry of Mexican nationals into the United States. The Immigration Act of 1917 imposed a literacy test and a steep \$8 head tax [\$120 in 2004 dollars] on all entrants to the country, including Mexicans for the first time. These requirements were a formidable barrier to legal entry for migrants from a country where few were literate and poverty was endemic (Reisler 1976:24). Wages for farm workers in the migration-sending region of West Central Mexico in the early 20th century were as low as 10 or 15 U.S. cents a day plus 3-1/2 kilos of corn for a day’s work from sun-up to sundown (Taylor 1933:35). Within a few months of the Act’s passage, agricultural interests in Arizona and California successfully lobbied to have the U.S. Secretary of Labor waive the literacy test, head tax, and 1885 ban on contract labor for Mexican farm workers. In 1918, railroad and mining interests lobbied successfully to have the waiver extend to Mexican rail workers and coal miners as well. These waivers were justified in part as a way to meet labor shortages in these sectors brought about by U.S. entry into World War I and they were set to be terminated in 1919 with the end of the war. Nonetheless, the benefited industries were able to convince the U.S. Labor Department to continue the exemptions for Mexican contract laborers until 1921, when they were finally eliminated (García 1981:46-51).⁸

In 1917, before the granting of waivers to Mexican agricultural, railroad, and mining workers took effect, legal entry by Mexicans fell precipitously. In El Paso, strict enforcement of the head tax in 1917 prompted many Mexicans to attempt to cross the Río Grande illegally downstream below Ysleta, Texas, where coyotes began to take them into the United States by rowboat, charging 50 cents per person [\$7 in 2004 dollars] (García 1981:48). Similarly, an oral history collected by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio describes how a woman and her husband paid a coyote \$10 each [\$110 each in 2004 dollars] to cross the Río Bravo into the United States from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas in 1919, after the coyote told them that U.S. officials would not permit them to enter legally because they did not know how to read (Gamio 1969, cited in Durand and Arias 2004:73).

⁸ Some authors have referred to the waivers granted to Mexicans during World War I as “el Primer Programa Bracero” [the First Bracero Program]. See, for example, Durand 1994:119.

Writing about the situation pertaining in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of southern Texas in this 1917-1921 period of U.S. policy transition, Slayden (1921:122) reported that the head tax, literacy test, and more rigid inspection rules imposed by the 1917 Immigration Act did nothing to reduce legal Mexican immigration, but “certainly increased the number of illegal entries,” to the point where he estimated that since 1917 about 75 percent of Mexicans coming into his part of Texas did so illegally. Moreover, he expressed his concern about the sudden rise in coyotaje along the border, in which he said Mexican government authorities were complicit:

There is evidence available to American officials that some of the underpaid officers of Mexico have suggested “through a friend” to intending emigrants to the United States that if they must leave their own country, they can avoid the examination, fumigation, and especially the tax of eight dollars, by crossing above or below the established stations and save at least four dollars, the other four being paid to the “friend” of the officer [\$40 in 2004 dollars] (Slayden 1921:122).

Furthermore, Slayden presaged the alarm expressed by other observers in the 1950s that such coyotes could be linked to foreign communists committed to promoting subversion within the United States:

Two Mexicans were arrested in San Antonio during the week in which this is written, each of whom had on his person a card, printed in Spanish, saying that the man who presented it would put intending emigrants into the United States for half the head tax exacted at the stations. The card also said that the people who undertook to do this service were headquarters for the distribution of Bolshevist literature. This story is from an absolutely reliable source (Slayden 1921:122).

That these comments echo the alarm being expressed today about potential coyote-Islamic terrorist connections on the border goes without saying.

Writing about the 1917-1921 period, Reisler (1976:29-30) and García (1996:19-21) explain that in order to contract Mexican laborers legally, employers had to formally apply to the U.S. Labor Department, indicating the number of workers they required, how long they would be needed, and the wages and housing conditions they would be offered. The red tape associated with this waiver program itself constituted a significant set of hurdles that some Mexicans apparently chose to avoid by entering the U.S. surreptitiously (Reisler 1976:41). From 1917 to 1921, about 73,000 Mexicans entered the U.S. with legal contracts to labor on farms and railroads (Reisler 1976:38), while thousands of others came outside the auspices of the temporary admission program. Accordingly, by 1918 the U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration reported to Congress that the 1917 Act had led to a “new and thriving industry ... having for its object the illegal introduction into the United States of Mexican aliens on a wholesale scale by means of organized efforts” (United States Department of Labor 1918:319, cited in Reisler 1976:25). After the exemptions for Mexicans ended definitively in 1921, unauthorized crossings of Mexicans assisted by coyotes would grow ever more dramatically. Nonetheless, even before 1921 two other types of coyotes played a crucial role in generating the flow of Mexican workers to the United States.

Enganchadores in Mexico and labor contractors on the border

Although U.S. immigration enforcement effort prior to 1921 was directed disproportionately towards Chinese “illegals,” Mexican contract laborers began to arrive at their country’s northern border with the United States by the thousands annually before the turn of the century, in violation of the ban on the importation of contract labor promulgated in 1885 (Cardoso 1980). Although they do not appear to have been referred to as such at that time, at least two types of coyotes, using the broad definition of coyotes and coyotaje presented at the outset of this report played an important role in recruiting Mexicans to work on the rails, on farms, and in mines. The first type was a recruiter known as an *enganchador* or *enganchista*, who traveled into Mexico at the behest of U.S. employers or contract employment agencies to induce Mexicans to migrate north with promises of employment and free transport to the border and beyond, to be paid off later, with interest, from the contracted worker’s wages. The second type was the *labor contractor* or *contratista*, located at the border in El Paso, another U.S. border town, or somewhat further in the U.S. interior in San Antonio, who procured Mexican workers for U.S. employers once they entered U.S. territory. These contractors often relied on *enganchadores* to entice workers across the border for them. Thus, for example, Roman González,⁹ El Paso’s biggest labor contractor in the first decade of the 20th century, hired agents to travel through the Mexican countryside seeking recruits for the companies he represented. On one occasion his men even raided a mine in Northern Chihuahua to obtain 200 men to work for the Colorado Iron and Fuel Company (Peck 2000:42).

Los enganchadores

During this earliest period of large-scale Mexican migration to the United States *enganchadores* and labor contractors did not usually lead migrants across the border away from official ports of entry, but they nevertheless fulfilled the two broad Mexican colloquial definitions of coyotaje explained above. On the one hand, they enabled U.S. employers and their recruited Mexican workers to evade the ban on the importation of contracted laborers. On the other hand, they served as brokers or middlemen for a highly desired commodity—Mexican labor power. Moreover, they seemed to do a very effective job of procuring Mexican labor for U.S. employers once rail lines connecting the two countries were completed in the 1880s. Cardoso (1980:28) noted that by the 1890s every year an average of 22,000 rail cars carrying 70,000 Mexican contract laborers entered the United States. Judging from available statistics regarding legal entry into the United States, by the second decade of the new century about three times as many temporary contract laborers entered the United States as “legal immigrants”: between 1910 and 1920, the U.S. admitted 206,000 legal Mexican immigrants and 628,000 Mexican “temporary workers” (Lorey 1999:70).

⁹ Referred to as *Roman Gonzalez* in Peck (2000:40) and as *Ramón González* in in Guerin-González (1994-38-39).

The system of labor recruitment known as *el enganche* (“the hooking”) began in Mexico prior to Mexican labor emigration to the United States. During the *porfiriato* it involved labor recruiters traveling to towns and villages in Western Central Mexico to gather gangs of laborers to work laying railroad tracks, in new manufacturing plants, and on agro-export plantations in other parts of Mexico. The *enganchador* (“the hooker”) would get migrants to agree to written or verbal contracts in which the *enganchador* promised them transport to jobs awaiting them in other parts of the country, with the costs of transport to be deducted from their wages once they began working. Oftentimes the *enganchador* would induce workers to “sign-on” for the jobs he was offering by getting them drunk. Other times he would work with local authorities to forcibly recruit vagrants, prisoners, and rebels. In any case, once workers were “hooked,” they were effectively treated as chattel by the *enganchadores* and the wages and working conditions that they were promised were often changed so that it was very difficult for them to pay off their transportation debts. Once the rail lines to the border were completed, U.S. employers tapped the established *enganche* system and its network of *enganchadores* to recruit Mexican migrant laborers (Durand 1994:108-110). The *enganche* system within Mexico had also promoted the migration of many contract workers to Northern Mexico. A large number of these workers used their jobs in the mines and factories of the North as a stepping-stone to migration to the U.S. (Reisler 1976:16-17).

Of course, there were two important differences between the conditions facing those “hooked” to work in Mexico and those “hooked” to work in the United States. First, in spite of any exploitation and abuse that inhered in the deal, wages in the United States were very much higher than those that could be earned in Mexico, making migration north far more attractive than contract labor migration to other places in Mexico. Second, importation of contracted laborers was illegal in the United States. For this reason, *enganchadores* working for U.S. employers did not typically have recruited workers sign written contracts at all or at least not until after they crossed the border into the United States, usually at El Paso, which at the turn of the century was the major port of entry for “hooked” Mexican laborers (Reisler 1976:10). Regardless of these differences, Mexicans contracted to work in the United States suffered many of the same kinds of mistreatment as did their counterparts contracted to work in Mexico (Durand 1994:110).

As I have already discussed above, *enganchadores* were coyotes in the sense that they enabled U.S. employers to effectively get around the 1885 contract labor ban and also served as labor brokers or middlemen. *Enganchadores* operating in Mexico at the behest of U.S. employers often violated local Mexican laws in doing so and usually met with hostility from Mexican *hacendados*, rural police and government officials in the country (Guerin-González 1994:35-36). In Western Central Mexico, this hostility owed to labor shortages in Jalisco and Michoacán that were occasioned by the mass exodus of working-age males to seek employment in the United States. In 1906 alone, for example, 22,000

agricultural workers from Jalisco headed by train under contract for El Paso and points beyond (Durand (1994: 112-113). Already in the 1890s, landowners in Jalisco and Guanajuato had joined together to get local laws passed to prevent workers from leaving for the North. These laws went largely un-enforced until 1910, when the governor of the state of Guanajuato assigned police to railroad stations to prevent men from purchasing tickets to the northern border. These efforts were largely futile, however, as illegally contracted workers began to buy tickets to nearer destinations beyond the reach of the governor's agents. From there they would then purchase a ticket to El Paso del Norte (Peck 2000:100).

The Mexican authorities also tried to discourage the *enganchadores* operating in Mexico in other, less extreme ways, such as warning potential émigrés of the exploitation and abuse they were likely to face in the United States (Cardoso 1980:32-33). Durand and Arias (2004) explain and illustrate this with a 1910 memorandum from the Secretaría de Gobernación to the mayor of Ixtlán, Michoacán:

At the beginning of the century the *enganchadores* went into the interior of the nation's territory in search of workers, but they very soon encountered resistance on the part of the Mexican authorities. From both the northern border and the capital, state and municipal authorities were urged to publicize and disseminate information about the misfortunes that befell émigrés, to refuse to issue passports or letters of recommendation to the contracting companies. When the mayor of Ixtlán, Michoacán informed the federal government that 30 individuals had headed north in search of work, the Secretaría de Gobernación instructed him to limit himself to "... make known the precarious situation that Mexican workers must pass through in the city of El Paso, where they are prevented from crossing into U.S. territory, if so determined by the American Office of Immigration; but do not impede emigration, **except in those cases involving *enganches* [acts of recruitment] that violate the relevant statute ...**" (Durand and Arias 2004:69-70, translated from Spanish by Spener, emphasis added).

It is not clear from this snippet exactly what types of *enganche* might be against the law, but it appears that at least *some* types of *enganche* were expressly illegal in Mexico early in the 20th century. Article 123 of the new revolutionary Mexican Constitution of 1917 made contract-labor recruitment illegal at the national level, unless such recruitment by foreigners was validated by local municipal authorities, by the employer's consular representative, and if a formal, written employment contract was offered (Galarza 1964:46). A few years later, in 1921, at the end of this early period of Mexican labor migration to the United States, a Guanajuato newspaper reported that the Secretaría de Gobernación had ordered Mexican migration agents not to admit U.S. *enganchadores* into Mexican territory under any circumstances (Durand and Arias 2004:76).

In his 1908 report to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, Victor S. Clark also remarks on the hostility faced by labor recruiters in Mexico, some of whom "are themselves hardly above the laboring class, and several are Mexicans or Spanish speaking Americans" (Clark 1908:476). He goes on to say that these *enganchadores* in Mexico concentrate their recruiting efforts among the "city and tramp labor population, partly because in many country districts hostile sentiment and legislation make open recruiting

dangerous” (Clark 1908:476). At the same time, he suggests that U.S. recruiters preferred to recruit in the Mexican interior, where they secretly operated in country districts and expected to find “a more reliable class of workmen” than “those picked up by chance along the border” (Clark 1908:476). Cardoso (1980:28), on the other hand, notes that *enganchadores* “drew upon displaced campesinos and peones who milled around Mexican border towns after their flight from rural villages or haciendas,” rather than from rural areas, where it “seemed dangerous for the recruiter to seek laborers ... because of the hostility of the hacienda employer and the rural police.” At the same time, Cardoso explained that many of the *enganchadores* working in Mexico were Mexican Americans who could recruit workers in the towns along the border “with little fear of being noticed” due to “their unobtrusiveness of skin coloring and language” (1980:28). In sum, it appears that *enganchadores* who recruited workers for U.S. employers did so in violation not only of U.S. laws, but also surreptitiously and against the wishes of Mexican government authorities, if not always against written Mexican statutes. They were, then, coyotes in a triple sense: First, they enabled U.S. employers to evade the contract labor ban in place after 1885; second, they acted as illicit brokers of a marketable commodity, Mexican labor power, and third, they enabled U.S. employers to recruit workers in Mexican territory in contravention of the will of various levels of Mexican government.

According to James Slayden, former representative of the San Antonio area in the U.S. House of Representatives, prior to the 1917 “Contract Labor Law”¹⁰ it was easy for Texas farmers to import Mexican workers: “Neighbors would combine and send an agent to Northern Mexico and he would bring back the number needed and distribute them among the farmers contributing to the enterprise” (Slayden 1921:121). Because this recruitment was a violation of the 1885 ban on importation of contract laborers, some farmers in his area “found themselves in trouble with the federal courts” and “its enforcement caused a serious stringency in the farm labor market” (1921:122). Fortunately for the farmers, Slayden said, these problems turned out to be temporary: “However, the Mexicans who wanted to come to Texas to pick cotton and earn in six weeks more than they ordinarily earned at home in six months had learned when they would be needed and many came without contracts but with the certainty of employment” (1921:122). Slayden’s comments are consistent with those made by Clark over ten years earlier, who reported that by the early years of the century, many Mexican workers headed to the border on their own in search of work in agriculture, either by rail or by walking as many as 300 miles on foot. These migrants financed their movement to the border either out of savings or by borrowing money from a

¹⁰ Here Slayden is referring to the Immigration Act of 1917, which imposed a literacy test and an \$8 head tax on all arriving immigrants, including Mexicans for the first time, not the Immigration Act of 1885, which first banned the importation of contract labor from outside the country. The literacy test and head tax provisions had a big impact on Mexican contract labor, which was already illegal as a consequence of the 1885 Act, though it occurred nonetheless and on a massive scale.

lender in their hometowns or villages. Clark held up the case of a boy passing through the El Paso station as an example of this:

A youngish boy passing through the El Paso station stated, and as proof showed his calloused hands, that he had worked in a quarry in Mexico for two years. His wages had been \$6 Mexican (\$3 United States currency) [\$60 in 2004 dollars] a month and rations, and it had taken him the full two years to save money enough to get to the frontier. He wanted to come to the United States because during one week he could earn more there than during a month in Mexico (Clark 1908:473).

Similarly, an oral history collected by Gamio, describes how in 1908 a Mexican worker traveled with a group of friends to Ciudad Juárez and crossed the river “without difficulty” into El Paso, Texas, where they signed on to work on the tracks of the Southern Pacific. Although the pay (\$1.50/day) was considerably higher than in Mexico, the worker complained of having to pay the company for lodging, water, and food that they had to prepare themselves, all of which were quite expensive and considerably reduced their earnings (Gamio 1969, cited in Durand and Arias 2004:129). Clark (1908:481) also described how some U.S. rail companies successfully employed Mexican foremen to supervise their Mexican workers, who, having experienced work on the tracks, “would return repeatedly to the same work, often in the same locality, after going home for a crop season or to see their families.” Citing a retrospective interview with a labor recruiter conducted by the economist Paul Taylor in the 1920s, García (1981:44) reports that during this period there were occasions when “one Mexican would leave a railroad camp to bring other workers back with him,” suggesting that Mexican labor migration to the United States began to be self-sustaining fairly soon after commencing.

Reisler (1976:12) writes that in the early years of the century, the Santa Fe Railroad offered its Mexican employees and their families’ free transport back to the border to encourage visits to their homes in Mexico. One benefit of this policy was that workers would often return to work for the Santa Fe accompanied by friends also seeking employment, thus reducing the company’s recruitment expenditures. Guerin-González (1994:36-38) has also documented cases of Mexican rail employees returning to jobs in the United States accompanied by fellow townspeople. In his pioneering study on the village of Arandas, Jalisco, Taylor (1933:35-36) found that villagers began to migrate to the United States starting in 1905. Unlike many other places, this migration was not induced by *enganchadores*, but rather by word-of-mouth reports about the good wages that could be earned in the United States. After a few Arandas men returned from working north of the border, “the news of attractive work spread rapidly” and “there was a wave of enthusiasm to take advantage of the wages in the United States.” By the 1920s, many Arandas families had become quite dependent upon remittances sent by husbands and fathers working north of the border (Taylor 1933:32-34). Returning emigrants had generally positive experiences working in the

U.S.A. and some of them had come home to purchase land and livestock, lend to others, and invest in businesses, sometimes arriving with trucks they had purchased north of the border (Taylor 1933:47-67).

All four of these accounts are consistent with Durand's (1994:111) contention that soon into the 20th century, the role of *enganchadores* operating in the Mexican interior had become largely superfluous to Mexican emigration. Once Mexican workers had been shown the route to the United States and learned that they could earn considerably more money much more quickly in the United States, they began to head to the border in large numbers on their own, regardless of the warnings from their own government of the considerable treachery and abuse they were likely to have inflicted upon them by U.S. employers and the labor agencies that supplied them with workers. Guerin-González (1994:35 and 42) concurs with Durand that the number of *enganchadores* recruiting in Mexico had declined considerably by the time the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910, but gives some credit for this to more rigorous enforcement by U.S. immigration authorities of the prohibition against importing contract labor.

Labor-contractor coyotes

If the importance of coyotes known as *enganchadores* diminished decidedly after the turn of the century, coyotes operating in the form of *labor contractors* in the border towns continued to play an indispensable, even growing role in feeding the demand for Mexican workers in the United States. According to Durand (1994:112), the contractors located in Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, and a bit later, Nogales and Matamoros “only had to wait each day for the train arriving with hundreds of workers and proceed to contract them” [translated from Spanish by Spener]. By the time he was writing in 1908, Clark noted that San Antonio, Texas had already become the “most important distributing point of Mexican labor for Texas proper,” though El Paso still played a much bigger role as a labor depot for the rest of the country (Clark 1908:475). Most of the Mexicans finding employment in Texas crossed the border at Eagle Pass, Laredo, or Brownsville. In his latter town, Clark reported that by 1907 “sixty boats were said to be employed ferrying Mexicans across to the United States” (Clark 1908:474-475). Reisler (1976:11) notes that by 1909, labor contractors in South Texas were advertising their ability to secure Mexicans to work for any type of employer, at low cost, and in any number needed. Zamora (1993:19) reports that many of the Mexican workers crossing into the United States through these South Texas border towns in the first two decades of the 20th century converged in San Antonio, which he referred to as “the most important labor distribution center in Texas outside of El Paso.” According to Clark (1908:475), labor contractors in the early 20th century operated at the border as follows:

The immigrants arrive at the border practically without funds, but with the moral certainty of securing immediate employment. Here they are met by the representatives of large authorized labor contracting companies, who regularly supply an entire railway system, or many of its divisions, with all the labor needed, and by private agents looking for smaller bodies of men for some special section, or simply speculating in labor; that is holding it at their headquarters on subsistence until they can secure a good commission

by delivering it to some enterprise badly in need of workers. These speculating agents are said to mislead men with promises of work at high wages which they are unable to provide, in order to keep them away from competing agencies.

According to García (1981:55-56), the demand for Mexican workers by U.S. employers was so great in the first decade of the new century that it generated intense competition among labor contracting agencies at the border. In El Paso, these coyote-agencies recruited Mexican employees at the international bridge “where they literally pounced on immigrants as they crossed the border” to offer them work, in scenes reminiscent of the way that later in the century coyotes’ recruiters would accost migrants arriving at bus terminals in the Mexican border towns to offer to take them across the border into the United States. Peck (2000:43-45) found that special characteristics of Mexican migration to the United States prevented any single contractor or small group of contractors from dominating the market in Mexican labor, in spite of the fact that most northbound Mexicans passed through the El Paso port of entry. In his view, the inability of anyone to monopolize this market owed a) to the close geographical proximity of a large pool of laborers in Mexico, such that U.S. companies could bypass El Paso contractors if they chose to do so; b) to the very large numbers of un-recruited migrants consistently arriving at the border who were beyond the ability of any single contractor to control; c) to the relative ease with which migrants could cross the border clandestinely; and d) to the skillful mobility of Mexican workers once in the United States, who frequently deserted contracts to find higher-paying work elsewhere even before they started the job (Peck 2000:43-46, 73, 113, 195-196).

To fill especially large orders, the coyote-agencies would on occasion send Mexican agents into Chihuahua to announce the availability of \$2/day railroad jobs [around \$40 in 2004 dollars] if laborers would cross into El Paso and sign a contract with their agency. Agents received 50 cents [around \$10 in 2004 dollars] for every worker secured in this way. Since no contracts were signed in Mexico, the agencies argued that they were not violating the ban on importation of contract labor, although they clearly were violating the 1891 law that “prohibited the importation of alien laborers by the use advertisements circulated in foreign countries which promised employment (Cárdenas 1975:67). García (1981:55) also notes that some Arizona contracting agencies, located far from legal ports of entry, went so far as to encourage migrants to cross illegally into the United States to sign with them. Of course, the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution after 1910 propelled ever larger numbers of Mexicans across the border, making it increasingly unnecessary for labor agency-coyotes to recruit in Mexican territory.

LABOR RECRUITMENT, CLANDESTINE ENTRY, AND MASS DEPORTATIONS, 1921-1942

Mexican migration to the United States declined sharply after the end of the World War I waiver program, but also because of depression and high unemployment battering the U.S. economy (Reisler 1976:55). Thousands of Mexicans returned to their country at this time, with many leaving in the face of threats of violence from white nativists (Reisler 1976:50-54). Then, in 1921, the special exceptions granted to Mexicans by U.S. immigration authorities came to an end. In that year, the U.S. Congress passed the Quota Law of May 19, 1921, which “limited the number of aliens of any nationality entering the United States to three percent of the foreign-born persons of that nationality who lived in the United States in 1910” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2003e). This law was taken as an emergency measure to prevent a flood of European immigrants entering the United States at the end of World War I, and appeared to have its desired effect: During the first year after the law went into effect, the number of immigrants arriving from Europe dropped from around 800,000 in fiscal year 1921 to around 300,000 in 1922 (Cardoso 1980:83). Mexico and other Western Hemisphere nations were excluded from the law’s 3-percent rule, meaning that there remained no numerical limitation on the number of Mexicans who could enter the country. Nevertheless, the entry requirements of the 1917 immigration act were re-imposed on Mexicans in an effort to reduce the flood of contract laborers coming across the border (Cardoso 1980:83).

The temporary quotas placed on European entrants in 1921 were lowered further and made permanent by the Immigration Act of May 26, 1924 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2003d), effectively ending the mass immigration of manual workers from Europe (Cardoso 1980:83). The 1924 Act also required that all immigrants, including Mexicans, pay a \$10 fee to obtain a visa from a U.S. consulate before entering the country (Reisler 1976:59). Thus, by 1924 the new requirements facing Mexicans at the border included a \$10 visa fee to be paid to the U.S. consul in Mexico before crossing, a head tax of \$8 that had to be paid at the border crossing [a total of around \$200 in 2004 dollars], passing a literacy test, proving they were not paupers, and undergoing a medical examination to prove physical fitness (Cardoso 1980:84; Morales 1981:88). Moreover, evading these new requirements by crossing clandestinely was made much more difficult by the creation of the Border Patrol as a result of legislation passed by the U.S. Congress two days after the Act of May 26, 1924 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2003).

As Gamio (1930:204) noted, the new requirements could be even more onerous than suggested above. In addition to passing the medical exam, for example, Mexican workers in Paso del Norte would be bathed in gasoline and have their clothing fumigated. Getting a visa could take several days, since workers had to first go to the Mexican Migration Office to get passports, photos, and other paperwork to present to the U.S. consulate. Lodging conditions in Ciudad Juárez were extremely poor and could cost

migrants 30 to 50 cents a day [\$3-\$5 in 2004 dollars], depending upon how many men shared a room. Oral histories collected by Gamio in this period (Gamio 1969, cited in Durand and Arias 2004:86) described migrants who arrived penniless at the border being stranded in Ciudad Juárez, unable to afford the costs of crossing, whether legally or extra-legally with a coyote.

In spite of the new restrictions on the entry of Mexican workers into the United States, structural conditions in both countries, combined with the new restrictions on the entry of Europeans, guaranteed that the flow of Mexicans into the United States would continue throughout the remainder of the 1920s. Starting in 1923, the U.S. economy grew rapidly again, creating an especially strong demand for manual labor in agriculture and industry that could no longer be met by European immigration. Meanwhile, economic conditions in Mexico remained precarious in the years immediately following the end of the Revolution, which had left 1.4 million dead, thousands of others displaced, and much of the productive capacity of the country in shambles (McCaa 2003). The Revolution's abolition of the debt-peonage system also freed peasants formerly tied to feudal haciendas to join the march to the North (Reisler 1976:15). Moreover, the wage discrepancy following the Revolution was such that a Mexican's purchasing power in Mexico was just 1/14 that of a worker in the United States (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 1923:1055-1056, cited in Reisler 1976:14). An additional impulse to emigration in Mexico was the regional civil war in West Central Mexico known as the *cristiada*, in which the federal government attempted to suppress the power of the Catholic Church (Durand 1994:124).

The structural situation clearly created strong incentives for U.S. enterprises to continue to recruit Mexican laborers at the border and for Mexican workers to continue to cross the border in search of work. For the first time, however, most of these workers entered the United States clandestinely. Although the Border Patrol was created in 1924, by 1928 it still had only 747 agents to police both the Mexican and the Canadian borders *combined* and until the 1930s most of its efforts went towards enforcing prohibition and customs laws rather than towards apprehensions of unauthorized Mexicans (Cardoso 1980:84). Moreover, it was not until after the Second World War that the great bulk of agents would be deployed along the United States' southwest border to police the movement of Mexicans.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Mexican migration to the United States continued unabated through the end of the 1920s. According to Morales (1981:88), for every Mexican entering the United States legally during the decade, five entered without inspection by the authorities. Cardoso (1980:94), for his part, estimates that during the 1920s more than 100,000 Mexicans entered the United States annually without authorization from that country's government, while another 60,000 or so entered annually with the U.S. government's explicit permission. The Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations at the time estimated that as many as 2 million Mexican

¹¹ Telephone interview on July 21, 2005 with Brenda Tisdale, Curator, National Border Patrol Museum and Memorial Library Foundation, Inc.

expatriates might be residing in the United States, equivalent to about one-eighth of Mexico's population (Cardoso 1980:94).

Labor-contracting coyotes in the border cities of Texas and elsewhere in the U.S. interior continued to play an important role in recruiting Mexican workers for agriculture, mining, and industry throughout the 1920s. During this decade, San Antonio became an ever more important location for labor recruitment agencies because the city at that time was the major rail crossroads for the southwestern United States (Cardoso 1980:85; Durand and Arias 2004:72-75; Zamora 1993:19). Other labor recruitment agencies in Chicago would "subcontract" to agencies in San Antonio to obtain Mexican workers for industry, paying an agreed upon fee per head. Rail transportation costs from San Antonio to Chicago would typically be deducted from the workers' paychecks (Cardoso 1980:85).

The rise of clandestine-crossing coyotaje

The 1920s marked the rise for the first time of large-scale coyotaje dedicated to facilitating the clandestine entry of Mexican workers into the United States. For example, the Chicago labor contractor-coyotes (in the coyote-as-middleman sense of coyotaje) would frequently contract not only other labor recruitment agencies in San Antonio, but also clandestine-crossing coyotes along the Texas-Mexico border, who would put workers on a train to Chicago after sneaking them across the border (Cardoso 1980:85). Morales (1981:89) describes the rise of clandestine-crossing coyotes after the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924 and how this type of coyote could collaborate with labor-contractor coyotes:

And it is as soon as the Border Patrol was created that the coyotes appear, persons who helped the Mexican "cross over to the other side," in plain violation of the law. For a few dollars it was simple to obtain a false passport or a hiding place in the trunk of a car in order to cross the border. Once in the United States workers would be delivered to the labor contractor, who, in turn, "sold" them to some businessman for between 50 cents and a dollar per person [\$5 to \$10 in 2004 dollars]. It was common for a given team of workers to be "sold" to several businessmen: once delivered, it would be stolen at night in order to be resold (translation from Spanish by Spener).¹²

In his pioneering study of Mexican migration to the United States conducted in the late 1920s, the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio (1930) described the prevalence and mode of operation of clandestine-crossing coyotes in El Paso-Ciudad Juárez in considerable detail. What is especially noteworthy about Gamio's description of coyotaje in the 1920s is just how similar it was in form and content to the strategies and practices of coyotaje involving the cross-border movement of Chinese workers at the turn of the century, on the one hand, and to those corresponding to the movement of Mexicans at the end of the 20th century, on the other. Gamio describes the rise of coyotaje at this border crossing as a consequence of the imposition upon Mexican workers of the \$8 head tax, \$10 visa fee, the

¹² See additional explanation of the "stealing" of teams of Mexicans from worksites later in this same section of the report.

literacy test, and medical examination. And, although he notes that the Border Patrol was becoming more effective at preventing clandestine entry of the United States, he states plainly that coyotaje was both common and effective: “It is relatively easy and quite common to smuggle or be smuggled across the border, and there are many people who make a profession of this” (Gamio 1930:205). Reminiscent of the role played today by the Sonora towns of Altar and Sásabe, Gamio describes how several small Chihuahua towns near Juárez became preferred crossing spots for clandestine migrants and how specific bus lines came to serve these towns in order to transport the aspiring migrants to them during the day in anticipation of their nocturnal crossings (Gamio 1930:205).

Coyotes in Ciudad Juárez in the 1920s would hang around the plaza, hotels, restaurants, and even the Mexican offices and U.S. consulate where aspiring migrants would have to go to process their visa paperwork. The coyotes’ fees ranged from U.S. \$5 to \$10 [\$50-\$100 in 2004 dollars], considerably less than the \$18 fee (around \$200 in 2004 dollars) migrants would have to pay to enter the country legally, before having to incur the additional costs of food and lodging typically caused by delays in getting the necessary paperwork processed in Juárez. The coyotes would drive migrants across low water crossings in automobiles, carts, or trucks, or, where the river was deeper, row them across in boats or lead them swimming to the far bank (Gamio 1930:205-206). Gamio noted that coyotes worked both as individuals and in organized gangs, a structure of the coyotaje “industry” that recurred in subsequent periods and continues to the present day (see Spener 2004). They were quite expert in effecting successful crossings and often did so in concert with both U.S. and Mexican authorities: “These people know their ground thoroughly, and the habits of both American and Mexican authorities, and sometimes even have an arrangement with some district official” (Gamio 1930:206). According to Gamio, the use of false documents to cross was common, as was the use of valid documents by impostors, who often rented them from coyotes:

Sometimes instead of taking the person over they sell or rent a forged head-tax receipt and passport. Such a receipt costs from two to five dollars [\$20-\$40 in 2004 dollars], and often it is not sold outright for this price, but merely rented, to be returned once the immigrant using it is safely in American territory. The passports generally belong to people in the United States, who “rent” their document to the smugglers, and they in turn to the immigrants (Gamio 1930:206).¹³

In order to outwit the Border Patrol, gangs of coyotes had scouts posted on both sides of the river, who used hand signals to coordinate crossing migrants. Corroborating the findings of Cardoso (1980) and Morales (1981) mentioned above, Gamio found that these organized coyotes sometimes worked for “big commercial, industrial, or agricultural enterprises in the border states and even in the interior of the United States, which have need of Mexican labor” (Gamio 1930:206). With regard to the labor-contracting

¹³ The rental of valid documents to impostors is still commonly practiced on the border today.

agencies, Gamio (1930:206) noted that although it was against U.S. law to contract labor in Mexico, the agencies often did so surreptitiously, with migrants instructed by the agencies' *enganchadores* to tell authorities that they were arriving at the border not with a contract in hand, but rather to look for work. In sum, Gamio found that coyotaje in El Paso-Ciudad Juárez was quite prevalent and that the relevant government authorities were quite aware of it, as was the general public. Furthermore, it appeared to him that the authorities, to the extent that the laws were relatively lenient with respect to punishing coyotaje, were willing to tolerate it to a significant extent:

In spite of American and Mexican laws, the smuggling agents are numerous, for the demand for labor pays them well, and even when caught and fined they do not suffer greatly because, since the fine is about a hundred pesos, and since a 'coyote' sometimes earns that much in one day, two or even more such fines a month can be well borne (Gamio 1930:207).

Although no similarly detailed description of the strategies and practices of coyotaje in the 1920s are available for other crossing points in Texas, it seems certain that the same sorts of activities, though perhaps on a smaller scale, were occurring in places like Piedras Negras-Eagle Pass, the two Laredos, and Brownsville-Matamoros, given the importance of these crossings for Mexican workers and the role played by San Antonio as a labor depot. Indeed, Reisler (1976:74, note 44) writes that the chief immigration inspector in Brownsville reported that in 1924 at least 100 Mexicans worked in the area "operating illegal ferries and bringing aliens into the U.S." In that same year, the U.S. Secretary of Labor reported that "the smuggling of aliens, linked with the illicit traffic across our borders in rum and narcotics, has become a widespread industry" (U.S. Department of Labor 1924:175, cited in Reisler 1976:69). And according to McWilliams (1948:164), by the 1920s the "profits in this racket were really enormous and the smugglers and coyotes and labor contractors constituted an intimate and powerful alliance from Calxico to Brownsville."

The 1920s also saw the appearance of coyotes on U.S. soil known as "man-snatchers," the forerunners of today's *bajadores* in Arizona and California, who kidnap migrants from coyotes bringing them in from Mexico in order to hold them for ransom to be paid by relatives who were already expecting to pay the coyotes for their deliverance. The "man-snatchers" would steal Mexican laborers from work sites in the United States in order to sell them to other employers as if they were chattel. The constant threat posed by the man-snatchers led labor contractors to keep workers en route to employers locked up and under armed guard to prevent their theft. In this regard, McWilliams (1948:165) tells of Mexican workers being marched through the streets of San Antonio in broad daylight, escorted by gunmen.

McWilliams (1948:171) also has noted that the availability of a Mexican-American¹⁴ population in the United States greatly facilitated the deployment of Mexican migrant labor, with Mexican Americans serving as “the foremen, the straw-bosses, and the contractors who recruited transported, and supervised Mexican labor.” In my review of the published historical literature on Mexican migration to the United States, I have been unable to establish whether by the 1920s these Mexican *mayordomos* were also engaged in the on-going recruitment of workers from their own home regions in Mexico as they would be later in the 20th century (see below). Weber (1998:218-219), for example, has documented how *mayordomos* from Michoacán recruited work crews in the California cotton fields in the 1920s and 1930s from among their *paisanos* who had settled in working-class neighborhoods in Anaheim and San Fernando, California. Moreover, she found that the relations between *mayordomos* and workers in the fields were built upon previously existing relations of kinship and *compadrazgo* that extended back to their communities in Michoacán, though she did not find evidence of *mayordomos* returning to Michoacán to actually recruit in communities there (personal communication, July 2, 2005). Slayden (1921) noted how farmers in Texas banded together to send recruiters into northern Mexico to find field workers and Zamora (1993) describes how communities in northern Mexico served as “pools of reserve labor” for Texas agriculture and industry and how Mexican workers moved back and forth across the border in an on-going oscillation whose dimensions depended upon the availability and conditions of work on either side at any given moment. As mentioned previously, García (1981:44) noted that already by 1910 Mexican railroad laborers would leave their crews and return with other workers they had brought back with them from Mexico, though he did not specify that they were *mayordomos*. Though none of these authors specifically mentions the involvement of Mexican *mayordomos* in facilitating the transit of workers across the border in the teens and twenties, it seems probable that at least some *mayordomos* would have played this role for at least some U.S. enterprises. Whether they also put aspiring migrants in touch with clandestine-crossing coyotes at the border in the aftermath of the imposition of stricter legal entry requirements in the 1920s also seems probable, but remains a topic for further research.

Another unintended outcome of changes in U.S. border and immigration policy in the 1920s was the surge in clandestine crossings of the border with Mexico attempted by European immigrants, who found their legal migratory path blocked after adoption of the restrictive immigration laws of 1921 and 1924. According to a 1923 Department of Labor report, the “problem of stopping the inflow of European aliens subject to the quota law had almost entirely displaced the Chinese smuggling with which the border

¹⁴The author does not specify whether he means “Mexican American” to include Mexican-born persons who now reside permanently in the United States or only U.S.-born persons of Mexican descent. At the time he was writing, however, the term often was used to refer to both the U.S. and the Mexican-born.

service had to contend for so many years” (U.S. Department of Labor, Annual Report of Commissioner-General of Immigration 1923:26, cited in Samora 1971:35). Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the U.S. immigration authorities had been contending with coyote-assisted clandestine European migration across the border since the turn of the century (Lee 2002:69; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2004), while the authorities were evidently more concerned, for mainly racist reasons, with the entry of unauthorized Chinese laborers. Although the published record is mute with regard to whether coyotes were moving more Europeans or more Mexicans across the border in the 1920s, it appears evident that many more Mexicans were entering in concert with coyotes of one sort or another—*enganchadores*, clandestine-crossing, labor-contractor, or some combination of the three—than were Europeans. Indeed, it would not be surprising to find that during the 1920s Mexicans and “OTMs” were slipping into the country in similar proportions—90 percent or more Mexican, 10 percent or less “OTM”—as in the contemporary period.

The Mexican government’s vilification of coyotes

The Mexican government’s hostility towards emigration and the agents that promoted it persisted through the 1920s as Mexican laborers continued to travel north in search of work. With the rise of clandestine crossing, however, the denunciations formerly reserved for *enganchadores* and *contratistas* now were increasingly directed towards clandestine-crossing coyotes. Indicative of the vilification of coyotes at the border is a memorandum sent by the Secretaría de Gobernación to the mayor of Zamora, Michoacán in April 1924. The memorandum warns the mayor of the piling up of migrants in the Mexican border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Laredo, and Piedras Negras due to the new visa fees, head tax, and literacy tests imposed by the United States. It notes that Gobernación has been trying to discourage emigration to the United States for a number of years but has had little success in convincing workers not to leave Mexico. The memorandum warns that migrants will not only run the risk of apprehension by the U.S. authorities if they attempt to cross, but will also be subject to “many deceptions and annoyances, including and especially on the part of coyotes (Secretaría de Gobernación 1924/2000:144).

In the following paragraph, the memorandum’s author uses particularly florid language to denounce the coyotes and give a sinister cast to their activities:

The coyotes get off the train along with their victims and from this moment on the exploitation begins: they are in cahoots with drivers and vehicle-operators from whom they receive quantities of money that are evidently charged to the worker; they drive workers in a group to a run-down and unhygienic place where their speculation continues in concert with the owner of the lodging, who apparently charges only 20 cents to each worker but in reality later receives from the coyote as much as 3 dollars [around \$30 in 2004 dollars] for each one, dollars that he then makes it his business to obtain from his victim; they are also in cahoots with the money-changers who obtain a certain percentage from the quantities of Mexican currency the workers hand over in exchange for dollars; afterwards they force the workers to remain locked up in their rooms (that sometimes just

consist of an enormous shed), physically forcing them to stay their under threat, with the objective of waiting till nightfall to haul them in trucks to low-water crossings on the river; and as their business depends in large measure on transporting this cargo, given that they charge between 4 and 20 dollars per person [\$40-\$220 in 2004 dollars], which explains the care they take so that their victims do not back out or scatter; they walk with them, often on intensely cold nights and in annoying rains, to the ford where they abandon them, only when they work in concert with American coyotes do they take them across to the opposite bank to deliver them to their new villains; and it often happens that the American border guards, upon realizing they are trying to cross, fire their guns, at times wounding women and children, who can't even gather up their kin because darkness prevents it and because their bodies are then washed away by the current. Once they are across the River, the workers are exploited by the U.S. coyotes; these coyotes crowd them once again into filthy places, mistreat them, hide them from the authorities, take as much money from them as they can, provide them with false or useless documents, give them bad advice that often results in them winding up in jail, and place them in the hands of the Companies that are in cahoots with such "coyotes" (Secretaría de Gobernación 1924/2000:145, translated from Spanish by Spener).

Two paragraphs later, the memorandum's author remarks that the coyotes' "infamous work" also includes the renting of false documents to clandestine migrants for three or four dollars, having ripped these documents off from migrants who have gone to the trouble of obtaining them legally.

Later, it becomes clear that much of the memorandum's author's antipathy towards coyotes has to do with two broader concerns. First, as a government representative, he is concerned that Mexican citizens obey the laws of both Mexico and the United States, regardless of how impossible these might be to obey for an impoverished Mexican worker at the border:

All these aforementioned fraudulent deceits, wicked exploitations and dangers will make Mexican migrants comprehend that they should pay attention to the instructions given to them by the authorities, and that it is preferable to lose a bit of time and fulfill all the requirements demanded by the law, so as not to get mixed up in this criminal underworld laid out for them by the "coyotes" and in this pile of sufferings that they will definitely be exposed to in foreign territory (Secretaría de Gobernación 1924/2000:146-147, translated from Spanish by Spener).

Second, upon closing the memorandum to the mayor of Zamora, the official from Gobernación, Ricardo Zavala, reminds its recipient that the overall objective of publicizing its contents is to "avoid as much as possible the alarming emigration of our workers to the United States of the North" (Secretaría de Gobernación 1924:147, translated from Spanish by Spener). A flier posted in passenger rail cars in Jalisco in the late 1920s that was reproduced by Taylor (1933:46) contained similar warnings against emigrating and depending upon coyotes to enter the United States.

Coyotaje as a migration strategy pursued by Mexican workers

We get no concrete sense from the published historical literature of what *proportion* of Mexican workers in the 1920s relied upon coyotes to help them enter the United States surreptitiously, although the

absolute number was probably quite large. In spite of the fact that the border was quite undefended away from a few major official crossings, we must nevertheless bear in mind that the means of transportation to and from the border were also relatively undeveloped at that time, meaning that people crossing the border were more or less obliged to approach and leave it either by train or by one of a few automobile thoroughfares where transportation away from the border was available. The paucity of transit options and the limited population of the border region at the time would appear to have made the U.S. authorities' job of capturing clandestine migrants relatively easier than is the case today, where there are a multitude of official and unofficial routes of access and egress. Thus, in spite of the fact that the border was largely "unprotected" compared to today, when the Border Patrol has nearly 10,000 agents deployed along the southwest border, a coyote's services to cross the border and evade immigration checkpoints along the roads leading away from it¹⁵ might still have been quite helpful to migrants seeking to enter the country outside the established legal channels.

Regardless of the proportion of migrants working through coyotes to enter the country or obtain employment following entry, it is undoubtedly the case that by the 1920s the majority of those who collaborated with coyotes did so deliberately and willingly in order to meet their work and earnings objectives in the United States. After more than a generation of Mexican migration to the United States, the costs and benefits of working north of the border were well-known in migrant-sending regions, as were the dangers of abuse and exploitation. Thus, it is not surprising that the entreaties of the Mexican government for workers to steer clear of coyotes at the border or, better still, to stay put in Mexico, largely fell on deaf ears, in the same way that warnings by the U.S. and Mexican governments go unheeded today.

Workers knew from experience that in spite of the risks, they potentially had a great deal to gain by migrating to the United States. While many were surely victimized by unscrupulous coyotes and, subsequently, by exploitative employers in the United States, many others remitted dollar earnings to their families and/or returned with savings that they would have had no opportunity to accumulate in their home regions (to say nothing of the substantial contributions their underpaid labor made to the development of key sectors of the U.S. economy in the Southwestern, Rocky Mountain, and Midwestern states). A key indicator of this economic boon to migrants and their families was that from 1917 to 1927 average annual remittances totaled \$10,173,719 [\$113 million in 2004 dollars, for a total of \$1.2 billion over the 11-year period] (McWilliams 1948:171). Thus, by the 1920s, it is fairly safe to say that clandestine migration—including resorting to the employment of coyotes to cross into the United

¹⁵ Highway checkpoints have been used by the Border Patrol since the 1920s, though prior to the 1980s they were typically set up on a roving basis and staffing limitations often did not permit them to remain open on a round the clock basis (telephone interview with Brenda Tisdale, Curator, National Border Patrol Museum, July 21, 2005).

States—was a well-developed *resistance* strategy on the part of Mexican peasants and workers who found economic mobility or even minimal subsistence blocked to them in Mexico. One of the main attractions to Mexicans of crossing the border using the *enganchador*-labor contractor chain was their belief that these agents, who “knew the ropes” at the border, could save them time, hassles, and money with the process of entering the U.S. “legally” or at least with the appearance of legality (García 1996:22-23).

One important indicator that coyote-reliance can be regarded as a migrant-resistance strategy was the large number of Mexicans during the first three decades of the 20th century who used labor-contractor coyotes as a way to acquire rail transport away from the border and then absconded before arriving at their contracted destination. Historian Juan García (1996:7-9) reports that this was especially common among Mexicans contracted to work on the railroads, who quickly discovered they could earn more money working in industry or agriculture than on the rails. Railroad officials complained repeatedly of this problem, but there was little they could do about it, given the prohibitive cost of tracking down and capturing workers who deserted their contracts and the companies’ need to fill a on-going labor shortages. One contractor-coyote cited by García (1996:8) estimated that it would cost an average of \$143.40 to find, capture, and deport a Mexican who skipped his contract. With regard to employment in sugar beets, by the 1920s Mexican workers’ accumulated stock of knowledge about migration and employment in the United States helped them avoid some of the worst abuses they were likely to face in *el Norte* in general and those inflicted upon them by coyotes in particular:

Mostly through word of mouth, information about dishonest recruiting agencies, farmers with bad reputations, and companies that broke contract promises quickly circulated among would-be recruits. Reliance on recruiting agencies by sugar beet workers and other laborers steadily diminished as they acquired cars, learned more from others about opportunities and working conditions, and made repeated trips to the region (García 1996:23).

Writing in more general terms, Zamora (1993:36) argues forcefully that rather than hapless victims of rapacious labor recruiters and employers, Mexican workers migrating to Texas in the early years of the 20th century were daring authors of their own history:

For immigrants, traveling in search of better cotton pickings or improved wages involved an enterprising spirit that led them to make the decision to cross the international border in the first place. Their willingness to hazard the distant and unfamiliar world of work in the United States for the sake of economic improvement revealed a form of proletarian daring and tenacity that found continued expression in Texas.

Although Mexican workers in Texas were docile to the extent that they evaluated the conditions and pay of their work relative to what they might have faced in Mexico—conditions which may have included their treatment by the various types of coyotes they were obliged to deal with on the way north—their accumulated experiences were transmitted by word of mouth to their peers on both sides of the border,

constituting a considerable resource for new migrants to draw upon (Zamora 1993:35). Moreover, growing Mexican colonies in U.S. cities meant that aspiring migrants could count on *paisanos* north of the border to help them emigrate and find work. One indicator of this is that three of the four cases of migrants from Arandas, Jalisco whose experiences were described in detail by Taylor (1933:68-70) had received help from a friend already in the United States to travel to work there themselves.

Domestic coyotaje within the United States

By the end of the 1920s, demand for Mexican workers was so great that Texas, which at that time had the largest Mexican population in the country, began to lose substantial numbers of workers to other states, especially to recruiters for the sugar beet industry. At the behest of growers, the Texas legislature passed the Texas Emigrant Agent Law of 1929, which effectively barred labor recruiters for employers in other states from operating in Texas. This turned the recruitment of *betabeleros*, which had formerly been handled by the sugar beet companies themselves, into an “illegal, underground conspiracy” farmed out to Mexican contractors and truckers, i.e., to domestic coyotes. Most Mexican beet workers in the 1920s had entered the U.S. illegally (García 1996:47). The inhumane conditions of transport faced by Mexicans shipping out to the sugar beet fields at this time presage those faced by undocumented Mexican workers transported by coyotes in the contemporary period. They were described vividly by McWilliams (1948:167-168):

Most of the trucks are open, stake trucks, never intended for passenger transportation. Planks or benches are placed on the truck, which is then loaded with passengers and equipment. Frequently fifty or sixty Mexicans are huddled, like sheep, in these trucks. Once the Mexicans have crowded into the back of the truck, a heavy tarpaulin is thrown over them and fastened down around the edges so that the passengers are concealed. The reason for this conspiratorial atmosphere is, of course, that perhaps two-thirds of the Mexicans who leave the state have been recruited in violation of the Emigrant Agent Law. Outwardly, the truck looks as though it were loaded with a cargo of potatoes. Before climbing into the driver's seat, the trucker tosses a couple of coffee cans into the back of the truck which are used as urinals during the long journey north. Then, usually around midnight, the truck rolls out of San Antonio and heads north.

These trucks would drive straight-through at high speed to fields as far away as Michigan, following a zigzag route over back roads to avoid encounters with the highway patrol. Serious accidents were common.

The Great Depression and forced repatriation of Mexican workers

After the roaring twenties sputtered to an end with the stock market crash of 1929, Mexican immigrant workers in the United States at that time were heavily scape-goated by nativists eager to pin the blame for widespread unemployment of U.S. workers on a convenient target. Legislation adopted in 1929 made it a felony for an alien to enter the United States illegally and punished re-entry after

deportation even more strictly (Cárdenas 1975:73), a measure that was mainly directed at Mexicans. Of greater actual impact, U.S. federal and local governments engaged in a massive repatriation campaign that took place in several waves between 1929 and 1939 and resulted in the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants as well as the illegal round-up of a large number of U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry (Durand 1994:125-127 and Hoffman 1974). Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002:34) report that the number of Mexican-born persons enumerated by the U.S. census fell from 639,000 in 1930 to just 377,000 in 1940, a drop of 458,000 or 41 percent. Cardoso (1981:95) reminds us that the decline in the Mexican-born registered by the census data would surely have been much larger had the 1930 census been conducted a year or two earlier, before the first wave of forcible repatriations began in 1929. Not only were hundreds of thousands of Mexicans deported during the Great Depression, but the stream of Mexican workers headed north as measured by legal entries also slowed to a trickle, as a consequence of both economic collapse and sociopolitical hostility: Legal Mexican immigrants registered upon entry with the U.S. authorities fell from an average of 46,000 a year in the 1920s to just 2,700 annually during the thirties (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:34). This drop owed in part to suddenly stringent enforcement on the part of the State Department of the head tax, literacy requirements, and prohibition against contract labor contemplated by U.S. law (Cárdenas 1975:74).

Although there were many Europeans residing in the United States whose immigration status was also doubtful, Mexicans were the only nationality singled out for repatriation during the Great Depression (Durand and Massey 2003:58). Nonetheless, Mexican migrants remained a vital part of the labor force for some economic activities, especially cotton production. In 1940, there were about 400,000 migratory cotton workers in Texas alone, two-thirds of whom were Mexican, with many, if not most of these undocumented. About 60 percent of cotton picking in 1940 was contracted through Mexican labor contractors and truckers who brought workers in from Mexico. These coyotes drove trucks loaded with 50 to 60 workers following the harvest through the “big swing” of Texas. One accident in McAllen, Texas in that year resulted in the injury of 44 Mexicans and the death of 29 (McWilliams 1948:159-160).

COYOTAJE DURING THE BRACERO PROGRAM, 1942-1964

Less than a decade after the mass expulsion of Mexicans at the outset of the 1930s, acute agricultural labor shortages were brought about by the United States’ entry into World War II. To meet the demand for field workers, the U.S. and Mexican governments negotiated an agreement to implement an agricultural guest worker program that became known as the Bracero Program. With the unpleasant memory of the mistreatment of Mexican workers by private labor contractors in first three decades of the century still in mind, the Mexican government insisted that the two governments themselves take charge of the contracting of Mexican laborers to work in the new program. In other words, the two governments

agreed to be the brokers for laborers to work on U.S. farms and ranches, taking over the role formerly played by coyotes in previous decades. The 1885 ban on importation of contract labor was still in effect, but a provision of the 1917 Immigration Act gave the U.S. Attorney General the authority to “issue rules and prescribe conditions ... to control and regulate the admission and return of otherwise inadmissible aliens” (cited in Calavita 1992:23). U.S. Public Law 45, which created the Bracero Program, used this provision of the 1917 law to authorize the Immigration Commissioner to waive the prohibition of contract labor (Calavita 1992:23).

During the war itself, the United States imported just 168,000 braceros from Mexico. After the war ended in 1945, U.S. agricultural interests successfully lobbied Congress to have the program renewed on a yearly basis until 1951, when it was made permanent (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:36). The Bracero Program operated through 1964, when it was terminated by an act of Congress in the face of pressure from the labor and civil rights movements. During the 23 years the program lasted, over 4.5 million *bracero* contracts were issued to Mexican men to work in the United States, the vast majority (more than 4.3 million, or over 95 percent) issued in the 18 years after the end of the war whose temporary agricultural labor shortages the Bracero Program had been designed to address (Calavita 1992:218).

Two other aspects of the Bracero Program are worth mentioning here. First, the Mexican government insisted upon the exclusion of many Texas farms from the program, based on the history of Texas farmers’ and law enforcement authorities’ historical mistreatment of Mexicans (Calavita 1992:20; Samora 1971:45).¹⁶ The exclusion of much of Texas from the program meant that most Mexican nationals laboring there would do so as undocumented migrants until the mid-1950s, when Texas growers would begin to be allotted many more *bracero* contracts (see below). Second, Mexican negotiators insisted that *bracero* recruitment centers not be located in the northern border cities where, during the 1920s, thousands of laborers awaiting contracts had stacked up on occasion, leading to periodic local crises in towns like Ciudad Juárez and also allowing coyotes of various types based on the U.S. side to thwart the authorities’ attempts to regulate the flow of workers across the border. The first recruitment center was set up in Mexico City in 1942. In 1944, others were opened in Guadalajara and Irapuato. In 1947, centers were opened in Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Tampico, and Aguascalientes. By 1955, all the *bracero* recruitment was moved to three centers in the north, Hermosillo, Chihuahua City, and Monterrey (Durand 1994:130).

¹⁶ The Mexican government refused to authorize *bracero* contracts in over 50 Texas counties where it had documented racist acts committed against Mexicans (Galarza 1964:76-77). *Bracero* contracts were issued in many other Texas counties, however, and in 1951, Texas accounted for 52,000 of the 191,000 contracts issued that year (Galarza 1964:79).

Bracero contracting and the rise of “wetback” migration

As was the case in the 1920s, following the end of the Great Depression the combination of strong demand for Mexican labor and the bureaucratic hurdles imposed upon would-be legal entrants into the United States resulted in massive undocumented migration of Mexicans occurring simultaneous to their massive legal importation in the Bracero Program. An early study by Burma (1954:44) found that undocumented Mexican labor migrants had outnumbered legal labor migrants since 1940. One of the principal reasons for the rise of “wetback” labor in the fields was the exclusion of much of Texas from the Bracero Program: more undocumented Mexican agricultural workers were to be found there than anywhere else in the 1940s and early 1950s (Samora 1971:45). U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions of undocumented Mexicans rose steadily and dramatically during the 1940s, from just 8,139 in 1943 to 458,000 by 1950 (Samora 1971:46).

In addition to the exclusion of Texas from the Bracero Program, undocumented migration was encouraged by farmers throughout the country who did not find their labor needs were being satisfied by the Bracero Program. Among other things they objected to were the \$15 contract fee and \$25 bond they had to pay for each bracero, as well as the 4-month minimum length of contract they had to respect (Galzarza 1964:57). To get the workers they needed, they simply let the word out among their legal braceros that jobs would be available to any friends or relatives they had who would be interested in working. The so-called “Texas Proviso” included in a 1952 Act amending the Immigration Act of 1917 (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services 2003) permitted farmers to employ undocumented Mexicans without fear of prosecution for “harboring” aliens who were unlawfully in the country (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:36).

In 1949, a change in the bilateral agreement governing the Bracero Program further promoted clandestine entry of the United States by making it a priority to give bracero contracts to Mexicans who were already in the country illegally, a practice that had begun informally already by 1947. From 1947 to 1949, 74,600 Mexican nationals were brought in as contracted braceros from the Mexican interior, compared to 142,000 Mexican “illegal aliens” who were legalized after entering the country illegally (Cárdenas 1975:78). In 1950, only about 20,000 new bracero contracts were issued, while 96,000 “illegal aliens” were legalized (Galarza 1964:63). Legalization gave strong incentives for Mexican workers and U.S. employers alike to bypass the bracero recruitment centers altogether (Calavita 1992:28-32). It also led to one of the more bizarre practices in the history of U.S. immigration policy, the so-called “drying-out” or “wringing-out” of “wetbacks.” When the Border Patrol would arrest a “wet” worker on a farm, it would transport the worker back to the border, have him ritualistically set on foot on Mexican soil in an act of official “deportation,” only to then allow him to step back into the United States, where he would be legally-contracted to go back to work as a bracero (Calavita 1992:41; Samora 1971:47).

Galarza (1964:63) reports that “drying out” was a big business in California in the early 1950s, with growers chartering Greyhound buses to transport their “wet” employees to Calexico to cross into Mexicali to get their bracero papers from the U.S. consulate. There can be no doubt that arbitrary and capricious practices such as these, however faithful they were to existing U.S. law, lent no legitimacy to U.S. immigration laws in the eyes of Mexicans, who could not reasonably view their evasion as an immoral act. Thus, while Mexicans surely knew that hiring a coyote to get them a bracero contract or lead them surreptitiously across the border was *illegal*, it would be unreasonable to expect them to consider that doing so was in any way *immoral*.

There were several other aspects of the way the *bracero* recruitment was conducted in Mexico that promoted the practice of coyotaje, whether in its clandestine-crossing or in its bureaucratic-evasion form, as a means for Mexican workers to gain access to jobs in the United States. First, from the outset of the program the number of contracts offered was never sufficient to meet demand for contracts by Mexican workers who aspired to work in the north (Calavita 1992:32). Durand (1994:132) gives the example of the town of Numarán, Michoacán, where 248 men went to the *presidente municipal* to ask for recommendation letters needed to be issued a contract, but only 25 received them, noting that similar incidents occurred all over the emigration stronghold of Western Central Mexico (see, for example, Durand and Arias 2004:303, with regard to the town of Concepción de Buenos Aires, Jalisco).¹⁷ Another indication of the excess demand for bracero contracts was that from 1946 through 1954, many more Mexican migrants were apprehended by U.S. immigration authorities than were issued bracero contracts (see data published by Calavita 1992:217-218).

Second, aspiring *braceros* typically were forced to bear considerable hardships in the process of obtaining their work contracts at the official recruitment centers, including incurring significant transportation expenses in getting to the centers and then facing mounting lodging and food expenses upon arrival at the recruitment centers, where lengthy delays were typical. In addition, they were frequently shaken down by officials for bribes in order to be awarded a contract (Calavita 1992:62 and 91; Galarza 1964:71; Grebler 1965:32; Hadley 1956:344, cited in Samora 1971:44-45; McWilliams 1948:239). According to Calavita (1992:110), by the mid-1950s Border Patrol monthly reports showed that about half of the indocumentados being apprehended said that they had made some efforts to get a legal bracero contract but had given up. Migrants interviewed around 1950 by researchers working for the American G.I. Forum of Texas and the Texas State Federation of Labor reported that they had entered the U.S. clandestinely because they would have had to pay 200-300 pesos in bribes at bracero recruiting

¹⁷ In the 1950s, the Mexican federal government apportioned available contracts to Mexican state governors, who, in turn, apportioned them to *presidentes municipales* in their states. The *presidentes municipales* were authorized to issue permits known as *certificados de aspirante a bracero*, indicating that the recipient had been cleared to apply for a contract at one of the official contracting centers (Galarza 1964:80-81).

centers in Mexico, just to get a place in line (American G.I. Forum of Texas and Texas State Federation of Labor 1953:5).

Third, there were some considerable advantages to working as an *indocumentado* over working as a *bracero*: although pay and working conditions were comparable between the two types of Mexican workers, *indocumentados* could work in any branch of industry in any part of the country they wished, were not tied to a single employer, and were not obliged to return to Mexico upon the termination of their contract, which usually lasted no longer than 6 months. Not surprisingly, many *braceros* stayed in the United States upon termination of their contracts in order to become *indocumentados*, while others “deserted” their contracts, sometimes with the assistance of “domestic” coyotes, who transported them in the dead of night away from the work site where they were contracted (Durand 1994:133-134 and 1998:33-34). Some reports indicate that growers often preferred legal *bracero* labor not because of fear of reprisal by the immigration authorities, but rather because they found *braceros* easier to control and exploit than *indocumentados*, who were free to come and go as they chose (Calavita 1992:56; Galarza 1964:58).

Bureaucratic-evasion coyotaje during the bracero period

Coyotaje of the bureaucratic-evasion form operated both at the level of *municipios* and at official *bracero*-recruitment centers in Mexico. *Presidentes municipales* (local mayors) were put in charge of distributing available *bracero* slots among their town’s residents and, as noted above, there were always more men wishing to work than slots available. This made the awarding of slots a lucrative coyotaje business for many local mayors and other local residents who could provide access to the mayors. The mayors charged bribes to place workers on the lists of men who would be sent to contracting centers and also sold letters of recommendation that workers were required to present once they arrived at the contracting centers (Calavita 1992:62; Cockcroft 1986:20; Durand 1994:131). Men who made it on the list and received their letters of recommendation would then travel to one of the recruitment centers to sign their contract and “ship out” to the United States. Upon arrival, however, the aspiring *braceros* could face substantial waits (Galarza 1964:52) and might not be able to get a contract at all unless they worked through a coyote. Moreover, thousands of other aspiring *braceros*, known as *libres*, traveled to these centers without having been certified by their local *presidentes municipales*. The *libres* often presented other credentials, including letters of recommendation from political patrons that had been tendered to them in return for a cash payment (Galarza 1964:81).

Pérez (1991:13) describes how the first men from his town in Oaxaca had good experiences working as *braceros*, but how subsequently it became harder to get a contract and they began to have to rely upon coyotes at the contracting centers. A migrant interviewed by one of Durand’s research assistants in Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosí spoke of how a friend of his who “trafficked” at the

Monterrey recruitment center got him to the front of the line for a contract in the 1950s (Durand 2002:36). A former *bracero* I interviewed in Nuevo León in 2002 described the difficulties he found in getting a contract in Monterrey in 1962 and how he was able to obtain it through the intervention of a coyote who was a family friend. Other migrants arriving from points south would sometimes have to wait months in Monterrey before getting a contract. It all depended, he said, on how many workers were needed north of the border at any given time and whether the aspiring *braceros'* local mayors had good contacts at the recruitment center. At the same time, he said that there were many men hanging around that contracting office who posed as coyotes, but who took aspiring *braceros'* money, only to never be heard from again:

There were a lot of people, coyotes, who used to do that, but they swindled a lot of people. "Listen, come tomorrow and give me so much (money) and you'll get in tomorrow." And it was lies! ... Well, people used to come in from other places, not us [norteños] but people from further south, from other places, wanting to get in. And there is no shortage of people who tell them "I have contacts and we do it this way, with so much [money] I'll get you in the queue," like a recommendation, but with money behind it. And in the end, these guys never saw the people, they just took off, they ripped them off. ... What happens is that they would see you here and make you think that they'll get you in tomorrow for 100 pesos. They'd tell you "come here tomorrow at such and such a time and I'll be here and you give me a buck" and the people, because of their desire to get in, would give it to him. Sure, but that "friend" would never come back, they'd never see him again. This was always going on there (translated from Spanish by Spener).

Nonetheless, although there were many "false" coyotes operating at this center, another former *bracero* I interviewed in 2004, this one from rural Coahuila, spoke of paying a coyote \$20 to get his contract at the Monterrey recruitment center in the 1950s:

Bracero: I went to Monterrey to be contracted several times.

Spener: And how did it work in Monterrey?

Bracero: Well, it was real tough. Real, real tough! Because in Mexico there are many people, a lot of people pile up. In Monterrey, there was a tremendous wait to find work.

Spener: So what did you have to do to get a contract if it was so tough?

Bracero: It's like this. Sometimes you have contacts so you can get through quickly, but you have to pay a certain amount. Back then, this kind of coyote didn't transport you. This kind was just there to get you in on the contracting. And that was what you wanted, to get contracted. ...

Spener: And these men that helped you get through the red tape, were they called coyotes back then?

Bracero: Well, like I said, that's what they're called because they aren't authorized to do it, but they do it. ...

I asked him if there were also coyotes operating at the Monterrey recruitment center who would offer to take migrants across the border clandestinely if they couldn't get a contract:

Spener: If you couldn't get a contract in Monterrey, would these same coyotes who helped with the red tape also offer to cross you over to the other side, in other words were there the other type of coyotes that would offer to take you [across the border]?

Bracero: Well, I never heard of that, that they'd take you as a *mojado*. No, there the coyote just worked in the contracting offices (translated from Spanish by the author).

In other places, however, it appears that coyotes of the clandestine-crossing variety also operated at the official *bracero* recruitment centers. A former bracero interviewed by Cockcroft (1986:19-20) reports how members of his community in Michoacán were obliged to use coyotes to find work north of the border:

Eventually the *coyoteada* [system of paid guides for migrants entering the United States] came along. Some men got in good with employers there at the contract sign-up centers [in Mexico] and, as I understand it, the word spread that there was an easy way to make some money by charging every *bracero* who wanted to go north a certain fee. And that's what happened; they started making us pay. Back then, they charged five hundred, sometimes as much as a thousand pesos. If the coyote got your card for you and you went with a group that he took to the border, he charged fifteen hundred pesos. ... There's [a coyote] in Tejaro, another in Vandacareo, who sent a ton of folks on the bracero trail. They made bundles of money; with a lot of willing workers, you can collect many thousands of pesos. They sent folks northward with those people who were at the contract office.

Here we should note, however, that the text of this oral history is ambiguous regarding exactly what services the coyotes were providing. In brackets, Cockcroft defines the *coyoteada* as the “system of paid guides for entering the United States,” but his informant speaks of coyotes getting a bracero his “card.” What type of card the migrant meant is not clear—he could mean a green card, a border crossing card, or a card of some sort to get into the contract queue. It is also not clear why a migrant would need a card at all if he was to be taken across the border clandestinely, or why the coyote would be taking the bracero to the border if he had obtained a legal contract from the recruitment center. The ambiguity of this historical account is all the more telling given Pérez' (1991:13) description of how, in his Oaxacan village of Macuilianguis, the red-tape coyotes transformed themselves into clandestine-entry coyotes after the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964: “So, when the Bracero Program ended, the coyotes kept working on their own. They looked for employers in the U.S. and supplied them with workers illegally.”

Coyotaje at the bracero recruitment centers in Mexico could sometimes be quite complex. Although she does not use the terms coyote or coyotaje to describe the process, Calavita explains how coyotaje worked in the so-called “specials” program within the Bracero Program that was initiated in 1954. In the “specials” program, U.S. growers were allowed to re-contract braceros with special skills at “reception centers” in the Mexican border cities. Growers would pay a bribe of around \$25 [around \$200 in 2004 dollars] to Mexican officials to re-contract these workers, which was often deducted from the workers' future wages. The growers did not typically bribe the Mexican officials directly, however. Rather, they paid the bribe to the Mexican medical and disability insurance representatives who handled bracero benefits, who took a cut themselves before paying off the officials at the reception centers

(Calavita 1992:94). In other words, the Mexican insurance representatives acted as the growers' coyotes in the "specials" program.

The hardships incurred by Mexican workers waiting to be contracted at the labor recruitment centers in Mexico were vividly dramatized in Eugene Nelson's 1972 novel *Bracero*. Among the hardships they had to endure were rip-offs by men posing as coyotes who offered to help them get contracts quickly. In one scene, Nacho, the book's protagonist, is approached by a coyote as he arrives in the unnamed town that serves as a contracting center. The coyote offers to get him to the United States immediately, without waiting in line, in return for a fee of 200 pesos. When Nacho says he cannot afford it, the coyote lowers his fee to 100 pesos:

Look, for just one hundred pesos I can take you to the house of an official right now and get your papers in order. You will see by his uniform and his identification that he really is an official. How about it? Or do you want to wait here like a dog for the next month? (Nelson 1972:133).

When Nacho continues to demur, the man tells him he has "a direct pipeline to the big boss" and that for just 5 pesos he'll take Nacho to see him. Nacho says he still needs time to think and the coyote feigns anger, leaving Nacho in the cantina to pay for the beer the coyote had invited him to drink with him. In another scene, a group of aspiring braceros sit around telling tales of the abuse they have taken. One man complained:

The first time I came up here two years ago, I paid a hundred pesos to some *cabron* who said he was going to get me on the list the next day and I didn't get on any list and I never saw the bastard again. I nearly starved for two months trying to get on a list and then finally I went as a wetback.

In response, another man sighed and said, "Ai, those *chingados* [fucking] coyotes" (Nelson 1972:146-147). The men go on to discuss that the cost of paying a *mordida* [bribe] to get a contract had risen considerably over the years. At the outset of the Bracero Program, it had been a small amount, just enough to grease the wheel, but by then it had become quite expensive (Nelson 1972:146-147). Indeed, Calavita (1992:187, note 71, citing two other sources) notes that bribes charged to aspiring *braceros* by Mexican officials in the 1950s could be as high as \$36 [around \$250 in 2004 dollars].

Clandestine-crossing coyotaje during the bracero years

In response to the shortage of contracts and the hardships endured by migrants in the bracero recruitment centers in Mexico, the number of Mexicans entering the United States clandestinely continued to rise dramatically in the early 1950s. By 1953, the number of Mexicans apprehended by the Border Patrol had risen to 865,000, nearly double the level in 1950 and more than 100 times the number of apprehensions recorded in 1943! (Samora 1971:46, Table 4). By this time, the Border Patrol had grown to over 1,000 agents nation-wide, with the vast majority dedicated to surveillance of the southwest

border with Mexico (Nevins 2002:197; interview with Brenda Tisdale, Curator, National Border Patrol Museum, July 21, 2005). As noted above, many of these Mexicans were headed to work in agriculture in Texas, where many counties were excluded from the Bracero Program until 1954 (see below). During this period, it was common for clandestine entrants to use the services of a *patero* [boatman] to cross the Río Grande into the United States. Such crossings are described in migrant oral histories collected by Durand's team (2002:47) and Cockcroft (1986:24). In their report *The Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas*, Saunders and Leonard refer to "boatmen who frequently make a profitable business out of ferrying the wetbacks across the river" (1951:92).

Pateros ferried migrants not only into the United States, but back to Mexico as well, since migrants often feared being shaken down for money by corrupt Mexican officials on the international bridges. Although their services were vital for migrants who did not know how to swim, *pateros* were also famous for robbing migrants of the dollars they earned as they returned to Mexico.¹⁸ This reputation was given voice in several popular *corridos* from Tamaulipas, including "El Güero Estrada," which was recorded by Los Alegres de Terán on their album *Contrabandistas y pateros*.¹⁹ It also made its way into Luis Spota's 1948 novel *Murieron a mitad del río*. In this novel, which describes the exploitation and abuse heaped upon *mojados* in Texas in the late 1940s, a group of friends about to cross the river is advised by an acquaintance at the border to cross on their own, rather than with *pateros*:

Pancho Orozco knew what he was talking about when he had said:
Ignore anyone who offers to help you cross. Cross by yourselves, without any help.
Pancho had seen and heard a lot about those who crossed the river by night, pursuing the dream of Texas dollars.
Not a night goes by—he added—when they don't fish some drowned man out of the river. The *pateros* work tirelessly.
The *pateros*?
Right. The ones who take people across in their launches. People like you, wetbacks. They kill in order to rob them.
What about the police?
Orozco let out a chuckle:
Watch out for them like you would the devil himself! They're in cahoots with the *pateros*. They protect them. Every wetback represents ten, fifteen, twenty pesos of profit. They take dozens across. It's a big business. When they come back loaded down with dollars, they kill them. Stabbing them or with pistols. Then they tie a rock around them and it's right to the bottom. Later, they swell up and float to the shore. And the police, they're nowhere to be found ... (Spota 1948:21, translation from Spanish by Spener).

¹⁸ Though *pateros* were not explicitly mentioned, bandits preying upon returning "wetbacks" during this period was also noted in the report *What Price Wetbacks?*, published by the American G.I. Forum of Texas and the Texas State Federation of Labor (1953:29).

¹⁹ For an analysis of the text of this corrido, see Spener 2003.

As was the case in the 1920s, the historical record is mute with regard to what proportion of clandestine Mexican entrants during the years of the Bracero Program hired a coyote in order to cross clandestinely into the United States. It seems probable that the proportion was low compared to today, given that the border was 2,000 miles long, hundreds of thousands of clandestine migrants were entering every year, the Border Patrol was still relatively small²⁰ and its strategy was often geared to policing migrant farm workers already in the country rather than preventing them from entering the country (Calavita 1992:32-33 and 77). Nonetheless, when the Border Patrol launched its first series of special “operations” to apprehend “wetbacks” in Texas and California in 1947, it captured 277 “alien smugglers” in addition to 194,000 “deportable aliens” (U.S. Department of Justice 1947:24, cited in Samora 1971:51). Writing at about the same time, McWilliams (1948:240) reported that “at the present time hundreds of [Mexicans] are paying as much as \$150 [\$1,270 in 2004 dollars] to be smuggled into the United States in trucks and airplanes.” The “field investigators” for the report *What Price Wetbacks?*, published in 1953 by the American G.I. Forum of Texas and the Texas State Federation of Labor,²¹ described the border towns of Del Río and Eagle Pass, Texas as a “hot spot” for the “smuggling” of “wetbacks,” which they described as a “multi-million-dollar business” (1953:52). In addition, they reported that at the time they were conducting their field work, “over forty smuggled aliens were being held in jail [in Eagle Pass], ready to serve as witnesses against the smuggling operators” (1953:53). In this report, smugglers were described as *pachucos*²² and lumped into the same category as other undesirables, including “the criminals, the marijuana peddlers, the falsifiers of identity documents, ... the prostitutes, and the homosexuals” (1953:6). Regardless of how they should be characterized, by the early 1950s there appeared to be a large number of coyotes dedicated to helping Mexicans enter the United

²⁰ A report published in 1953 by the American G.I. Forum and the Texas State Federation of Labor found that the Border Patrol had only 491 agents in the entire Texas border region, running 900 miles from El Paso to Brownsville, through which the majority of Mexican indocumentados passed during this period (1953:6). Galarza (1964:61) reported that in 1954 there were still no more than 200 Border Patrol agents on-duty at any one time during the day along the entire breadth of the U.S.-Mexico border.

²¹ This report was a patently political document aimed at inciting the federal government to take action to curb clandestine labor migration. Neither “field investigator” was a social scientist. One was Ed Idar, Jr., the executive secretary of the American G.I. Forum of Texas. The other was Mr. A.C. McLellan, identified in the report as a businessman from Rio Grande City, Texas. At the time, both the American G.I. Forum and the Texas State Federation of Labor took strong anti-immigrant positions. Regardless of any possible bias on their part, the authors state that their results were based on “many interviews with wetbacks” and “a survey of bracero conditions” and that they “vouch for the accuracy of their statements and for the true reporting of interviews and the reporting of information compiled from other sources (American G.I. Forum of Texas and Texas State Federation of Labor 1953:1).

²² According to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, pachucos were “Mexican American adolescents, generally ages thirteen to twenty-two, who belonged to juvenile gangs from around the 1930s to the 1950s. ... During the era of the 1930s and 1950s, pachuco youths in urban areas of Texas became known for their style of dress, idioms of speech, and countercultural activities. ... Some of the pachucos engaged in criminal behavior that included gang rivalry, harassment of both Mexican and Anglo-American citizens, vandalism, and even killings. Many juveniles, however, were no more than imitators who dressed in the pachuco dress of the day, or sought to emulate the pachucos' antiestablishment attitude” (De León 2001).

States clandestinely: In 1953, the Border Patrol reported apprehending 1,545 “alien smugglers” (United States Immigration and Naturalization Service 1954:3, cited in Grebler 1965:34).

Galarza (1964:60-61) reported that the “wide distribution of wetbacks” in U.S. agriculture in the 1950s owed to the operation of Spanish-speaking farm labor contractors, who, Galarza made clear, were involved in helping migrants sneak across the border as well as transporting them to farms once they were inside U.S. territory:

In a typical operation one contractor was caught by the Border Patrol while directing a convoy of two trucks and a passenger car northward from Tijuana. Seventy men were aboard the trucks, which were preceded by a scout car. The men had crawled through the border fence and were being taken to pre-arranged employment 500 miles to the north (Galarza 1964:60).

He estimated that in 1953 there were at least 400 such contractor-coyotes operating in California, accounting for the employment of 25,000 to 30,000 farm laborers (Galarza 1964:61).

Covotaje and the fear of communist infiltration and subversion of the United States

Also as was the case in the 1920s, the massive clandestine entry of Mexican workers into the United States created alarm on the part of government officials and other observers who feared that non-Mexican subversives could be entering the country across its evidently porous Southwestern border, in spite of the fact that no credible evidence existed that this was, in fact, occurring. Thus, the *1951 Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* found that the Border Patrol’s enforcement capacity was being strained not only by the clandestine entry of farm workers, but also by “the crescendo of communism with its devious schemes of infiltration.” The report warned that the porous border “create[s] easy access for non-Mexicans” (cited in Calavita 1992:49-50). The Acting Immigration Commissioner, testifying before a House subcommittee had the following to say:

A harvest of dangerous byproducts from the seemingly harmless invasion by illegal aliens is now in the making. Who can say that Communists and subversives do not cross the Rio Grande? ... [I]t was recently discovered that approximately 100 present and past members of the Communist party had been crossing daily into the United States in the El Paso area (cited in Calavita 1992:50).

And similar to the case in the 1920s and again today, the threat of subversion by OTMs entering the United States alongside Mexican workers was linked to the operation of smugglers on the border. In the 1920s and 1950s, the threat was perceived to come from communists, while today it comes from Muslim terrorists. The authors of *What Price Wetbacks?* raised this specter in particularly vivid terms:

Along a wide-open border, such as that of the United States and Mexico, anything can happen. While the nation spends millions of dollars each year seeking out subversives within the country, any given number of them could easily slip in to the country to replace those apprehended.

Who is to say how many Communists mingle with the hordes of wetbacks wandering casually into the country across the Rio Grande? If one out of every two wetbacks—or one out of every five—is arrested, does the same ratio hold true for subversive agents and spies? Or won't the ratio of those unapprehended be much greater, considering the intelligence and training of the subversive or the spy?

In July 1953, the District Immigration Office at San Antonio reported that in two and one-half years, 15 aliens who had come in from Mexico had been deported under subversive charges. They were of the following nationalities: Mexico, England, Germany, the Philippines, Iraq, Palestine, Poland, Russia, and Chile. How many slipped in without being apprehended? How many from communist-dominated Guatemala came over masquerading as Mexicans?

[Recently it has been] reported that a smuggling ring headed by a Spanish-speaking Costa Rican woman had just been broken in Brownsville by Immigration Service investigators. This particular ring, the news reports stated, was specializing in the smuggling of undesirable European aliens into the country—charging as high as \$2,000 a head! [\$14,200 in 2004 dollars] Only official records, not available to these reporters because of their confidential character, can reveal the extent to which subversive elements may be using the open border to infiltrate the country. Only the same official records can reveal how many aliens were actually smuggled in by the Brownsville ring, and, possibly, how many of these might have been subversives (American G.I. Forum of Texas and Texas State Federation of Labor 1953:30-32).

Operation Wetback and its aftermath

In response to concerns about a border out of control, the Border Patrol launched Operation Wetback in June 1954, resulting in the apprehension and return to Mexico of around 1,000,000 Mexican *mojados* (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:37; Samora 1971:51-55). In the following years, Border Patrol apprehensions fell precipitously, to 243,000 in 1955, and then to just 30,000 in 1960 (Samora 1971:46, Table 4). One of the major reasons for this was the negotiation of the inclusion of formerly excluded areas of Texas into the Bracero Program in 1954 and the subsequent doubling of bracero visas issued annually. Thus, while growers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas had only 700 legal *braceros* for the 1953 harvest, they had over 50,000 for the 1954 harvest (Calavita 1992:55). Between 1955 and 1960, over 400,000 *braceros* were legally admitted every year (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:37). By 1956, Texas accounted for 43 percent of the 445,000 new bracero contracts issued (Galarza 1964:79).

It is not clear, however, that the dramatic drop in apprehensions of unauthorized Mexican workers by the Border Patrol was all due to the sudden legalization of a previously illegal flow. Samora (1971:55) suggests it may have been due in part to the fact that after Operation Wetback the Border Patrol returned to its “routine procedures,” which no longer included “the concerted action approach” with other law-enforcement agencies it took in 1954 and 1955. Calavita (1992:77) found that after Operation Wetback, the Border Patrol was mainly concerned with apprehending Mexicans who had “deserted” their bracero contracts, rather than capturing clandestine migrants who had recently entered the country. Regardless of

how effective the expansion of visas was in reducing the entry of unauthorized Mexican workers into the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 in the face of labor union opposition and a growing civil rights movement in the United States would mean a subsequent return to mass undocumented migration of Mexicans and a concomitant return to prominence of coyotaje as a way of facilitating it.

THE RETURN OF UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN MIGRATION, 1965-1986

As discussed in the previous section, already prior to 1965 a considerable number of legally-contracted *braceros* either deserted their contracts or stayed on to work as *indocumentados* after the end of their contracts. Not surprisingly, the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 did not result in the end of Mexican labor migration to the United States. Rather, it resulted in the return of Mexican undocumented migration on a massive scale. In spite of the many abuses inflicted upon *braceros*, Samora (1971:72) reported that in migrant-sending communities in latter half of the 1960s “everyone ... knows that the *braceros* made out well, and although the Bracero Program no longer exists, U.S. employers are eager for good laborers and almost anyone can get work if he can cross the border” (see also Stoddard 1976:183-184). The experiences of several million Mexican men in the Bracero Program and many thousands of others as clandestine workers in the United States during the program’s duration led to the accumulation of a tremendous stock of knowledge about both the work and income opportunities north of the border and the means for accessing them (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Furthermore, Mexico’s economic “miracle” under its “import-substitution-industrialization” model initiated in the 1940s began to unravel by the 1970s, producing ever-larger labor surpluses in the country, providing a further stimulus to migration (Cornelius 1978:36; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:42).

In addition to the end of the Bracero Program, other changes in U.S. immigration policies simultaneously reduced the opportunities for Mexicans to migrate legally to the United States. In 1965 the Hart-Celler Act became the first piece of U.S. legislation ever to place numerical limits on Mexican immigration by imposing a 120,000 cap on legal immigrants that could be admitted from the entire Western Hemisphere (Cerrutti and Massey 2004:18; Cornelius 1978:18).²³ Although spouses and

²³ Although prior to 1965 there were no numerical limits on the number of Mexican nationals who might be admitted to the United States as immigrants, there were nonetheless significant barriers in the administration of U.S. immigration law that effectively denied legal entry to many, if not most aspiring Mexican migrants. Newman (1965:13-16) makes this clear in his synthetic account of the application process faced by a typical rural Mexican migrant seeking to immigrate legally to California in the early 1960s. The Mexican documents required to submit with the application were difficult and expensive to acquire, as was the medical examination. At that time, the State Department required a bona fide letter of job offer from a U.S. employer as proof that the applicant would not become a public charge if admitted. In addition, the California Department of Employment and the U.S. Department of Labor would have to verify that the letter was from a legitimate employer, that the job was not

children of U.S. citizens would be admitted to the country outside these numerical limitations, relatively few Mexican immigrants had actually established U.S. residence and become U.S. citizens by the outset of this period, given the circular nature of migration promoted by the Bracero Program and the undocumented labor migration that had accompanied it. Legal channels for Mexican migration to the United States were further reduced in 1976, when Congress imposed on Western Hemisphere countries the same 20,000 annual quota for immigrant visas that it established in the 1965 Act for countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia (Cornelius 1978:18). A law passed in 1978 abolished the separate hemispheric caps and established an annual world-wide cap of 290,000 immigrant visas, subsequently lowered to 270,000 in 1980 (Cerrutti and Massey 2004:19). The impact of these policy changes on Mexican migration was tremendous, given that as recently as the late 1950s the Bracero Program had been issuing an average of 400,000 work visas to Mexican men annually (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:37).

Estimating the dimensions of clandestine border-crossing and coyotaje in this period

Although Mexican labor migrants had entered the United States clandestinely in large numbers in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s, after 1965 the absence of legal migration channels combined with the other factors mentioned above led to levels of clandestine crossing of the border theretofore unseen. U.S. apprehensions of “deportable aliens” rose from 86,597 in 1965 to 345,353 in 1970, to over 1 million in 1978, to a peak of 1,767,400 in 1986. The vast majority of these apprehensions were of Mexicans by the Border Patrol as they attempted to enter the United States (Department of Homeland Security 2004, Tables 35 and 36 and p. 146). Using data presented in Massey and Singer (1995:210, Table 3) we can estimate that in the 1965-1986 period, undocumented Mexicans made approximately 27.9 million entries into the United States, offset by 23.3 million departures, with approximately 4.6 million establishing residence in the United States. During this same period, only 1.3 million Mexicans were admitted to the United States as legal immigrants, with another 46,000 admitted as temporary contract workers (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:45).

Unlike previous periods of large-scale clandestine entry of the United States, during this period there is some historical record of what proportion of clandestine Mexican migrants hired a coyote to get into the country. Although estimates vary, the proportion of clandestine migrants hiring a coyote to enter the United States appears to have become fairly high within just a few years after the end of the Bracero Program. Based on his experiences in the field along the South Texas-Northeast Mexico border in the late 1960s, Samora (1971:86) reported that migrants who failed to make it across the border on their first

temporary, and that qualified workers could not be recruited from the local labor market in California. If an immigrant visa were, in fact, issued, the application process might take over a year. If subsequent to legal admission the immigrant wanted to bring his family to join him legally, the costs of the application process multiplied correspondingly, as did the waiting time.

two attempts without the services of a coyote would resort to hiring a coyote by their third attempt. Zazueta and Zazueta (1980:70), on the other hand, found in their 1977 study that most migrants hired a coyote on the first few times they crossed only to cross without such services once they had gained sufficient experience to make it on their own.

In a survey conducted in 1976 in rural communities in the state of Jalisco, Cornelius (1978:23) found that 41 percent of undocumented migrants there had hired a coyote to make their last crossing of the border. Analyzing data from the National Survey of Emigration to the Northern Frontier and the United States conducted in 1978-1979 by the Mexican Ministry of Labor, Koussoudji (1992:166) reported that 52 percent of undocumented Mexican migrants had used a coyote on their border-crossings during the preceding 5 years. López Castro (1998:965) reports that surveys conducted by the Colegio de Michoacán found that by the early 1980s a majority of migrants departing from communities in the “traditional” areas of emigration in Western Central Mexico were using coyotes to enter the United States. Similarly, the Texas Indocumentado Study conducted in 1980-1982 in San Antonio and Austin reported that “the do-it-yourself approach” to border crossing had become “increasingly rare” and that by then “virtually everyone” made use of a coyote to get into the United States (Browning and Rodríguez 1985:287-288). The most systematic statement to be found regarding the prevalence of coyote-use during this period comes from Cerrutti and Massey (2004:28-29) who, using longitudinal data collected for the Mexican Migration Project, report that by 1970 around two-thirds of first-time undocumented migrants were hiring a coyote to cross the border, rising to 80 percent by 1978, and fluctuating between 70 and 80 percent for the remainder of the period ending in 1986.

Returning to Massey and Singer’s (1995) estimate presented earlier that Mexicans made approximately 27.9 million unauthorized crossings of the Mexico-U.S. border from 1965 through 1986, we can apply any of the proportions reported above to see that coyotes assisted migrants in making many millions of entries into the United States during this period. If we take the lower-bound estimate of 41 percent made by Cornelius, we arrive at a figure of 11.2 million coyote-assisted crossings made by Mexicans during this period. If we take Koussoudji’s estimate of 52 percent, we arrive at 14.5 million coyote-assisted crossings. On an annual basis, this would come to an average of around 660 thousand coyote-assisted crossings per year over the 22-year period [$.52*(27,935,100/22)$]. We can also look at the prevalence of coyote-use in terms of undocumented immigrants residing in the United States. As noted above, Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002:45) report a net figure of 4.6 million new undocumented Mexican residents of the United States over the course of this period. If 70 percent of them used a coyote to enter the United States on at least one occasion (as suggested by Cerrutti and Massey’s first-time crosser estimates cited above), that would mean that around 3.2 million undocumented residents of the United States during this period had entered the country with the assistance of a coyote at some point in

their lives. Of course, this figure does not take into account the many thousands (or perhaps millions) of other Mexican coyote-users who returned to Mexico without ever establishing stable residence north of the border. Regardless of the proportions we choose and whether we are referring to crossings or migrants, coyote-use during this period appears to have been a mass phenomenon, involving millions of Mexican migrants making millions of surreptitious border crossings.

As shown in Table 1, the real prices paid by clandestine Mexican migrants to enter the United States during this period varied considerably from one crossing point to another and depending upon the distance traveled and the type of coyotaje service contracted. In the late 1960s, traveling away from the South Texas-Northeast Mexican border region by a combination of crossing the Río Bravo/Río Grande, walking through the brush, and being picked up in a car or truck to be driven to a city in the Texas interior appears to have cost a minimum of \$1,000 in constant 2004 dollars. At the same time, a migrant could hire a *patero* to take him just across the Río Bravo for as little as around \$20 in current dollars. The cost for traveling beyond Texas by land to Chicago, Illinois in the late 1960s could range from as little as \$1,000 to as much as \$2,000 in current dollars in the late 1960s. In the mid-1970s, paying a coyote to get from Tijuana to Los Angeles traveling by land could cost anywhere from \$1,100 to \$2,290 in today's dollars. In 1972, it was possible to travel to Los Angeles from Tijuana with a women-run coyote organization known as Las Hueras [sic]—the blondes—that would rent its customers legitimate immigration documents to pass through the San Ysidro port of entry in a car, for around \$1,000. In 1975, the U.S. Comptroller General of the United States reported that serviceable “green cards” could be purchased or rented on the black market for prices ranging from \$340 to \$570 in current dollars. At around the same time, another coyote organization charged over \$3,000 [in 2004 dollars] to help a middle-class Mexican man pass through the San Ysidro port of entry with black market documents.

Coyote land-travel charges away from the Texas-Mexico border appear to have fallen a bit by the beginning of the 1980s, with several reports of prices in the \$700-\$900 range in 2004 dollars. Analyzing data from the Mexican Migration Project, Cerrutti and Massey (2004:30) found that the mean price paid to coyotes by undocumented Mexican migrants—without regard to what specific services were being paid for, what part of the border was being crossed, or how long a distance was being traveled—fell steadily through this period, from a peak of a little over \$1,000 in 1968 to a little under \$600 by 1986 [expressed here in 2004 dollars]. These authors argue that this decline in the price of coyotes' services occurred due to an increased supply of migrants with crossing experience who were qualified to become coyotes: by the early 1990s, 16 percent of the working-age population in traditional migrant-sending areas in Mexico had made at least one trip to the United States as a labor migrant (Phillips and Massey 2000:39). Of course, we should also note at this point that not all coyotes, and perhaps not even a majority of them,

were themselves migrants, as many coyotes were Mexican border residents and Mexican Americans residing in the border region (see findings of a 1976 U.S. government report discussed below).

Taking our previous estimate of approximately 660,000 coyote-assisted crossings made by Mexican migrants each year during this period, we can multiply it by different prices in the range reported in the previous paragraph to get a sense of how much money Mexicans could have been spending annually on coyotaje services. If we take a lower-bound figure such as the \$578 given by Cerrutti and Massey for 1986, we get an annual expenditure of \$381.5 million, expressed in 2004 dollars. If we take a somewhat higher figure such as \$725 provided by Lewis (1979:44-45) for a trip by land from Tijuana to Los Angeles in 1978, we produce an estimate of \$478.5 million annually, in 2004 dollars. Regardless of the amount we choose in the range of prices paid found in the literature or the reasonable proportion of crossings for which migrants hired a coyote, it appears that already by the 1970s coyotaje was generating annual revenues on the Mexico-U.S. border in the hundreds of millions of dollars.²⁴

Militarization of the border

If coyotaje became truly a mass phenomenon during this period, it owes not only to the increase in the number of surreptitious crossings being attempted by Mexicans, but also to the greatly increased border enforcement efforts engaged in during this period by U.S. authorities. The number of agents deployed by the Border Patrol nationwide, with the vast majority assigned to guarding the border with Mexico, grew from around 1,100 agents in 1950, to nearly 1,500 by 1960. The 1960s saw little growth in the number of agents, but the Patrol grew dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the massive growth of surreptitious entry by Mexicans that began following termination of the Bracero Program: From 1,566 agents in 1970, the Border Patrol grew to 2,484 agents by 1980 and then to 3,693 agents by 1986, nearly two-and-a-half times the number of agents working for the Patrol just 16 years earlier (Nevins 2002:197).

In addition to greatly increasing the number of agents, with the concomitant increase in number of vehicles to transport them as they guarded the international line, the Patrol began to borrow tactics from the military to control movement across the border. In 1968 and 1969 it installed the first motion, heat, and sound sensors in heavily-trafficked points along the border, using technologies that had been developed for use in the Vietnam War (Lewis 1979:41). During the Carter and Reagan administrations, the Border Patrol and other branches of the Immigration and Naturalization Service adopted important elements of “low-intensity conflict doctrine” from the United States’ counterinsurgency wars in Vietnam and Central America, in which a variety of military and paramilitary tactics were used to control rebellious civilian populations (Dunn 1996). In order to carry out this doctrine, the Border Patrol

²⁴ If we assumed, for example, that only 20 percent of crossings annually involved the hiring of a coyote and only \$500 (2004 dollars) was paid on average, \$127 million would have been spent each year on coyotaje services.

acquired an impressive array of hardware to spot and apprehend migrants entering the United States away from official ports of entry, including infrared radar, night-vision scopes, helicopters, closed-circuit television monitoring, and materials to construct steel walls along some stretches of the border. In addition to hardware, the INS expanded its intelligence capabilities and “maintained liaison relations with a wide variety of federal security, police, and military agencies” as well as with law enforcement and intelligence agencies of other countries (Dunn 1996:41). From 1978 to 1986, the INS overall budget more than doubled to \$574.3 million [\$990 million in 2004 dollars], with most of the funds going to its enforcement activities, which accounted for 64 percent of the total INS budget in 1986 (Dunn 1996:180). It was during this 1965-1986 period, then, that the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border was undertaken in earnest, to the point where some sections of it, such as the heavily-trafficked Tijuana-San Diego corridor, came to resemble a “war zone” (Lewis 1979:41), with the forces of the Border Patrol arrayed on one side and migrants and coyotes on the other.

U.S. law enforcement efforts to combat “alien smuggling”

By the late 1960s, U.S. immigration authorities had begun to apprehend and prosecute “alien smugglers” in substantial numbers. Samora (1971:3) reports that apprehensions of “smugglers” along the border rose from just 525 in 1965, to 2,048 by 1969, to over 3,000 in 1970. Using data provided by the I.N.S., the Comptroller General of the United States (1976:5-6) reported that “alien smuggling” was on the rise in the early 1970s: While in FY 1970 only 8.4 percent of the 218,676 “illegal aliens” apprehended by the Border Patrol had been “smuggled” into the United States, by FY 1975 around 14 percent of the 568,550 captured migrants were believed by the Border Patrol to have been smuggled. According to the report these figures underestimated the true extent of the “problem,” since many smuggled aliens were never apprehended and those that were caught often were not thoroughly interrogated or had been warned by their “smugglers” not to give any details of their journey to the officers who arrested them. In light of the estimates presented above using data from surveys of clandestine Mexican migrants, it seems likely that the data published by the I.N.S. about the number of “alien smugglers” and “smuggled aliens” *drastically* underestimated the extent of coyotaje during this period.

Coyotes were being arrested all along the border by the mid 1970s. In 1969, the El Paso Sector of the Border Patrol uncovered 439 cases of “alien smuggling” involving 2,108 “aliens” and 534 “smugglers,” 355 of whom were detained for prosecution. These figures were up from just 114 cases in 1965 (Samora 1971:86). From July 1975 to June 1976 the Border Patrol apprehended 4,415 suspected coyotes in the company of 45,676 undocumented migrants in the San Diego, California area.²⁵ Only a

²⁵ The usual caveat to apprehension figures applies here: The numbers refer to events, not persons. Because coyotes and migrants may be apprehended more than once during the same reporting period, the actual number of persons being apprehended may be somewhat less than the number of apprehensions recorded.

small percentage of these coyotes were indicted, however, with the U.S. Attorney's office bringing charges against just 450 persons in 1974 and 375 persons in 1975 (Villalpondo 1981:106). Around the same time (1974) 173 coyotes were prosecuted San Antonio and another 558 were prosecuted in Del Río, Texas (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:21).²⁶ Nationwide, the Comptroller General found that less than half of the 26,873 cases of "alien smuggling" identified in FY 1973-1975 resulted in prosecution, with most treated as misdemeanors. This low rate of prosecution owed to the need of U.S. Attorneys to direct resources towards the "higher priorities of other offenses" (Comptroller General of the United States: 19-20). Of the 22,386 "alien smugglers" apprehended by the I.N.S. from July 1969 through December 1973, the immigration status of 88 percent could be ascertained. Of these, 44.3 percent were U.S. citizens, 31.8 percent were "legal resident aliens," 20.5 percent were "illegal aliens," and 3.4 percent were border-crossing card holders (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:23).

The presence of large absolute numbers of coyotes operating along the border appears to have continued through the remainder of this period. In 1978, for example, the deputy district director of the INS in San Diego said that he believed that "on any given day" there were over 2,000 "smugglers" operating in the San Diego-Tijuana corridor (Lewis 1979:49). By the latter half of the decade, the El Paso chief of the Border Patrol reported that half of clandestine migrants entering his sector were being smuggled (Halsell 1978:81). From 1969 through 1986, the Border Patrol "located" 1.5 million "aliens" it believed to have been "smuggled" into the United States, along with 186,387 persons it believed to have been "alien smugglers." For this same period, the Border Patrol's parent agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, reported that its achievements included apprehensions leading to convictions in 17,211 cases involving alien smuggling.²⁷

Already by the late 1960s the Border Patrol had informants spying on coyotes in the U.S. border region and in Mexico without whom it would not have been able to "apprehend the numbers they do with the staff available" (Samora 1971:75). By the mid-1970s, the Southwest Region of the INS was making extensive use of such informants, some of whom were paid, others of whom were "paroled" to allow them to reside in or visit the United States, and others who were both paroled and on the INS payroll. In 1975, the INS was working with 235 "paroled" smuggling informants, 113 residing in the United States and 122 residing in Mexico. The INS regarded them to be highly effective tools in combating coyotaje, who were themselves "Mexican aliens" and "part of the scene where smugglers operate" (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:16).

²⁶ The Comptroller General's report did not provide data on the number of coyotes apprehended by the I.N.S. in these two locales.

²⁷ Author's calculations using data contained in the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (U.S. Department of Justice 1979, 1983, and 1988). By "located" the Border Patrol means "apprehended" or "arrested," regardless of whether "aliens" or "smugglers" are the ones being "located." Every year the number of alien smugglers "located" greatly exceeds the number of "alien smugglers" convicted in the federal courts.

By the mid 1970s the Border Patrol had 50 agents devoted to anti-smuggling investigations, while there were another 300 INS investigators working in anti-smuggling units operating out of district offices. The Border Patrol accounted for 80 percent of the apprehensions of smugglers (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:10). Also by this time the INS had created the Mexican Antismuggling Information Center run by the Border Patrol out of its sector headquarters in Yuma, Arizona. All INS offices were directed to submit information on smugglers they collected so that the Center could index and analyze it. According to the Comptroller General's report (1976:10-11) the Center did not receive the level of cooperation it should have from other INS offices and was folded into the El Paso Intelligence Center in March 1976. In 1974, Mexico passed laws that imposed steep criminal penalties upon persons convicted of aiding the illegal entry of the United States by undocumented workers. By 1975, the INS was liaising with Mexican authorities in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila (across from Del Rio, Texas), resulting in the prosecution in Mexico of 14 members of organized smuggling rings (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:26). Two years later, the United States and Mexican governments began stepped-up bilateral cooperation to crack down on smuggling. In 1978, Leonel Castillo, the new INS director, told reporters at a bilateral meeting that the two governments had agreed to work together to topple "the top ringleaders" of smuggling operations. In that same year, the INS announced the launching of the National Anti-Smuggling Program (Lewis 1979:48-49). By the end of FY 1978, the Program resulted in 1,143 felony convictions against smugglers, compared to just 497 the previous year. Meanwhile, Mexico had also arrested and prosecuted several hundred "alien smugglers" (Lewis 1979:51).

Methods employed by coyotes in the face of border militarization

In response to the build up of paramilitary personnel and military equipment on the border in this period and in the face of growing governmental efforts to arrest and incarcerate them, the methods practiced by coyotes to help their customers enter the United States remained quite similar to the ones they had been using since the late 19th century, although they now made use of more modern transportation and communication devices that technological advances had made available to society in general. These methods were summarized succinctly by the Comptroller General in his 1976 report to Congress:

Aliens' chances of successfully entering the United States illegally and reaching desired locations are greatly increased by professional smugglers who are often aware of INS defenses and use special methods to evade them.

- Guides lead aliens around Border Patrol agents or through normally inaccessible areas.
- Small groups of aliens are used as decoys to divert the attention of Border Patrol agents so larger groups can enter undetected.
- Scout cars with two-way radios warn vehicles smuggling aliens of the location of Border Patrol agents.
- Aliens are hidden in special compartments of vehicles.

- Illicit documents are furnished to aliens to enable them to enter the United States through [legal] ports of entry.
- Aliens are transported by airplanes or boats that bypass ports-of-entry (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:5).

Coyotes continued to transport migrants by train, as they had done since the previous century, although now they helped them hop into freight cars surreptitiously instead of buying them seats on passenger trains. In addition, by this time tractor-trailers had overtaken rail transport as the chief way to ship cargo around the United States and, not surprisingly, coyotes had also begun to avail themselves of this way of transporting their clients once they had entered the United States. This practice appears to have been especially common in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas:

Typically, an INS agent said, “the [smuggler] will approach a legitimate truck driver and offer him 50 dollars [\$145 in 2004 dollars] each to haul the aliens one hundred miles past the checkpoint. He is careful to select a driver without a criminal record, someone who will be placed on probation and not sentenced to prison if apprehended.” The hundreds of produce trucks leaving the Rio Grande Valley daily cannot be searched individually, according to the agent, and “smugglers often build secret compartments in the floors of truck beds where aliens can hide, covered by loads of produce (Lewis 1979:50).

Also by the mid-1970s, recreational vehicles had begun to be used as conveyances for surreptitious Mexican migrants: “Near Laredo, Texas, Border Patrol agents stopped a pick up truck and two motor homes carrying 124 illegal aliens.” One of the suspects in the case was carrying \$18,000 in cash on his person (Comptroller General of the United States 1976:7). According to Stoddard (1976:192), coyotes during this period were hauling migrants in “refrigerated semi-trailers, U-Haul trucks, liquid carrier tank trailers (with false bottoms), furniture vans, horse trailers (along with the horses), in private mobile homes” and probably in private planes as well (note 13, p. 207).

As Lee (2002) has documented with regard to the movement of Chinese in the late 19th and early 20th century and Gamio (1930) described with regard to the movement of Mexicans across the border in the 1920s, coyotes in this period (1965-1986) frequently operated in collusion with both Mexican and U.S. authorities. Zazueta and Zazueta (1980:69-70) reported that in the late 1970s, coyotes were paying sums of \$150-\$200 (\$470-\$780 in 2004 dollars) per migrant to Mexican and U.S. authorities to be allowed to operate freely in the border region. Zazueta (1979:13) reports that coyotes in Tijuana who did not keep up with their payments to local police could soon find themselves arrested. Lewis (1979:46) reports that in 1978 and 1979 U.S. immigration inspectors at the San Ysidro, California port of entry were convicted of taking bribes to let coyotes bring migrants in vehicles through the checkpoints. The Comptroller General’s report (1976:7) describes how in 1974 a smuggling ring was broken up that involved the smuggling of as many as 1,000 illegal aliens per month by Marines and former Marines of Camp Pendleton, California. This group of coyotes depended upon the wives of 4 U.S. soldiers stationed

at Camp Pendleton who used their military ID's to drive vanloads of migrants per year through the camp in order to avoid the San Clemente checkpoint on the way to Los Angeles. The group took 12 people per trip and charged each passenger \$100 [\$383 in 2004 dollars] (Lewis 1979:51-52).

As they had done in earlier periods, some coyotes in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s worked as labor agents in direct collaboration with U.S. employers. Stressing the continuity between the Bracero period (1942-1964) and the undocumented period (1965-1986), Pérez (1991:13) writes that when the Bracero Program ended, coyotes who worked the bracero recruitment centers in Mexico contacted employers in the United States and began supplying them with undocumented workers directly. Posing as an undocumented migrant for research conducted with Samora in the late 1960s, Jorge Bustamante reports coyotes offering to place him in jobs in a variety of places, ranging from just across the river in Texas to Kansas and other places in the Midwest (Samora 1971:109). The Comptroller General's report noted that many coyotes placed migrants in jobs in the United States (Comptroller General 1976:8). Lewis, in her book *Slave Trade Today*, dedicated an entire chapter, titled "Aliens on Order" (1979:72-80) to documenting how coyotes delivered migrants to employers in a variety of U.S. cities and rural areas. Similarly, Halsell (1978:83), relying on Border Patrol sources, reported coyotes acting simultaneously as labor recruiters, cross-border guides, highway transporters, and then as slumlords in the U.S. destination where migrants went to work. Durand (1998:44) also notes that after 1965 Mexican *mayordomos* (foremen) in the employ of U.S. farms and businesses were often sent to their home communities in Mexico to recruit workers, subsequently arranging for their surreptitious border-crossing and transport to the work site in the U.S. interior.

Finally, during this period we see the return to prominence of "domestic" coyotes, who dedicated themselves to the transport of migrants within the United States. Conover (1987:55-57) describes how coyotes provided transportation to farm workers from one work site to another. In Arizona, different coyotes' reputations were known by workers in agricultural camps. The prices they charged were negotiable, as were the payment arrangements. At times the coyotes would transport migrants free of charge and then "sell" them to a farm that needed workers. According to Conover, these coyotes were usually either Chicanos or experienced migrants who had lived in the United States for a considerable period of time. He also noted that "as a rule, [these] coyotes carried guns, and did not like to be messed with." Cockcroft 1986:196), also writing about farm labor camps in Arizona, described how farm worker union organizers viewed such domestic coyotes as enemies to their cause since they sometimes supplied "scab" labor to farmers attempting to break worker strikes. On the other hand, an oral history collected by Durand (2002:72-79) and his collaborators that was taken from a man from a rancho in San Luis Potosí, describes a 1976 sojourn in which he and his friends "escaped" from an unhappy work situation on a chicken farm in rural Louisiana with the help of a domestic coyote they contacted. According to this

man, “everyone who goes [to work in the United States] always carries with him in his agenda at least 10 names of [domestic] coyotes, in case they need one, to see which one they can connect with” (Durand 2002:78, translation from Spanish by Spener). Taking a nationwide view, Lewis (1979:65-71) reports that during this period the United States was “crisscrossed” by smuggling routes over which migrants were transported in trucks and vans on their way to a variety of work sites around the country.

The authorities’ portrayal of coyotes: Powerful, sophisticated, greedy, and ruthless

According to government authorities, whose accounts were repeated by journalists covering the issue, coyote operations grew in size, complexity, and sophistication during this period in response to the growing demand for coyotaje services, on the one hand, and beefed-up border security, on the other. Coyotaje was portrayed as “big business” and “organized crime” and coyotes were portrayed as increasingly greedy, ruthless, and abusive criminals who preyed upon migrants’ vulnerability as they arrived at the border. The Comptroller General (1976: ii and 7) found that “[p]rofessional smuggling of aliens is growing in size and complexity” and that there had been “a significant increase in the number of large, organized smuggling rings” that were “difficult to immobilize because the leaders often stay removed from the actual smuggling act.” Halsell (1978:81-82) wrote that Border Patrol officials she interviewed viewed “the smuggling of aliens” as a “large-scale, highly-organized operation.” Usually law enforcement only captured the “mules” [drivers] working for the organization, while the “ringleaders” remained “as anonymous as a Mafia boss.” Lewis (1979:45, 66-67) asserted that the true identity of the coyote, whom she referred to as the “big-time operator,” was often not even known by lower-echelon members of his operation, since his will was carried out through his “middlemen” and “lieutenants.” Halsell (1978:81-83) reported that Border Patrol officials believed that many former “dope smugglers” had moved into the “alien smuggling” business because it required little in terms of cash investment, offered comparable profits, and brought with it considerably lower criminal penalties if caught, a claim that would be repeated in the 1990s following the border crackdowns that occurred in the middle of that decade (see, for example, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1997).

Lewis (1979:41) vividly renders the view of coyotes as sophisticated operators of a big business in the following passage:

As the conditions of border crossing became more difficult, the coyotes grew more sophisticated. The coyotes have now become extended, multinational business operations of their own. These rings not only operate on both sides of the border, but have contacts in Central and South America and in the Caribbean, as well as knowledge of whom to bribe in between. The network is so effective that when night-time border checks in the U.S. were first accompanied by helicopters equipped with powerful spotlights, would-be immigrants in Quito, Ecuador, were told, just one week after the first chopper had made its test run, to bring dark clothes to help escape detection. And, as conditions along the border turned into a war zone, smugglers began to develop a

wartime mentality (as did the INS with its body-count game). The smuggling trade became a dangerous and dirty business.

Such conditions obtained not only in the heavily-trafficked Tijuana-San Diego corridor, but elsewhere along the border as well. For example, Lewis (1979:50) also describes a large-scale coyotaje operation run out of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas in the 1970s that continued to operate in spite of the fact that its drivers were repeatedly arrested by the U.S. immigration authorities. According to the INS investigator she interviewed, this organization had its own auto maintenance yard in Nuevo Laredo, where it parked as many as 25 vehicles. It used juveniles as guides and drivers who could not be tried as adults in the United States. It did not limit itself to the clandestine transport of Mexicans but also had a network of contacts throughout Latin America. This organization was estimated to move between eight and ten thousand migrants into the United States annually.

By the early 1970s, migration scholars were also commenting on the growing size and sophistication of coyotaje networks on the U.S. border with Mexico. Alejandro Portes, for example, echoed official accounts in this passage from a 1974 article titled “Return of the Wetback”:

“The character of the confrontation between illegal immigrants and U.S. control agencies has shifted markedly from one involving more or less isolated individual actions to one based on organized and increasingly sophisticated smuggling operations. ... The sophistication of smuggling operations is reflected by the use of scouting cars to spot Border Patrol checkpoints, of women and children to give the appearance of legitimacy to smuggled groups, and of hired drivers ignorant of the identity of the main operators. ... While smuggling operations have existed since early in this century along the Mexican border, recent years have witnessed an unprecedented increase in their efficiency and scope. ... Illegal Mexican entry into the United States is increasingly an organized profit operation. ... The fact that control agencies have to contend not only with isolated wetbacks but with rapidly growing organizations furnishes further evidence of the magnitude of the movement and, perhaps more importantly, of its increasing institutionalization (Portes 1974:43).

This U.S. researcher’s account was mirrored by the view of a Mexican researcher, who believed that the bands of coyotes operating in the late 1970s in the Tijuana-San Diego corridor were “perfectly organized Mexican-U.S. mafias that perfectly know the mechanisms of action of the Border Patrol,” that had individual cells covering specific stretches of the route and that used multiple routes into the U.S. so that if one route were blocked at any given moment, another could be followed (Zazueta 1979:24-25, translation from Spanish by Spener). Moreover, he noted that the Border Patrol was unable to do away with the coyotaje phenomenon because of the “enormous quantity of money that moves around this business” which could be used by coyotes to buy permission to pass through certain zones from the agents patrolling it. For his part, Cornelius (1978:23) wrote that by the mid 1970s a “vast industry of commercial smuggling of migrants and fraudulent documents” had emerged and that “the increasing

dependence of Mexican migrants on commercial smuggling operations” was “one of the worst consequences of current U.S. immigration laws as they affect prospective migrants from Mexico.”

If the official view of *coyotaje* during this period was that it was a sophisticated and highly profitable criminal enterprise, the official view of *coyotes* was that they were greedy, ruthless, and brutal. The Comptroller General’s report (1976:8) reported that “smuggled aliens” had been treated “inhumanely and even killed,” specifically mentioning a coyote who had raped a woman he was smuggling into San Diego, another who instructed his collaborators to “dump aliens in a ditch and continue if the aliens should become sick or die,” and a group of 24 migrants who had been locked in a truck in Los Angeles for two days without food or water. The underlings in coyotaje organizations were characterized by Border Patrol agents as drug-users engaged in a desperate trade in order to feed their addictions. Former narcotics dealers who got into the business were “completely amoral,” dealt with people like they did dope and had “no regard for human lives” (Halsell 1978:81-83). As an example, Border Patrol agents in El Paso told Halsell (1978:86) how they had found a “tank truck” in which 22 “illegals” died, asphyxiated by the fumes.²⁸ When he was in the field at the end of the 1960s, Samora (1971:76) was told that coyotes would loan migrants the large sum of money needed to pay for their crossing at usurious interest rates and threaten to harm their families at home in Mexico if the loan was not repaid.²⁹

These official accounts were supplemented on occasion by migrants who reported abuses to reporters, such as having fellow migrants abandoned to die by coyotes in the Arizona desert when they could walk no further after hurting a leg or being bitten by a rattlesnake (Lewis 1979:62). Others described fellow migrants suffocating while locked in the back of moving vans driving across the United States (Halsell 1978:85). Sometimes coyotes themselves would tell of abuses they or their colleagues had inflicted upon migrants. One former coyote told Lewis (1979:111) that some coyotes had specially-rigged trunks in their cars that could be filled with exhaust to kill passengers known to be carrying large sums of money. In his sensationalistic (and likely apocryphal) memoir of working as a coyote in Tijuana and Southern California in the 1970s, Calderón described coyotes ditching airplanes filled with migrants into the Pacific Ocean (1983:75-77), raping women in Tijuana and prostituting them in Los Angeles (1983:79-80), and, when migrants could not pay upon arriving at their destination, cutting off their hair,

²⁸ If true, this unsubstantiated account would constitute the worst single-event tragedy in the history of clandestine-crossing coyotaje on the border. 19 migrants died in the back of a tractor-trailer rig in Victoria, Texas in May 2003, in what has been reported to be the worst single event of migrant deaths on the U.S.-Mexico border. Prior to that, the worst single migrant-death event was believed to be the 18 migrants who asphyxiated in a locked rail car in Sierra Blanca, Texas (east of El Paso) in the summer of 1987. While it is probable that the agents interviewed by Halsell, who died in 2000, truthfully told her about a tanker-truck incident in which migrants had died, it also seems likely that they over-reported the actual number of dead.

²⁹ Coyotes’ ability to do this presumes, of course, that they know who migrants are and how to find their families in their home communities. This would be unlikely in cases where migrants contracted coyotes based at the border with whom they had not made previous crossing arrangements.

taking their clothes, and leaving them naked along busy thoroughfares to be picked up by the police. Upon being deported back to Tijuana, the “mafia” of coyotes would refuse to take these migrants across again, knowing from their sheared heads that they had not paid the agreed upon fee (Calderón 1983:105).

“Illegal immigration” and fears of terrorism in the 1980s

By the early 1980s, the “illegal immigration problem” was given a national security cast by the Reagan administration, which warned that the United States’ unsecured southern border could be used as an entry point for international terrorists (Dunn 1996:26). This concern filtered down to the level of local Border Patrol sectors. For example, in 1985, Silvestre Reyes, chief of the McAllen sector of the Border Patrol who less than a decade later would later become famous for launching Operation Blockade in the El Paso sector,³⁰ expressed his concern that it was no longer just Mexicans who were coming across the Rio Grande, but aliens from around the world. Many of these non-Mexicans were brought into the country by coyotes. “What's scary about this new trend,” Reyes said, “is that we're no longer dealing only with hungry Mexicans sneaking across to find a job. We don't know who's getting in - terrorists, criminals. They could be anybody, for any purpose. Unless we stop it, we're vulnerable to anything” (Loh 1985:10).

The Reagan administration’s concern with terrorists coming across the U.S. border with Mexico was not limited to those coming from Middle Eastern countries, such as Libya, but also, and especially, from countries in Central America that were wracked by civil conflict in the 1980s, conflicts in which the United States had intervened actively. Not surprisingly, in the administration’s view, the potential terrorists coming across the border would be partisans of the social movements opposing the governments or paramilitary groups financed by the United States. During this period, the I.N.S. Commissioner was put in charge of an interagency task force known as the Alien Border Control Committee and charged with implementing recommendations from the Vice President’s Task Force on Terrorism. Plans drawn up by the Committee included sealing the border with Mexico and detaining, prosecuting, and deporting thousands of “terrorists and undesirables” during a so-called “immigration emergency” (Dunn 1996:54-56).

An alternative view of coyotes and coyotaje

The historical record examined thus far suggests that we should take both the supposed growth in the size and sophistication of coyotaje enterprises and the increased cruelty of coyotes towards migrants in the 1965-1986 period with a grain of salt. When we compare coyotes’ *modus operandi* in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s with the 1920s and 1950s, we see that the essential elements of the trade did not change

³⁰ The fame gained by Reyes would subsequently get him elected to Congress to represent the people of El Paso and adjacent areas of West Texas.

greatly. Indeed, although there were undoubtedly more of them, the coyotes operating during this period seemed to be no more sophisticated or ruthless in moving migrants across the border than were the bands of coyotes that helped Chinese enter the United States through Mexico at the end of the 19th century. And certainly the atrocious behaviors attributed to coyotes by government authorities and news reporters in the 1970s and 1980s were no worse than those attributed to them in prior decades. As I have discussed elsewhere (Spener 2004), these same claims by government authorities about coyotes' dramatically increased sophistication, greed, ruthlessness, and cruelty would be vociferously repeated, almost verbatim, in the late 1990s and first years of the 21st century. Given the continuity in the nature of coyotaje over time, we might question whether the alarm sounded about coyotes every twenty years or so is the consequence of real change in the material conditions on the border or perhaps owes more to government officials' interest in justifying their budgets to a skeptical public.

Some grounds for skepticism about the official account

Other evidence contained in the historical record from this period indicates that, indeed, there were ample grounds for skepticism about the official portrayal of coyotaje as dominated by lucrative, transnational criminal syndicates. Halsell (1978), for example, made two clandestine crossings of the border while conducting research for her book *The Illegals*. The first was with a man from Michoacán that she met in the plaza in Reynosa. Upon crossing the river with him, she marvels at his knowledge of the tactics of the Border Patrol and how to counter them, such as timing their movements so that they will be interpreted by concealed motion sensors as those of an animal. When she asks her companion how he knows to do this, he tells her that “the wetbacks in the Reynosa plaza and in their home villages talk endlessly” about how to deal with Border Patrol tactics and that their lives depend on their knowing such things (Halsell 1978:30-31). Her account leads us to wonder whether Lewis' (1979:41) description of the rapid communication of information about the use helicopter spotlights in San Diego, California to members of smuggling networks in Ecuador is really an example of the sophistication of smuggling enterprises or rather of the efficacy of word-of-mouth communication among migrants.

Halsell made her second crossing of the border in Tijuana with the assistance of a solitary coyote who worked independently. Before going with him she said that she had heard “so many grim stories of the perils involved in being smuggled” that she feared for her life (Halsell 1978:80). Nevertheless, her crossing with him was successful and he treated her quite humanely as they walked across the border under cover of night. The coyote was a Vietnam veteran and the son of Mexican immigrants who had moved “back” to Tijuana after leaving the military. He made a point of studying the Border Patrol's tactics and learned to outsmart them. He told her that when he had been apprehended by the Border Patrol on several occasions, his customers had never identified him as their coyote because he was

competent and treated them well. Halsell's experience with this solo coyote led her to the following insight:

Listening to him talk about his one-man operation, I recall my conversations with Border Patrolmen who told me smuggling was a highly organized operation. Yet the Burriagas [her coyote's last name] must be multiplied by the thousands. Smuggling, then, must be a business somewhat like prostitution: For every one that is part of a highly organized ring, there are a thousand or more who are individual entrepreneurs (Halsell 1978:89).

Zazueta (1979:29-30) makes a similar observation with regard to findings from his 1978 study of deported migrants in Tijuana, although he believed that solo operators and more small-scale groups of coyotes did not move nearly as many people as the larger, more organized groups that he describes in his report.

Halsell and Zazueta's respective insights seem to be consistent with other findings of the Comptroller General in his report to Congress. His report noted that prior to May 1974, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had focused on attempting to arrest as many individual smugglers as possible rather than on "disrupting rings," where a ring was understood to mean "continuous, profit-making operations involving several participants" (Comptroller General 1976:11-12). In May 1975, all Border Patrol sectors were ordered to list all the "rings" they had identified during FY 1975, the number of members in each ring and each ring's impact in terms of numbers of "aliens" smuggled each month. One sector, whose name was not specified in the report, submitted information on 131 rings it had identified, 28 of which had one member, 72 with two members, 21 with three members, and only 10 with 4 or more members (Comptroller General 1976:11-12). In other words, 92 percent of the large number of "rings" identified in the sector had 3 or fewer members. We can also look at the supposed size and sophistication of coyote operations in another way. According to Lewis (1979:51), in the late 1970s the INS broke up the biggest coyote "ring" operating in San Diego, which was, in turn, the biggest coyotaje "market" on the border. This ring had 13 members and transported about 50 people per week, for fees ranging from \$150 to \$500 per person. In almost any other context, a business with just 13 employees and annual revenues between \$1.1 million and 3.8 million (in 2004 dollars) would be regarded as a *small business*³¹ rather than a large-scale, predatory cartel.

It does not appear, then, that the coyotaje market on the border during this period was dominated by a handful of criminal syndicates, but rather featured a large number of smaller enterprises and even solo operators. This is not surprising, given the minimal requirements for getting into the business, which

³¹ For example, the United States Small Business Administration defines a sawmill as a small business if it has 500 or fewer employees, a lumber wholesale firm as a small business if it has 100 or fewer employees, and a building materials retailer as a small business if it has \$6 million or less in annual receipts. For other examples of what constitutes "small business" in the eyes of the U.S. federal government, see "Small Business Size Standards matched to North American Industry Classification System" on the website of the Small Business Administration, <http://www.sba.gov/size/sizetable2002.html>. Retrieved on August 4, 2005.

consisted of a few basics, including knowledge of border geography, contacts with migrants, access to a motor vehicle, and a willingness to take risks. It is also not surprising, given that the clandestine migration process itself gave rise to a growing cadre of Mexican men and women who were “qualified” to be coyotes by virtue of their border-crossing experience, as noted by Cerrutti and Massey (2004:30). Indeed, during this period many experienced migrants began to “go professional” and lead relatives and fellow townspeople on journeys north across the border for a fee, providing services that competed with those offered by coyotes living along the border itself. Rather than criminal syndicates preying upon desperate migrants arriving unawares at the border, these coyotes were highly-valued members of the migrant-sending community itself (López Castro 1998:967).

In *Slave Trade Today*, Lewis (1979:111) relentlessly portrays coyotaje as an institution and coyotes as social actors as utterly predatory towards migrants. She writes that “most coyotes ... tell of the empathy they have for the people they help come to the United States” and quotes one coyote as saying that because coyotaje is a “word-of-mouth” business, he’d have no more business if he did “these terrible things” to people. Lewis, whose main source of information seems to have been INS officials, is utterly unconvinced by the coyotes’ arguments: “Perhaps there are ‘clean’ smuggling operations—groups who have delivered what they have promised without abandoning, robbing, or killing any *pollos* on the way. Perhaps.” Similarly, Samora (1971:6 and 145) believed that coyotes were the ones who had “made the most profit from the illegal alien” and recommended that the authorities “crack down on smugglers who traffic in human lives.” This recommendation was in keeping with his belief that “wetbacks” moved from “poverty to greater poverty” by migrating illegally and that the only ones who profited from their presence in the United States were “those who employ him or smuggle him” (Samora 1971:105). This position is contradicted by Cornelius’ (1976:30) finding that by the mid 1970s, migrants from rural Jalisco were regularly sending home \$100 to \$300 [\$350 to \$1,050 in 2004 dollars] a month to support their families.

Increased size and strength of the transnational migrant community

Although it is certainly the case that there were coyotes who committed horrible abuses against their clients and many clandestine Mexican migrants who were brutally exploited by their employers during this period, the sheer volume of unauthorized migration to the United States suggests that such broadly negative views of clandestine migration and the coyotaje that facilitated it were quite exaggerated. We must remember that the Mexican-born population as (under)estimated by the U.S. Census grew from just 760,000 in 1970 to over 4 million by 1990, with most of the growth apparently due to clandestine migration. If we can believe the findings from the available surveys conducted during this period, the majority of Mexican immigrants residing north of the border had made use of a coyote’s services at least once to enter the United States, while many thousands of others who returned to Mexico

had also done so. This by itself constitutes *prima facie* evidence that coyotaje as an institution was delivering on its promise of effectively transporting many thousands of unauthorized migrants into the United States, even if individual coyotes committed serious abuses against their clients. To believe otherwise is to suggest that every year during this period hundreds of thousands of migrants continued to arrive at the border in hopes of crossing in spite of the fact that odds were that they would be unable to cross and would be robbed, raped, killed, or injured in the attempt. While this makes for a dramatic story line, available evidence does not suggest it was true. Rather, it appears that most migrants who attempted to cross with a coyote did so and arrived more or less safely in their intended destinations, where they were able to work and/or establish residence in growing Mexican immigrant communities.

The very growth of Mexican immigrant communities in the United States after 1965 helps explain the effectiveness of coyotaje as an institution that not only served the needs of U.S. capitalists, but also served to advance the interests of Mexican migrants themselves. By the beginning of the 1980s, researchers for the Texas Indocumentado Study recognized the importance of *resource accumulation*—financial, work, social, and cultural—in undocumented Mexican communities. These resources were used to facilitate Mexicans’ border-crossing, obtaining of jobs and housing, and acquisition of the knowledge and skills they needed to conduct their affairs in the United States (Browning and Rodríguez 1985:287-289). Such resources accumulated within the undocumented community over time could be used as capital to “finance” the various survival strategies of its members, including the hiring and payment of coyotes (Browning and Rodríguez 1985:287-288; Rodríguez and Núñez 1986:152-153). The availability of social resources needed to undertake such survival strategies depended, in turn, upon the presence of a sufficient number of fellow *indocumentados* in the United States (Rodríguez and Núñez 1986:153).

In his periodization of the history of Mexican migration to the United States, Durand (1998:44) notes that after 1965 social networks became the driving force of Mexican migration and that members of these networks assisted with border-crossing, including paying coyotes, as well as providing housing and assistance in finding housing and employment in the U.S. destination. Similarly, Cornelius (1978:21) explained that the “extensive kinship networks” in place in the U.S.A. by the 1970s helped provide migrants with needed housing, food, job-hunting assistance, and financing their trip north. Thus, as the undocumented Mexican population in the United States grew, so did the social resources available to Mexicans south of the border who wished to emigrate. The availability of these resources put subsequent migrants in a better position to negotiate the perilous crossing of the border, including the terms under which they contracted coyotes. For one thing, the presence of relatives and friends already in the United States meant that aspiring migrants need not finance their own migration, whether out of savings or through usurious loans offered by coyotes. For another, it meant that more migrants had experience with a greater variety of coyotes and could effectively “shop around” for the best deal available.

Rise of C.O.D. payment arrangements between migrants and coyotes

The rapidly improving bargaining position of migrants vis-à-vis coyotes likely contributed to an important change in the terms of the contract for coyotaje services. Instead of paying coyotes to take them across the border at the outset of the trip, migrants began to pay coyotes upon arrival in their destination in the United States, usually through loans obtained from friends and family already there. This change benefited migrants in several ways. First, they did not have to raise funds in advance of their trip but could instead head north with only the cash needed to get to the border. Second, traveling with little or no cash on their persons made migrants less vulnerable to being extorted by Mexican police and robbed by bandits or even coyotes themselves. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it gave coyotes a greater incentive to actually deliver migrants to the promised destination, since coyotes would not get paid in full until they did so.

Several authors have noted this general change in payment arrangements. López Castro (1998:969) found that payments to coyotes serving specific local communities in the Mexican interior always had worked on a C.O.D. basis, while coyotes based at the border eventually changed over to a C.O.D. arrangement. He does not specify, however, at what point in time this change occurred. Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002:130-131), on the other hand, argue that the switch in prevalence to C.O.D. arrangements did not occur until the mid-1990s, as rising coyote prices brought about by intensified border surveillance by the U.S. authorities made it necessary for aspiring migrants to request loans from U.S. relatives whose dollar earnings made it possible for them to come up with the needed funds. In examining the historical record, however, it appears that the practice of total or partial C.O.D. payment came into being much earlier, although data are lacking that would permit us to determine what proportion of coyote-assisted crossings were paid for in advance versus paid for upon arrival. In this regard, it is worth examining several examples described in published sources.

In *Los Mojados*, Samora (1971) described two coyote-assisted border crossings made in 1968 and 1969 that involved C.O.D. arrangements, although he did not make clear where the money to pay the coyotes would come from. In both cases, migrants crossed the Northeast Mexico-South Texas border headed to Chicago. In the first case (Samora 1971:1-2), 46 migrants from Guanajuato and Michoacán contacted coyotes unknown to them personally at a hotel in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, who agreed to take them to Chicago for \$200, half of which was collected from them shortly after crossing the Rio Grande with the other half to be paid upon arrival in Chicago.³² In the second case, six migrants were approached by a coyote in a hotel in Ciudad Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas who offered to take them to Chicago for

³² The fact that the coyotes were to collect another \$100 from each migrant upon arriving in Chicago did not guarantee these migrants' safe passage, however. They were locked into a U-Haul truck and three died from heat and lack of oxygen by the time they reached San Antonio.

\$200, with the migrants paying only \$25 upon crossing the river, and the remainder to be paid on arrival (Samora 1971:71-72).³³

The large-scale “Las Hueras” [sic] organization mentioned previously, which in the early 1970s rented immigration documents to migrants for \$225 [\$1,018 in 2004 dollars] and drove them through the legal port of entry and checkpoints from Tijuana to Los Angeles, charged only a small portion of its fee in advance (Lewis 1979:47-48).

In an oral history collected by Durand and his students (2002:72-29),³⁴ a man from a rancho in San Luis Potosí reported that he crossed into the United States with coyotes he found by asking around on the main plaza in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. These coyotes walked the migrants across the river and through the brush around the town of Eagle Pass and then drove them in pick-up trucks to Uvalde, Texas, where migrants’ respondents were contacted by phone and asked if they would pay for their friends/relatives to be delivered to their homes. The man and his friends had no friends or relatives in the United States nor the \$120 each to pay the coyotes, so the coyotes made calls to find them work and then drove them to work on a chicken farm in Louisiana. The \$120 was deducted from their first two weeks of wages.³⁵

In their 1977 study of migrants returned to Mexico by the Border Patrol, Zazueta and Zazueta (1980:74) found that the general custom was for migrants to pay their coyotes upon arriving in their destination, while those who paid in advance ran the risk of having their supposed coyotes disappear on them *al menor descuido*. In a follow-up 1978 study, Zazueta (1979:4-5) reported that he frequently overheard deported migrants making calls from pay phones in Tijuana to relatives or even their employers in the United States to be sure they would have money on hand to pay their coyote when they arrived. Most migrants interviewed for the 1978 study reported not paying their coyote until they arrived in their U.S. destination and that the money came from friends and relatives living there (Zazueta 1979:7).

³³ These migrants also failed to reach their destination, this time because the car in which they were traveling was pulled over by the state highway patrol in Illinois. This and the other account of coyote-assisted crossing of the Texas-Mexico border published in Samora’s book appear to have been provided by immigration authorities rather than from interviews Samora and his assistants conducted with the migrants and coyotes involved. We don’t know, therefore, how the migrants involved were expecting to pay the remainder of their fee upon arrival in Chicago (through loans from relatives already there? from dollar earnings once they got a job?) or whether they would attempt to cross again with the same coyotes after their arrest in Illinois.

³⁴ This is the same oral history cited previously with regard to the rise during this period of “domestic” coyotes within the United States.

³⁵ In the view predominating among immigration officials, the “garnishing” of these workers’ wages by the chicken farmer likely would be interpreted as a form of indentured labor, although the workers themselves may well have felt it to be an especially advantageous way to finance their journey north. After all, the coyotes effectively had transported them free of charge up until that point and actually helped them find a job when none was waiting for them. U.S. immigration authorities might also have described the coyotes as “selling” the men to the chicken-farm owner.

Pérez (1991:22-28), writing about a border crossing he made at the two Laredos in the early 1980s describes how coyotes refused to take migrants across unless they had a name and a phone number for someone who would pay for their trip upon arrival, complaining that too many people had not paid them to risk transporting anyone who hadn't made arrangements with a "respondent" in the United States. During this crossing, he also quotes a fellow migrant as commenting that the "good thing about the coyotes is that they can't collect from a dead man, so they have to protect us against all kinds of dangers" (Pérez 1991:26-27).

Migrant-coyote solidarity

In her book *Mexican Voices, American Dreams*, a collection of migrant oral histories she compiled in the 1980s, anthropologist Marilyn Davis (1990:129), also reported that coyotaje in the Tijuana-Los Angeles corridor was largely a C.O.D. business, where "the coyote is paid only when his 'chicks' reach their destination." Of greater interest, however, was the sharp contrast her accounts of coyotaje offered to the view expressed by U.S. government officials during this period and reporters who communicated that view uncritically. She distinguished, for example, between *rateros*, whom she described as rip-off artists posing as coyotes, and bona fide coyotes, who actually provided migrants with services that enabled them to surreptitiously enter the United States to live and work.

... ballooning demand and big money bring out el coyote's counterpart, *el ratero* [the robber]. *El ratero* always passes himself off as a coyote. *El ratero* is as easy to find as el coyote is difficult. ... Barking his pitch at the bus station as people disembark from the interior provinces, or speaking in sotto voce along border approaches to catch those just turned back, he promises, "With me, it's secure." If they believe him, they will surely lose their money and maybe their lives. He may be small-time, operating alone, or part of a mafia-type crime family trafficking in drugs or prostitution and backed by paid-off police (Davis 1990:128).

Real coyotes, on the other hand, were embedded in networks that linked migrant-sending communities in Mexico with the border and migrant-receiving communities at the border. Davis (1990:128) argued that the "real" coyotes worked via word-of-mouth recommendations and that, although money did change hands, their services were "integrated into the cultural system of favors." For her, coyotes were "not part of the big international rings smuggling Central Americans, Asians, and Africans," but rather were an institution that existed of, by, and for Mexicans, with "one *compadre* helping another."

Consistent with this view of coyotes, Davis (1990:133-134) related the story of a Tijuana coyote nicknamed "El México," who stated that migrants sought him and his collaborators out because they knew they were serious. El México³⁶ worked exclusively through recommendations. His success

³⁶ Readers in the United States should not assume that this coyote's use of a nickname to identify himself reflects any gangster-like tendencies on his part. The use of nicknames is common among young men in Mexico and is not restricted to use among criminal gangs.

depended upon his good reputation among migrants: “It’s like any other business, if you are a mechanic or an engineer, it takes time to build your clientele. When people see you do good work, they will look for you.” This portrayal of migrant-coyote network links is consistent with the findings reported by Zazueta (1979:9-10) from his 1978 study of deported Mexican migrants in Tijuana. Zazueta found that most of the migrants who had bad things to say about coyotes were those that had failed in their attempts to enter the United States. Many of these migrants were also first-time crossers who were unfamiliar with how coyotes operated at the border and were more likely to have hired coyotes at the border about whom they knew nothing in advance. On the other hand, Zazueta found that the most successful migrants appeared to have been those whose coyotes had been arranged for them by friends or relatives who were already in the United States, who knew from experience which coyotes were reliable and which were not.

Davis (1990:135 and 136-139) also told the story of the operator of a “safe house” used by coyotes in Southern California to house migrants once they had crossed the border, but before they moved on to other points in the U.S. interior. During this period, safe houses were typically depicted as veritable dens of iniquity by U.S. immigration authorities, places where migrants were subjected to inhumane conditions and where a variety of abuses were inflicted upon them (see, for example, Lewis 1979:66-67). The operator of the safe house was a “señora” contracted by El México, who was single, had a disabled son who could not walk, and needed the money. According to El México, she did a good job taking care of people, making them breakfast, letting them bathe, and washing their clothes.

Davis (1990:136-139) actually visited the woman, named Lidia Sánchez, in her home in Chula Vista, California. She described the home as well-kept and “normal,” and found Sánchez there doing dishes with a young woman who was one of her customers, talking about their kids, including things like how to get them to eat and what to do about high fevers and ear infections. Davis wrote that the young woman was so “obviously comfortable” in Sánchez’s kitchen that she assumed she must be a friend or a relative, rather than a “skulking fugitive from the Border Patrol.” Sánchez said she got to know people who stayed with her while waiting for their money to arrive. Often she had to show migrants how to use the shower or washing machine since they’d never seen one before in their rural villages. On rare occasions, up to 40 people had stayed with her on a single night. A Mexican American, she only worked with a couple of coyotes she knew well, who had been friends of her mother. Sánchez told Davis she often received “thank you” calls from customers when they arrived at their destination and had customers recommend her to relatives. She said the migrants never caused her any problems, no drugs, no fighting, nothing. Sánchez knew what she was doing was illegal, but she did not feel what she was doing as wrong. She had to make a living and was able to do so helping people worse off than she was.

Although he did not share Davis’ benign view of coyotaje as a socially-embedded community institution, Zazueta (1979:28-29) concurred with her that the business was conducted almost entirely by

Mexicans and Mexican Americans and that the social and cultural conditions of the border “naturally” trained coyotes to adapt to prevailing conditions on either side of it. Moreover, he noted that migrants viewed coyotaje as “normal” and “just an instrument for achieving an end.” Furthermore, he noted that at least to some extent migrants identified with their coyotes, who in the final analysis were “people like themselves, that at some point found themselves in analogous situations, when they, too, migrated for the first time and thanks to their ability made it,” and who now risked their liberty to help others cross (Zazueta 1979:34-35, translation from Spanish by Spener).

LEGALIZATION PERIOD (1986-1992)

During the 1970s the U.S. Congress began to consider legislative measures intended to address the growing “problem” of “illegal immigration.” Finally, in 1986, the U.S. Congress passed and President Reagan signed into law the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The major provisions of IRCA included two sets of opportunities for unlawful residents of the United States to legalize their residence as well as making it illegal for owners of U.S. farms and businesses to knowingly employ immigrants who did not have legal permission to live and work in the country. IRCA also authorized increased funds for the Immigration and Naturalization Service to enhance border security. Each of these provisions had implications for both the size of the flow of clandestine Mexican migrants entering the country during this period, as well as for the practice of migration-related coyotaje.

The general amnesty program

The general “amnesty” provision of IRCA gave unauthorized migrants who could demonstrate that they had resided continuously in the United States since January 1, 1982 the opportunity to become temporary legal residents, then permanent legal residents, and then, ultimately, citizens of the United States. From May 5, 1987 to May 4, 1988, 1.7 million immigrants applied to legalize their status in the country, more than 70 percent of whom (1.2 million) were Mexicans (Woodrow and Passell 1990:41). In order to demonstrate continuous residence in the United States since 1982, applicants had to present documentary evidence, such as pay stubs, rent receipts, bank statements, and affidavits from persons who knew them during the period that they had resided illegally in the United States (New York Times 1987:A16). Many migrants had a quite difficult time documenting their continuous residence in the country, given that they had been living clandestinely up until that point and had not created a paper trail of their lives there (Arocha 1987a and 1987b; Lyall 1987). Many migrants who lacked the required paper trail invented it by hiring coyotes to obtain the needed documentation.

Special agricultural workers amnesty program

In addition to the “general amnesty” program, migrants could legalize their status by demonstrating that they had worked in agriculture in the United States for at least 90 days during the 12-month period ending on May 1, 1986. The documentary requirements to demonstrate this were considerably less stringent than for the “general amnesty” program. IRCA instructed the INS to review amnesty applications for “special agricultural workers” (SAW) using “just and reasonable inference” to determine whether documentation presented—which often consisted principally of an employer affidavit—was sufficient to warrant granting amnesty (Nordheimer 1988:14). Immigration opponents and the INS believed that fraud ran rampant in the SAW program (Nordheimer 1988:14; Pear 1987:A1) and a number of cases of coyotaje were reported in the press. For example, in upstate New York, several “vendors” were found by the INS to be selling forged work papers from farmers to immigrants for fees of up to \$1,500 (Associated Press 1988:52). To some migration scholars, it appeared that the SAW program represented a “fast-track” to legalization not only because the documentation requirements were less onerous, but also because, unlike general amnesty applicants, migrants were not required to demonstrate proficiency in English and knowledge of U.S. civics. Although U.S. immigration officials only expected about 250,000 applications, 1.3 million people actually applied to the SAW program for amnesty, over 80 percent of whom were Mexicans (Cornelius 1990:236). In California, the number of SAW applicants was believed to be three or four times the total of eligible farm workers in the state (Woodward and Passel 1990:60), providing a strong piece of *prima facie* evidence supporting the belief that many applicants were not, in fact, agricultural workers at all but pretended to be in order to legalize their status in the United States.

A total of 2.3 million Mexicans legalized their status in the United States through IRCA’s amnesty provisions, 1.3 million as “general amnesty” recipients and another 1 million as “special agricultural workers” (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:90). Given what we know about the prevalence of coyotaje during the 1965-1986 “undocumented period” of Mexican migration to the United States, it is likely that the majority of Mexican amnesty recipients had entered the United States with the assistance of a coyote on one or more occasions in the past. Although we have no data that would permit us to determine the proportion who did so, it is also certainly the case that many amnesty applicants turned to coyotes of one kind or another for help in convincing the U.S. government that they had been residing continuously in the United States since the beginning of 1982 or had worked at least 90 days in U.S. agriculture in 1985-1986.

Employer sanctions and new document requirements for legal employment

Aside from the two legalization programs described above, the other main provision of IRCA was the repeal of the so-called “Texas Proviso” from the nation’s immigration laws. The proviso, written into law in the early 1950s at the insurances of members of Congress representing Texas agricultural interests, stated that knowingly employing undocumented workers would not be considered to be a criminal act, even though “harboring” and or “transporting” them would be. With the adoption of IRCA, employers were required to verify that job applicants had the U.S. government’s authorization to work in the United States. If employers knowingly hired unauthorized workers, they could be fined and/or imprisoned. After passage of IRCA, all job applicants would have to present to employers a set of documents from an approved list that established their identity and that they were authorized to work in the United States. Such documents included Social Security cards, state-issued birth certificates, legal permanent residency cards, naturalization certificates, driver’s licenses bearing a photograph, et cetera (Immigration Reform and Control Act, text retrieved on August 9, 2005 from <http://www.eeoc.gov/abouteeoc/35th/thelaw/irca.html>).

The purpose of requiring job applicants to prove their work eligibility to employers and to penalize employers if they did not verify their employees work eligibility was to “dry up” the demand for undocumented migrant labor. As post-IRCA history has amply demonstrated, these provisions of the law were almost entirely ineffective. There were several reasons for this. First, the Immigration and Naturalization Service never deployed sufficient personnel and resources to workplace enforcement to make many employers fear the consequences of violating the new law. Very few prosecutions were brought against employers and few of the penalties imposed were severe enough to provide a real deterrent to violating the new law (Brownell 2005).

Second, employers were not required to verify the authenticity of the work-authorization documents presented to them by their employees. The law only required that an employee present and an employer examine a “document or set of documents that reasonably appears on its face to be genuine” (Title I of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, text retrieved on August 9, 2005 from <http://www.eeoc.gov/abouteeoc/35th/thelaw/irca.html>). This made sense to the extent that business-owners were neither experts on counterfeit documents nor trained and authorized law enforcement officers. It also meant, however, that workers only need present papers that were reasonable facsimiles of genuine documents. Very soon after the law’s implementation, coyotes began to serve the market for the documents needed to establish eligibility for employment and at very affordable prices. Some of these documents were counterfeit, while others were valid but sold or rented to persons other than the ones to whom they were originally issued (Anderson and Spear 1988:B9; Andreas 2000:38-39; Kilborn 1992:E2; Stevenson 1990:1). The change in U.S. immigration law, combined with the rise of a new wave of

coyotaje that effectively circumvented it, led some scholars to argue that the history of Mexican migration to the United States had passed from the era of *indocumentados* to the era of *clandestinos*, since most unauthorized Mexicans in the United States now carried documents, though not necessarily documents obtained through legal channels (Durand and Massey 2003: 185).

Third, the threat of employer sanctions contributed to the rise of a system of subcontracting by larger, Anglo-owned firms to smaller, Mexican-immigrant owned enterprises that employed unauthorized migrant workers, especially in construction and agriculture.³⁷ In many cases, these enterprises were headed by recently-legalized workers who had previously worked as *mayordomos* (foremen) of the Anglo-owned firms for whom they now worked as independent contractors (Durand 1998:66-67; Durand and Massey 2003:176-177). In this new role, the Mexican contractor assumed the legal responsibility for verifying the eligibility of his employees to work in the United States. In many, if not most cases, he knew that his employees were not legally authorized to work in the United States, but he also knew that he faced little risk of prosecution. Most of these Mexican-owned subcontracting firms, which were many in number and geographically quite dispersed, were informally-organized with no official payroll and were operated out of the owner's home or truck. As such, they were quite difficult to locate and it was difficult to prove that the owner had actually employed unauthorized workers unless they stood as witnesses against him. This, in turn, was unlikely to occur given that hiring for these firms often took place within the owners' networks of kin and friendship.

As was the case in the early part of the 20th century discussed above, we see multiple forms of coyotaje in operation with this type of labor-contracting arrangement. On the one hand, these Mexican contractors acted as coyotes insofar as they helped the Anglo owners of the firms to which they were contracted evade the prohibitions of the new immigration law. On the other hand, they were coyotes in the sense that they were acting as informal labor brokers for the larger firms that contracted their services. The innovation here was that where formerly the workers procured for the larger firm would become employees of that firm, now they would remain in the employ and under the supervision of the labor-recruiting coyote. Finally, the Mexican owners of these small contractor firms often helped arrange and finance their workers' border-crossing with the assistance of clandestine-crossing coyotes, without the Anglo-owned firm incurring any risk in the process. Rather, the costs and risks were born within the Mexican migrant community itself, in which the Mexican-owned firm was thoroughly embedded socially and culturally.

³⁷ During this period, the practice of subcontracting as a mechanism for shedding fixed costs was also on the rise among firms throughout the U.S. economy, regardless of their dependence upon unauthorized immigrant labor. See, for example, Reich 1991.

Border-crossing conditions: Continuity with the pre-IRCA period

The U.S. militarization of its border with Mexico initiated during the 1970s continued during the period following the enactment of IRCA. By 1992, the INS' enforcement budget authorized by Congress grew to \$702 million [\$945 million in 2004 dollars], up from just \$352 million in 1986 [\$607 million in 2004 dollars] (Dunn 1996:180-181). Under the Bush administration, from 1989 to 1992, the INS continued to add to its arsenal of border enforcement equipment. It deployed 36 additional helicopters, bringing its fleet to 58. Working with the U.S. Army it completed production of 15 mobile "image enhancement surveillance vehicles" to better monitor the movement of people and vehicles along the border. It built a new 7-mile-long, 10-foot-high steel fence between San Diego and Tijuana and floodlit some parts of that border corridor. It built or expanded 9 Border Patrol stations and 6 highway traffic checkpoints and also constructed new roads along the border in conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, it continued to expand its inventory of night-vision scopes, motion sensors, and other remote surveillance equipment (Dunn 1996: 68-69 and Appendix 3).

In spite of the continued build-up of its arsenal along the border, it would be incorrect to characterize this period as representing a qualitatively new situation with regard to the deterrence of unauthorized migration. That would come later in the 1990s. From 1986 to 1992, the number of Border Patrol agents grew only moderately, from 3,693 to 4,076, an increase of just over 10 percent (Nevins 2002:197). Hours logged by agents guarding the border also failed to grow remarkably during the Bush administration (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:98).

If anything, it is likely that the real effort made towards migrant interdiction actually declined somewhat during this period. The reason was that during the latter years of the Regan administration, the Border Patrol was assigned a major new duty: interdicting narcotics shipments transported into U.S. territory between the legal international ports of entry (Dunn 1996: 52-53). Unlike apprehending migrants, who are relatively easy to capture in large numbers as they move across open country on foot, narcotics interdiction was far more time- and labor-intensive (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:100), meaning that although total line-watch hours by the Border Patrol changed relatively little during this period, the *proportion* of those hours spent on migrant interdiction fell considerably. Thus, it does not appear that migrants and coyotes faced qualitatively new challenges in their attempts to cross the border during this period. Overall, the conditions on the ground could probably best be characterized by their continuity with those prevailing in the 1970s and early 1980s.

In the years immediately following implementation of IRCA, apprehensions of unauthorized migrants by the U.S. authorities fell dramatically, from 1.7 million in FY 1986 to just 891,000 by FY 1989. This was not surprising given the fact that over 2 million Mexicans had taken advantage of the new law's amnesty provisions and legalized their U.S. residence. Nevertheless, apprehensions rose back to

their pre-IRCA levels during the next three years, to 1.2 million by FY 1992 (Dunn 1996, Appendix 2). This is also not surprising, given that many unauthorized migrants were unable to qualify for the amnesty (e.g., for having arrived in the United States after January 1, 1982) and the underlying structural economic and demographic conditions in Mexico and the United States did not change appreciably, meaning that Mexicans would continue to migrate north in large numbers. Thus, the 2.3 million Mexicans removed from the unauthorized migrant stream by the amnesty were quickly replaced by others, many of whom were blood relations of the newly legalized Mexican residents of the United States.

IRCA and coyotaje: A summary

In conclusion, we can summarize the impact of IRCA and on-going border militarization on the practice of coyotaje with regard to Mexican migration as follows. IRCA expanded the market for coyotaje services by creating new documentation requirements both as part of the amnesty-application process and the process of finding and keeping a job in the United States. It lowered the demand for coyotaje services insofar as it took over 2 million Mexicans out of the clandestine migration stream. On the other hand, now that these Mexicans were able to cross back and forth across the border freely and stabilize their living and working situations in the United States, they found themselves in more frequent contact with and better able to assist their undocumented relatives back in Mexico with crossing into the United States to find work, including by paying for a good coyote to guide them. Moreover, to the extent that their legalized status in the United States gave them more confidence to go to the police to denounce crimes committed against them or their relatives, migrants' bargaining position with coyotes was probably somewhat improved. Many *mayordomos* who legalized their status with the amnesty started their own businesses, contracting to their former employers and acting as coyotes by recruiting unauthorized workers from among their networks of kin and friends. This frequently included arranging for and financing their workers' coyote-assisted trips across the border. Coyotes would be smart to perform this service well since customers such as these were likely to come back to them in the future with requests to bring additional workers and family members across for them. Meanwhile, the basic physical challenges of crossing the border surreptitiously did not change dramatically during this period, in spite of continued increases in the financial and material resources available to U.S. immigration police. Thus, the practice of clandestine-crossing coyotaje remained essentially unchanged from the previous period. New challenges for migrants and their coyotes were just around the corner, however, as the United States was about to embark upon an unprecedented intensification of its migrant-interdiction efforts on the border with Mexico in September 1993, with the launching of Operation Blockade in El Paso, Texas.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe this re-reading of the published historical record demonstrates that coyotaje has played a fundamental role in facilitating mass Mexican migration to the United States since it commenced in the 1880s and during every period thereafter, including and especially the present one. The literature on the history of Mexican migration has given coyotaje surprisingly little direct attention, with most of the major works in the field addressing it only in passing, if at all, apparently regarding it as a phenomenon of secondary importance. One reason for this is the failure of historians to recognize some of the key actors involved in the early stages of Mexican emigration—such as *enganchadores* and labor-contractors—as coyotes. Nonetheless, the failure of scholars to pay greater attention to coyotes of the clandestine-crossing variety, who were clearly important already by the 1920s, demands further investigation. Nearly 30 years ago, during a period when such coyotes were bringing literally millions of Mexicans into the United States, Zazueta (1979:26) wrote that much remained to be learned about “este fenómeno harto común y, al mismo tiempo, tan desconocido” [this phenomenon that is so common, yet, at the same time, so unknown]. So it remains today to a large extent. Nonetheless, we can draw several conclusions about the overall dynamics of coyotaje from the historical review presented in this report.

First, it is clear that coyotaje as practiced by *enganchadores* and labor contractors prior to the Great Depression was a tool for labor exploitation that primarily served the interests of U.S. capitalists. The early coyotes were instrumental in inducing Mexicans to come north to fill wage-labor jobs that employers would otherwise have had great difficulty filling. As has been amply documented in the literature, these coyotes helped employers get around U.S. and Mexican contract labor bans and other immigration regulations. They also committed numerous abuses against the workers they recruited, not only by misleading them about the true nature of the employment they were being offered, the conditions under which they would be transported and housed on the way north, but also by treating them as chattel once they were “hooked.” At the same time, these coyotes made an indispensable contribution to the integration of a binational labor market in which Mexicans, by virtue of their foreign nationality and distinct cultural characteristics, constituted a dependable, super-exploitable, and, ultimately disposable workforce for key crops and industries in many parts of the United States. The contributions made to the infrastructure and economy of the United States by Mexicans lured and/or physically brought into the country by coyotes were enormous. As has been the case with African slaves, however, Mexicans’ contributions have yet to be fully acknowledged by the country that has so benefited from them.

Second, it is also clear that Mexican migration to the United States, propelled by structural conditions in each country and through the process of cumulative causation, became self-sustaining very soon after it was induced by labor-recruiting coyotes early in the 20th century. The same occurred again after U.S. entry into World War II, when Mexican workers began to be recruited directly by the U.S. and

Mexican governments under the auspices of the Bracero Program. Word spread quickly of the superior wage-earning opportunities available in the United States and entire communities became dependent on dollar remittances. The collective experiences of men who had worked in the United States provided a base of migration-specific knowledge and skills that permitted most Mexicans to head north un-recruited by specific employers, nonetheless knowing that jobs awaited them. When obstacles were placed in their way by U.S. authorities, especially after the end of the World War I contract-labor waiver program, Mexicans increasingly turned to coyotes to get them where they wanted to go. Even before then, however, a large number of migrants were turning the tables on the labor-contracting coyotes at the border by “skipping” their contracts before arriving at their contracted destination, but after availing themselves of free rail transport away from the border.

In the 1940s and 1950s, aspiring *braceros* hired coyotes to get in the contract queue or, if no contracts were to be had, paid them to be taken cross the border to work as *mojados*. Following the end of the Bracero Program, legal avenues for Mexicans to migrate to the U.S. were sharply reduced and, by the 1970s, vigilance of the border by U.S. authorities was sharply increased. The main corridor for entering the United States surreptitiously in Tijuana-San Diego was heavily militarized and came to resemble a “war zone,” while other crossing points also came to be much more heavily patrolled. As it became more difficult for Mexicans without papers to cross into the United States, they relied increasingly on coyotaje as a strategy for entering the country where their labor was paradoxically demanded at the same time that it was prohibited. Working in their favor in pursuing this strategy were the considerable size of the Mexican transnational community by the 1970s and the accumulated cultural knowledge and social resources available to its members in Mexico, at the border, and in the principal sites of Mexican settlement in the United States.

To be sure, many migrants were horribly abused by coyotes in the post-Bracero/pre-IRCA period as well, but many others were able to enter the United States successfully with coyotes who had been recommended to them by friends/relatives that had already crossed with them successfully. The shift to a C.O.D. system of payment arrangements also worked in favor of migrants, who no longer had to carry large sums of money with them to the border, where they might be robbed, and who now had some leverage over the coyotes they hired. With the C.O.D. arrangement, coyotes knew they would not be paid until they delivered their customers safely to relatives in the United States, who could also denounce them to the authorities for any abuses committed against their loved ones. Coyotaje grew into an undeniably mass phenomenon after 1965 as it became one of Mexicans’ preferred strategies for migrating to the United States. To the extent that U.S. policy by that time was expressly geared towards barring legal entry to most peasant and working-class Mexicans, we can also interpret coyotaje as coming to constitute a strategy of *resistance* to state hegemony embodied in an ever more militarized border. Viewed this

way, coyotaje becomes another social weapon in the arsenal of the weak. This interpretation is not contradicted by the risks faced by migrants in making coyote-assisted border crossings, including the risks they face from the coyotes themselves, nor is it undermined by the fact that coyotes continue to deliver migrants to capitalists who exploit them. Regardless, coyotaje remains a strategy of resistance by Mexicans against their geographic confinement to a low-wage territory.

The foregoing suggests that additional research might focus on identifying the *point of inflection* that appears to have occurred at some point in each period of Mexican migration to the United States, in which the accumulated force of the migration stream itself transformed coyotaje from operating principally as a tool of U.S. employers in their quest to acquire a readily exploitable workforce into a strategy utilized by migrants to access opportunities to earn much higher wages in a region where they are legally prohibited from working. In this regard, we must also bear in mind that there are many different regional migrations that emanate from Mexico, meaning that multiple flows of migrants to the United States exist during any given period, including the present one, each with its own degree of “maturity.” Thus, we might expect to find side by side at the same historical moment two different types of migratory streams, one in which coyotaje serves as an effective migrant resistance strategy that is socially embedded in the migrant community itself and another in which coyotaje operates chiefly to induce migration from communities where it has not been theretofore prevalent, whether this coyotaje is undertaken at the behest of U.S. employers or simply for the pecuniary gain of coyotes themselves. Taking such an approach might help us better resolve the apparent contradiction in the contemporary period between the “successful” coyotaje serving communities with a long tradition of U.S. migration and the “predatory” coyotaje serving other communities, where the exodus to the United States has been sudden and recent, and whose members are far more vulnerable to abuse and abandonment at the border.

The third and final conclusion we might draw from this historical review is that the *modus operandi* of coyotes has changed very little since the late 19th century, despite claims to the contrary made by government authorities and immigration opponents about the supposedly growing size, sophistication and ruthlessness of “smuggling organizations.” When we read of how Chinese were spirited into the United States from Mexico in the late 19th century and the actions taken by the U.S. authorities to combat the phenomenon, it is hard not to be struck by their similarity to accounts from the contemporary period. When we read Gamio’s account of coyotaje dedicated to bringing Mexicans into El Paso in the 1920s, it appears to be no less complex, sophisticated, or profitable than that described as occurring in Tijuana or Laredo in the 1970s and 1980s. What *has* changed since the 1920s seems mainly to be the size of the migratory flow, due as much to overall population growth as anything else, and general society-wide changes in available transportation and communication technologies. In the 1970s, U.S. immigration authorities claimed that tighter border control had transformed the “alien-smuggling business” into a

large-scale, multi-million dollar, multinational organized crime phenomenon with ties to drug-trafficking and potentially to international terrorism. Needless to say, the same claims are being made today about the latest border build-up, leading this author, at least, to wonder if the boy today crying “coyote” is to be believed.

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Table 1. Prices paid by Mexican migrants for coyotaje services, 1965-1986

YEAR	NOMINAL AMOUNT IN U.S. DOLLARS	AMOUNT IN REAL 2004 U.S. DOLLARS*	ROUTE/METHOD	SOURCE
1968	\$202	\$1,098	Average price given; routes and methods unspecified	Cerrutti and Massey 2004:30—Figure 2.4
1968	\$200	\$1,087	Piedras Negras to Chicago, by land**	Samora 1971:1-2
1968	\$200	\$1,087	Ciudad Miguel Alemán to Chicago, by land**	Samora 1971:71-72
1969	\$200-\$300	\$1,031-\$1,546	Away from the Texas border by land**	Samora 1971:75
1969	\$4	\$21	Fee charged by patero to cross Río Grande, location unspecified	Samora 1971:79
1969	\$400	\$2,062	Reynosa to Chicago by land**	Samora 1971:109
1971	\$250	\$1,168	Texas-Mexico border to Chicago in U-haul truck	Portes 1974:42
1972	\$225	\$1,018	Tijuana to Los Angeles, using rented documents to pass through San Ysidro port of entry	Lewis 1979:47-48
1974	\$300-\$600	\$1,149-\$2,298	Tijuana to Los Angeles, by land**	Villalpando YEAR:106
1975	\$150	\$526	Into Texas from Mexico, by land**	Comptroller General of the United States 1976:7
1975	\$300	\$1,053	Unspecified routes and methods	Comptroller General of the United States 1976:8
1975	\$163	\$572	Counterfeit green card	Comptroller General of the United States 1976:8
1975	\$129	\$453	Altered genuine green card	Comptroller General of the United States 1976:8
1975	\$97	\$340	Genuine green card rented to impostor	Comptroller General of the United States 1976:8
1975	\$100 to \$550	\$350 to \$1,930	Through El Paso, with various types of service and U.S. destinations	Stoddard 1976:192

YEAR	NOMINAL AMOUNT IN U.S. DOLLARS	AMOUNT IN REAL 2004 U.S. DOLLARS*	ROUTE/METHOD	SOURCE
1975	\$250-\$400	\$877-\$1,403	Various services and destinations, including clandestine crossing, transportation away from the border, and false documents	Cornelius 1976:27
1976	\$1,000	\$3,322	Rental of documents to pass through San Ysidro port of entry	Zazueta and Zazueta 1980:72
1976	\$120	\$399	Piedras Negras to San Antonio, by land**	Durand 2002:72-79
1976	\$500	\$1,661	Mean cost, route and method unspecified	Halsell 1978:82
1977 (apx)	\$300	\$935	Mean cost, no specific routes/methods given	Cornelius, cited in Morales 1981:269
1977	\$150-\$250	\$467-\$779	Amount of per-migrant bribe to Mexican and U.S. authorities paid by coyotes	Zazueta and Zazueta 1980: 69-70
1977	\$250-\$500	\$780-\$1,560	Typical cost, no route or method specified	Kossoudji 1992:166
1978	\$250	\$725	Tijuana to Los Angeles, by land**	Lewis 1979:44-45
1978	\$300-\$400	\$870-\$1,159	Laredo to Chicago, by land (in U-Haul truck)	Lewis 1979:77-78
1979	\$150	\$391	Tijuana to Los Angeles, by land**	Lewis 1979:51
1979	\$500	\$1,302	Tijuana to Chicago, by land**	Lewis 1979:51
1981	\$350	\$728	Mexican border to San Antonio, Houston, or Austin	Browning and Rodríguez 1985:287-288
1981	\$450	\$936	Nuevo Laredo to Austin, by land	Rodríguez and Núñez 1986:152-153
1983	\$450	\$854	Nuevo Laredo to Houston, by land**	Pérez 1991-15-21
1984	\$450	\$818	Nuevo Laredo to San Antonio, by land**	Conover 1987: Chapter 1
1984	\$500	\$909	Nuevo Laredo to San Antonio, by land**	Conover 1987: Chapter 1

YEAR	NOMINAL AMOUNT IN U.S. DOLLARS	AMOUNT IN REAL 2004 U.S. DOLLARS*	ROUTE/METHOD	SOURCE
1986	\$400 (1990 dollars)	\$578	Unspecified	Cerrutti and Massey 2004:30—Figure 2.4
1986	\$200	\$345	Mean price, routes/methods unspecified	Durand and Massey 2003:173

*Nominal dollars inflated to 2004 dollars using conversion factors provided on-line by Dr. Robert Sahr, Department of Political Science, Oregon State University, retrieved on July 20, 2005 from http://www.oregonstate.edu/Dept/pol_sci/fac/sahr/cv2004.xls.

**Crossing the border on foot, swimming, or by boat and then being transported by motor vehicle to the final destination.