El Carpintero

By David Spener

El Carpintero was a middle-aged migrant who became a coyote after making many clandestine border crossings in the 1980s while traveling back and forth on his own between Houston, Texas and his home in Monterrey, Nuevo León. He had worked in a factory in Monterrey and as a carpenter in Texas. He was arrested by the U.S. Border Patrol near Laredo in 1997 with six undocumented migrants in his car. He spent the next eight months in U.S. federal prison after pleading guilty in court to being an “alien smuggler.” I interviewed him in Monterrey in the summer of 1999, about a year after he had been released from prison and deported back to Mexico.

The majority of undocumented Mexican migrants enter the United States for the first time with the assistance of a paid guide known commonly as a coyote. Portrayed by the Border Patrol, human rights organizations and the press as hardened criminals, coyotes seldom get to tell their side of the story. What follows is the tale of one man from Monterrey, El Carpintero [a pseudonym], who entered and subsequently left the smuggling profession.

El Carpintero started on the coyote’s path as a migrant himself. Through his teen years, El Carpintero traveled frequently from Monterrey to south Texas towns, swimming across the river to visit relatives and to work as a carpenter’s assistant. He became familiar with the many river crossings and footpaths migrants used to enter the United States without being detected by the authorities. In the early 1980s, El Carpintero swam across the border at Laredo with a friend and a coyote they had met along the riverbank. The three hopped a freight train and got off in San Antonio where the coyote took them to one of the many safe houses located on the city’s West Side. He stayed with the coyote in his safe house for several weeks while he worked at odd jobs to earn the money to pay off his $350 smuggling fee. After finding employment as a carpenter, he worked and lived in San Antonio for the next six years, traveling back to Monterrey several times a year. Among his friends in Monterrey, El Carpintero became known as an experienced border crosser who knew the best routes and precautions to take on the journey. Young men began to approach him for help in crossing and he
obliged when he was able, though he had not yet begun to charge a fee for his services.

During the deep recession that hit Texas in the late 1980s, El Carpintero returned to Monterrey to work in a factory for several years. As the economy recovered by the early 1990s, he moved back north to Houston to work in construction. As he had done while living in San Antonio, El Carpintero commuted back and forth between Monterrey and his Texas home several times a year. He now knew the routes through south Texas "like the back of his hand" and had become well versed in the "cat-and-mouse game" played by migrants and the Border Patrol. Waiting to cross the Rio Grande at night on one of his trips back to Houston, El Carpintero bumped into an old acquaintance from San Antonio whom he knew to be a coyote. The acquaintance recruited him on the spot to help guide a group of undocumented migrants across the border and past INS highway checkpoints in south Texas. The group's trip went smoothly and upon arrival in Houston, the head of the smuggling ring offered El Carpintero $100 per head to guide other migrant parties in the future. Though smuggling was never his main occupation, El Carpintero worked on and off as a guide for this family-run ring for the next two years.

El Carpintero disliked working with this professional smuggling ring. It interfered with his construction work, and he felt guilty that members of the ring profited from the predicament of impoverished compatriots who could ill afford to pay the $500 fee to Houston from the border. He eventually severed his relationship with the ring but did not abandon smuggling altogether. He continued to travel to and from Monterrey four to five times a year and often brought fellow migrants along with him. "I never had to look for them," he explained. "They would always come to me!" He now charged for his services, though he sometimes lowered the price for friends and friends-of-friends. As his reputation as a competent and "honest" coyote spread, strangers also came to him, and he eventually developed a Mexico City clientele in addition to his Monterrey circle.

Although he had been apprehended by the Border Patrol on numerous occasions, El Carpintero had never been charged with alien smuggling even on trips when he was, in fact, guiding groups of migrants for a fee. He noted that it was generally not in the interests of the smuggler's clients to identify him as the group's coyote, since they were depending on him to lead them across the border again if they were apprehended and returned to Mexico. And it was, of course, in the interest of the coyote to lead them again since he and his collaborators would not collect their full fee until the party
reached its destination. According to El Carpintero, members of the migrant party would typically tell Border Patrol agents that they did not know each other and that there was no guide among them. Alternatively, they might say that there had been a coyote with them but that he had abandoned them in the brush before the Border Patrol arrived—a point worth considering since the Border Patrol frequently denounces coyotes for leaving their charges to face the hazards of the desert alone.

In the face of migrants' unwillingness to identify their smugglers, Border Patrol agents often question those they apprehend quite aggressively, sometimes threatening them with jail if they refuse to identify the coyote among them. It was this type of aggressive interrogation that eventually brought El Carpintero to "justice" one night in February 1997 when he was pulled over on Interstate 35 with a carload of six undocumented migrants. Detained in Laredo, he was appointed a public defender who advised him to plead guilty to the smuggling charge. He agreed and spent the next eight months in jail. Upon release from prison at the end of 1997, he was deported to Mexico. Realizing that if he were apprehended in the United States illegally again he could face years in jail, El Carpintero headed home for Monterrey.

Far from preying upon immigrants, El Carpintero saw himself as providing a valuable service to those needing to find work north of the border. Without him, they might drown in the river, fall prey to bandits, get lost in the desert, or lock themselves inside an unventilated freight car. He acknowledged that there were many rip-off artists in the border towns who posed as professional coyotes and that it was difficult for inexperienced migrants to know whom they could trust. Indeed, he expressed disdain for just such a pair of bandits he had met while serving time in Laredo. One would pose as the coyote, collecting a fee for crossing the river, then lead unsuspecting migrants to the Texas bank of the river, where his accomplice lay in wait, ready to rob them at gunpoint.

The Border Patrol's Operation Rio Grande began in the summer 1997—after El Carpintero had left the smuggler's game. Still, he travels frequently to the border and maintains some contact with people who are in the business there. El Carpintero says that the Border Patrol has made crossing more difficult. Where before it was possible to smuggle a party to Houston with just two or three people working together, now it is best to work with four to six companions. In addition, he says, the prices charged to get to Houston or Dallas have risen, from $500-700 per person at the time he last crossed, to as much as $1,000. Clearly, the temptation for experienced
migrants with an entrepreneurial bent to enter the profession is great, while the demand for coyotes’ services, even at the new, higher prices, shows no signs of abating. With the U.S. economy booming and well-paying jobs (by Mexican standards) readily available north of the border, migrants calculate that even $1,000 is not too much to pay if their coyote can be counted on to get them through the Border Patrol’s defenses in one piece. And as they look north across the muddy Río Bravo del Norte, that is a big "if" indeed.

Notes

1 Stories posted on this website complement research reported in the book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, written by David Spener and published in 2009 by Cornell University Press. Research and writing for the book and this collection of stories were made possible by generous support from Trinity University and the John D. and Catharine T. MacArthur Foundation. This story was originally published in 1999 in the *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Volume 33, No. 3, pp. 22-23. I thank Rubén Hernández-León for introducing me to El Carpintero in Monterrey in August 1999. Dr. León-Hernández also mentions this coyote using the nickname “El Gringo” in his book *Metropolitan Migrants: The Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States*, published in 2008 by the University of California Press. Rubén Hernández-León is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Los Angeles.

2 For a number of empirical, analytical, and ideological reasons, I no longer use the terms smugglers and smuggling to refer to the professional and semi-professional facilitators of undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States. In more recent publications, I use the term coyote to refer to the people providing such migration-facilitating services and coyotaje to refer to the services themselves. For an explanation of the reasons for making this terminological change, see *Clandestine Crossings*, the section titled “Terminology Used in this Book,” as well Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration.”