I Helped Them Because I Had Suffered, Too

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Ignacio was born on the ejido of Guadalupe Victoria, Coahuila in 1926. His parents were peasants. He had worked in the fields as a child, in a steel foundry in Monclova as a young man, and as a mojado and bracero in Texas before moving to San Antonio in the 1950s, where he raised his family. When he retired, he and his wife of over fifty years moved to a ranch a few dozen miles west of town, off the road back toward Coahuila. In his later years, he would provide water, food, the use of his telephone, and a place to sleep for the night to migrants who arrived at his door after trekking through the brush away from the border. For a time around the turn of the new century, he worked for a coyote from the state of Querétaro, driving migrants from his ranch to San Antonio in the back of his pick-up truck.

Don Ignacio Hernández [not his real name] was born in 1926 in the southern part of the state of Coahuila on an ejido named Guadalupe Victoria, not far from the town of San Buenaventura. He was 78 years old and living with his wife Alicia on a small ranch west of San Antonio when I interviewed him with one of my Trinity University students, Joe Pierce, in the fall of 2004. Don Ignacio’s parents were campesinos [peasants] and he grew up helping out in the fields, sowing and cultivating crops and tending goats. He attended school only through the third grade of elementary school, for the school in his village only went through the third grade and his family was too poor to send him to another town to continue his education. When he was twelve years old, his father got very sick with a fever of some kind and couldn’t work the fields for a full season. Ignacio and his brother had to take on full responsibility for the family’s livelihood at that time. His parents had lent a parcel of land to another man to work a few years earlier. They asked for the land back so Ignacio could cultivate corn on it. Around the same time, one of Ignacio’s uncles gave the family some goats to raise. Ignacio’s younger brother then went to work tending the goats. People said that Ignacio was too young to plant and cultivate the fields on his own, but he said he could, and plowed it himself with a team of mules: “And that’s how we began to work. And we matured fast that way.”
After his father recovered from his illness, Ignacio continued working the family’s plot through his teens and early twenties. He fell in love and married Alicia on the ejido in July 1950, when he was 23 years old. Right after the wedding, the newlyweds went with other residents of the ejido to pick cotton for a few months near Matamoros, Tamaulipas. When they got back, they took the money they’d gotten as gifts from their wedding and that they had earned on the cotton harvest to open a little store in Guadalupe Victoria. They tried their luck at the store for a couple of years, but they couldn’t make any money at it. Guadalupe Victoria was too small and people were too poor. Moreover, the couple decided they didn’t want to raise their yet-to-be-born children in a village where they wouldn’t be able to get an education. So they closed the store and moved to the nearby town of San Buenaventura. Ignacio’s father owned a little house there in which they could live. The couple’s first daughter was born in that house shortly after they moved in. There wasn’t much work to be had in San Buenaventura, however, and they couldn’t support themselves there by working the family’s plot on the ejido. Fortunately, there was work available at the steel foundry, Altos Hornos de México, in the town of Monclova, about 25 kilometers away. Ignacio got a job at the foundry and worked there for four years. The pay was reasonably good—this was during the boom years of Mexico’s postwar industrial expansion—and he was able to support his family living modestly in San Buenaventura. It was dangerous and unpleasant work, though, especially for a farm boy like Ignacio who was used to the fresh air and quiet of the countryside. The heat and fumes made him sick and jaundiced. Finally, Ignacio decided he’d had enough. He decided to try his luck al otro lado to work for a spell. It was 1955.

Map 1. Mexican state of Coahuila
FIRST ADVENTURE IN TEXAS

Ignacio went to Piedras Negras to cross the river into Texas. He had a sister and a brother-in-law who lived there. He stayed with them for a few days to set up his first crossing. The brother-in-law had a friend, Chema, who was also planning to go work on the other side. He had gone before and already knew the route to follow. More importantly, he knew a farmer just a little past Eagle Pass, which was right across the river, who usually had work for him. The brother-in-law introduced the two men and Chema agreed to take Ignacio with him to see the farmer. Neither one of the men had papers. They waded across the river one night together and started walking along a road that led away from Eagle Pass.

We found the road and started walking away from the river towards here [San Antonio]. Chema knew the way. We walked along in the brush along the road, out of sight. He told me to hit the dirt whenever a car came by. Cars would come by every so often and he'd say, "Get down, hermano!" We finally came to a ranch and waited there until daybreak, about 15 miles from the border. We were hoping to see a man named Don Enrique, to see if he'd give us work. When he woke up and came out he said, "Sure, muchachos, I've got work for you to do!" Of course it was only 50 cents and hour and all he gave us was a tent to sleep under in case it rained. And we made ourselves a little bed of straw to lie on underneath it. We worked there for four or five weeks at most, clearing the fields, picking up sticks, cleaning it up so they could plant onions. Then I went back to Piedras to leave money with my brother-in-law to give to my wife. Then I crossed back over again to this side to find more work.

Ignacio didn’t go back to the same onion farm on his second sojourn. While he was in Piedras Negras, he met other men who had experience crossing the border to work in Texas. He met another man like Chema, with whom he waded across the river and walked to a farm a few miles away from the border. This time the farmer paid them two dollars a day plus food. He worked there for a few weeks and went back again to Piedras Negras to leave more money for his wife. By now, it was the end of June, around the time of the annual festival in San Buenaventura. Ignacio would have liked to have gone back to visit then, but a friend invited him to go with him to try their luck crossing into West Texas from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Wanting to make some more money before heading home, he decided to go with the man to Juárez, hundreds of miles away (see Map 2).

Ignacio’s friend had a contact that he thought would be perfect for helping them find work in Texas further away from the border where they
could earn better wages. The friend was a *trailero* [driver of a tractor-trailer rig] who hauled produce all over the state. They waited for the man for four or five days in Juárez. When he finally arrived, he said that he was sorry, but he couldn’t take them with him away from the border into Texas. He was Mexican himself and could get arrested and deported if the Border Patrol caught him hauling them in his truck. The trailero offered to help them out another way. He was hauling a load of watermelons from the Rio Grande Valley that he needed to cut up and sell in El Paso, just across the Río Grande from Juárez.

He said, “You can work for me one day cutting up the watermelon and delivering it.” We said, “Great!” and we went with him in the truck. And we spent the day helping him with the watermelons, just in El Paso. It was easy to cross the river because it hardly rains there. So there was almost no water and we just skipped right across.

When they were done with the watermelons, the trailero paid them and dropped them off along the railroad tracks outside of town, where the two
men hoped to hop a freight train that would take them away from the border.

After the trailero dropped Ignacio and his friend off along the tracks, they hopped the next train that came by. They were not alone in doing this. A little while after they got on, the train stopped and dozens of Mexican men like them were arrested by the Border Patrol. The agents took Ignacio and his friend back to the station in one of their cars. While there, he was subjected to a very unpleasant interrogation by an aggressive agent:

I had an encounter with an agent there. He was taking my fingerprints and asked me, "Where did you cross?" I told him the truth: that I had walked right across the river downtown that morning, right in front of the station where we were. This made him mad for some reason. He said, "No you didn’t!" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "You came across with your tarjeta local [border crossing card]!" I said, "I don’t have any tarjeta local!" Then he says, "No, my boss says you do. You can try lying to him if you want. You Mexicans are all real coyotes." He was a gringo, an Anglo, but he spoke Spanish. Then I told him, "Look, I’m telling you the truth, mister. I’ve got no reason to lie. If I had a tarjeta local I’d say so, but I don’t!"

Ignacio was upset, not only because the agent accused him of lying, but also that he had called him a coyote, a Mexican slang term with various connotations, none of them complimentary:

Spener: What did it mean that he called you a coyote?
Don Ignacio: That we were devious [mañosos], that we lied and all that. It was offensive because a coyote is a very astute animal. That’s what they call people in Spanish who are untrustworthy, who do all kinds of bad stuff, lie and all. I didn’t like that he called me a coyote.3

Given that he was in an inherently vulnerable position and the agent was not going to accept any of his protestations, Ignacio decided to bite his tongue. He just wanted to get out of there as painlessly as he could. The agent, for reasons that Ignacio did not understand, seemed to take some special pleasure in showing him who was boss:

I was offended because he was yelling at me. He was treating me badly. I was mad but I stopped responding and didn’t say anything more because I thought he might actually beat me. As he was taking my fingerprints he took his pistol out and stuck it under his belt in the front of his pants just so I could see it. That was it, though. I felt better when they told me to get out of there. They put us on a bus and took us back across to the other side, to
Ciudad Juárez. They didn’t put us in jail or anything. They just sent us back to the Mexican side.

But this same agent was on the bus with us, with the *mojados*. And somebody complained that his wallet had been stolen. This was before they let us off the bus. So as we were crossing the bridge, the bus stops and the agent says, “Somebody’s lost his wallet and one of you must have it. So we’re going to search you all to see who has the wallet.” So they begin to search everyone on the bus, but nobody has the wallet. Finally, they get to a guy at the very back of the bus and he refuses to let them search him. The agent gets mad at this and says, “So you have the wallet?” I don’t know if the guy had the wallet or not, but they arrested him and took him off back to jail on the U.S. side. They let the rest of us off in Juárez.

Ignacio had had enough of trying to work in the United States at this point. He took the bus home and when he got there, “the fiestas were still going on real nice in San Buenaventura.”

When the fiestas were over, Ignacio had to face the same old problem again: How was he going to make a living? He didn’t want to go back to Altos Hornos, so he tried agricultural labor at home again, this time as a hired hand. He could only make about seven pesos a day that way, though, not enough to support a family, *ni para los frijoles* [not even enough to buy beans]. There was a big flood in Piedras Negras that year and he headed there to work on a clean-up crew, digging houses out from the mud. He went as much to figure out how to cross again as to earn pesos from that short-term job. While he was there, another man working on the flood clean-up told him he’d heard about a truck farmer across the river in Eagle Pass who was looking to hire some men to work for him. Not wanting to go back as a *mojado* again, Ignacio was able to get a *tarjeta local* to cross the border by working through a coyote who knew whom to bribe in the U.S. government office in Eagle Pass that issued the crossing cards, which were intended only for residents of Mexican border cities, and not to work, only to shop and make social visits. With this card, he was able to work for a while on farms near Eagle Pass and send money home to his family in San Buenaventura.

In the late 1950s, Ignacio began to work legally in the United States in the Bracero Program, the agricultural guest worker program that the U.S. and Mexican governments originally negotiated in 1942 to meet labor shortages brought about by U.S. entry into World War II. Getting a contract was complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. It involved going to a special recruitment that the Mexican government set up in Monterrey. If a man
I helped them because I had suffered, too.

Don't have a contact working in the center or didn't hire a coyote to bribe the right people, he could wait months to get a contract:

**Don Ignacio:** I went to Monterrey to be contracted several times.

**Spener:** And how did it work in Monterrey?

Don Ignacio: 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?

**Don Ignacio:** 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.

**Map 3. Muleshoe, Texas (indicated by red letter A)**

Ignacio made several sojourns as a bracero to farms around the west Texas town of Muleshoe after passing through the Monterrey. He would be contracted for only three months at a time, but his employers could get his contract renewed several times before he had to return to Mexico and go back through the contracting center in Monterrey. In this way, he said, he
could stay working in Muleshoe for up to eighteen months at a time. This was a good thing, for even with paying a coyote to speed things up, going through the contracting process was never a pleasant experience. As an example of this, Don Ignacio related an incident he remembered painfully well:

My friend said, let’s go to Monterrey and get ourselves contracted there. And I said, great, let’s go. And so we went. When we got to Monterrey there was a tremendous crowd at the contracting center. So we went to stay in the home of an acquaintance we had there. We paid him to let us stay there, since he helped people out that way sometimes. People he knew, and he’d give them food and a room and then you’d pay him something. We’d go every morning to the center to see if we could get a contract, until we found this mordelón, this crooked cop, who told us about a man, a coyote, who for twenty dollars [about $180 in 2008 dollars] could get us on our way tomorrow.

Figure 1. Bracero processing center in Monterrey, 1950s

Source: National Museum of American History

http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=770&pagekey=776

This man [the coyote] told us we’d spend the night on the grounds of the recruitment center.5 We could stay anywhere there. And I told him, no way, how are we going to stay here when we were so comfortable at our friend’s house. And he said, no, because you don’t want to not be here when they call you. They’ll skip over you and we’ve already paid them. So, I said
I helped them because I had suffered, too. Okay, we'll stay. And he told us about a lady who'd give you a piece of cardboard to lie on in an empty room in her house, where you could spend the night. She gave us the cardboard to sleep on and we were tired and fell right to sleep. But then I woke up and began to itch, like something was biting me. So then I'm wide awake. My friend is still sound asleep. Then I realize what it is and I call out to him, “Listen, there are chinches [bedbugs] here! I said that we couldn't stay here. ¡Hijole! I said, let's get out of here and we ran out.

But the señora was upset, and she said, "Why are you leaving, señores, it's not time yet. It's still early!" And I said we were going because the pieces of cardboard she'd gave us to sleep on were full of chinches. She said, "That can't be!" And I said, "Well look, here the little animals are!" Anyway, we had no choice but to leave. So we went back out to where we'd been waiting in line before. There were a ton of people still there, since hardly anyone left to sleep and a few slept there on the ground, others nodding off here and there. There were some stands where they were selling tacos. We went there and my friend began to pull the chinches off his jacket. He must have pulled off a couple of hundred of them!

Later that morning their contracts were approved and Ignacio and his friend were put on a train to Reynosa. They crossed the international bridge across the river into Hidalgo, Texas, where they were fumigated and given a health inspection by the U.S. authorities. It was a humiliating ritual, as Don Ignacio related:

They boarded us on a train to Reynosa and then we went across the bridge into Hidalgo, Texas. That's where they fumigate you as you enter the country. They spray your whole body. We were standing there nude, lined up waiting for the doctors to inspect us. And you had to stand spread-eagle show yourself to the doctor so he could see if you had some disease down there.

Ignacio spent a total of five years working on and off in Muleshoe, in west Texas near Lubbock, under the “specials” section of the Bracero Program. The “specials” section was for agricultural workers with special skills that were in short supply. The advantage to farmers and the Mexican workers contracted in this way was that the workers’ contracts could be renewed several times before the worker would be required to return to Mexico. He got into this program for the first time by going to an office after crossing the border at Hidalgo. Contracts were available in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, but Ignacio and one of his friends had heard they
could do better for themselves in West Texas. They figured out how to convince the officials to give them a contract in the specials program in west Texas by observing how they interviewed other applicants:

We went to the office and the men there greeted us. They asked us if we wanted to go out west. We said we did, but we only had a contract for here in the Valley. We'd seen them interview another man in line before us:

“Have you worked in the fields before?"
“Yes, I have.”
“What do you know how to do? Can you drive a tractor?”
“Well, no.”
“Do you know how to irrigate?”
“Well, no.”

And they didn’t take him. So, when it was my turn, I knew what I had to say.

“Do you know how to drive a tractor?”
“Yes, a little. I’ve driven a tractor, a little Ford, but only on the road.”
“Do you know how to irrigate?”
“Yes, I know how to irrigate.”
“What did you do it with?”
“Well, I’ve used a paleta con boquilla [water-wheel with nozzle] before.”
"Okay, you’ve got a job."
So, they took me to the office, got all my papers together, and we headed out to West Texas. That’s how I ended up in Muleshoe.

Life and work in Muleshoe was harder than he expected, however. He did all kinds of farm work there. The biggest problem, he discovered, was the weather. It was much farther north than Ignacio had ever worked before, and in the winter months the cold, snow, and ice meant that work ground to a halt, and with it his pay:

I had worked there for a few months and then went back home to Mexico for a visit. And then when I came back I found out about the climate there. I came back in January and thought I’d go right back to work. But there was nothing. The snows had come and when it snows and ices, you can’t work. So my boss didn’t have a job for me. I didn’t get any work until the end of March!

When he did get work, it was as a tractor driver. He had gotten especially good at plowing the fields with the tractor during his first sojourn. His winter unemployment finally ended when a couple of men who’d seen his tractor work hired him to do the spring plowing for them.

They liked my work because I worked really well with the tractor. I had good eyesight for plowing the fields in really straight rows. They started out paying me thirty dollars a week, then they gave me a raise to forty, then to forty-five. It was a reliable job. And when my first 18-month contract ran out, they gave me another one.

Things had gone so well for him with the tractor work that Ignacio got up the nerve to ask his employer to sponsor him to immigrate to the United States, i.e., to come work for him as a permanent resident, not as a temporarily contracted bracero. The farmer had refused, though, saying that workers who got their papers always left to work elsewhere as soon as they got them. He continued to go back and forth between Muleshoe and his home in Coahuila through the remaining years of the Bracero program, which was ended unilaterally by the United States in 1964.

Travel back and forth across the border in those days was considerably more arduous than it is today. Roads were rougher, vehicles were slower, and accommodations were more primitive. Ignacio usually returned via Piedras Negras and would spend the night there before continuing on the bus to San Buenaventura. He remembered one evening he spent there particularly well:

I was with this man I’d met in Muleshoe. He was an older guy but we’d become friends. We went out one evening in Piedras. He
I helped them because I suffered, too

had a son, Manuel, who also worked in Muleshoe. This old man’s contract had run out just like mine. We were in Piedras together and were hanging out in a hotel. We had a little money between us and we went out drinking. We went to a few cantinas and wound up drunk. And I woke up in jail the next morning! I don’t know how but there I was! The other guys in there said, “What did you do?” And I said, “I didn’t do anything. I just got drunk.” And they said, “Well, you were really drunk when they brought you in here.” And it was a twenty peso fine. I told the officers, “Here’s your money. But I didn’t do anything. I was just drunk!” I don’t know where my friend spent the night.

We found each other in the morning and I asked how things had gone for him. And he answered, “Man, why did you let me drink so much?” I said, “How was I supposed to stop you?” And he said, “Well, what’s done is done.” Neither one of us had hardly any money left, so he called his son in Muleshoe and asked him to send us some. Meanwhile, I went to a guy I knew in Piedras and asked to borrow 50 pesos from him to hold us over until the money arrived from Muleshoe. I gave him a watch I’d bought in Texas to hold until I could pay him back the money. He said, “I’ll take the watch, but not because I don’t trust you, only because I won’t lose it.” He took it and kept it there. Finally the money arrived and we went and gave him his fifty pesos and he gave me back my watch. And then we went to Monterrey to get in line for another contract.

Ignacio was working in Muleshoe again when word came out that the Bracero Program was coming to an end. A friend encouraged him to approach his employer again to ask if he would help Ignacio immigrate permanently to the United States. The employer was still reluctant, fearing Ignacio would go work somewhere else where he could make more money if he had his papers. He finally agreed to sponsor him when Ignacio reminded him that if he didn’t help him get his papers he was definitely going to lose him since he wouldn’t be able to come back as a bracero anymore. He filed his application to become a legal permanent resident just before his final bracero contract ended. Ignacio went home to San Buenaventura to wait for the process to run its course.

Nearly a year later, Ignacio received a letter at home telling him to report to the U.S. consulate in Monterrey to finalize his residency papers. He went to the consulate and showed them the letter he received. The official read over the letter and told him he needed to “come back on such and such a day at such and such and hour with thus and such letters in hand, and if I didn’t have them all I shouldn’t come because my application wouldn’t be approved.” He went back to San Buenaventura to get all the papers
together. The one thing he didn’t have was a letter showing that he had completed his mandatory military service in Mexico—because, as was common, he had not actually served in the military. The officials in the consulate were very specific that he needed this letter in order to have his immigration application approved. Ignacio knocked on all kinds of doors trying to find out how he could get this magical letter. Eventually, Ignacio was referred by consular officials themselves to a notary in Piedras Negras that could help him obtain this vital document. The notary’s name was Severo Treviño:

So I went to talk to Sr. Treviño. “What can I do for you?” he asked when I walked in. I told him that they recommended I see him because I was trying to immigrate to the United States and I didn’t have any paperwork showing my military service. And he said, yes, he had arranged a lot of those, but that it was going to cost me—a mordida [bribe]. He said it would be eighteen dollars. I said, “Fine, I’ll take it.” And he said he couldn’t get it right away, but if I paid him the eighteen dollars he’d send it to me in San Buenaventura in a week. So, I paid him the eighteen dollars and I left. Days and days went by and the letter didn’t come. Finally, my appointment date in Monterrey was coming up so I decided to go to Piedras Negras to see what the problem was. When I walked into the office, Señor Treviño was there and immediately said to me, “Look, man, here’s your paper.”

A few days later Ignacio went to his appointment at the consulate in Monterrey where his application was approved and he received his green card.

With his green card in hand, Ignacio returned to Muleshoe to go back to work for the farmer that sponsored his application. It would take some more time and money to get papers for his wife and kids to move to Texas with him. He worked through the end of the year and was getting ready to head home for the Christmas holidays. The farmer typically paid his workers a generous Christmas bonus every year—around two-hundred dollars. When all the rest of the workers were given their bonuses, Ignacio was not. He went to see his boss to find out why he didn’t get a bonus. The boss told him that he wasn’t getting a bonus because he’d missed part of the year while he was waiting for his papers to come through. He said he’d get a Christmas bonus again as always the next year. At that point Ignacio angrily told the farmer that there would be no next year. Now that he had his papers he knew that he could easily find work elsewhere, so he left Muleshoe for good, confirming the farmer’s long-held expectation that his workers would leave him if they had full freedom in the U.S. labor market.
Eventually, Ignacio would settle in San Antonio, Texas, where he worked, raised his family, and lived until his retirement in the early 1990s.

GOLDEN YEARS ON THE RANCHITO

In spite of having lived for nearly forty years in San Antonio, Don Ignacio [the title “Don” signifies respect for an older, married man] always had remained a country boy at heart. He liked the fresh air, the quiet, and being surrounded by nature. When he retired, he and Alicia left their kids and grandkids in town and moved to a modest home set on a small ranch a few dozen miles to the west, off the highway leading to Del Rio. They had a vegetable and flower garden they tended, along with some chickens, a dog, and a few goats. As an old man, Don Ignacio’s days of rambling through the borderlands as a roustabout in search of work were long over. Much to his surprise, though, he found that his quiet little ranchito out in the middle of the monte was located along a trail that hundreds of contemporary mojados hiked on their way away from the border. He quickly discovered this when groups of migrants would stumble out of the brush and knock on his door to ask for help. I had gone to interview Don Ignacio not about his days as a migrant himself, but on the recommendation of one of his relatives in San Antonio, who was an acquaintance of mine. She had told me about how he helped migrants walking across his ranch. This is what Don Ignacio had to say about it when I first asked:

Spener: So, living out here, do a lot of migrants still come through this area?
Don Ignacio: Oh, yes!
Spener: How is that? How do you know?
Don Ignacio: Well, they come to me here. Right here on the ranch.
Spener: But how do they get here?
Don Ignacio: They walk right out of the monte.
Spener: But where are they coming from?
Don Ignacio: They come through Acuña, through Piedras Negras, and hike through the monte. Some of them already know the way and since they’ve been this way before, they serve as a guide for the others. There aren’t as many now as before, but they still come.
Spener: And do they come on their own or does some coyote bring them through here?
Don Ignacio: Like I said, they have a guide and they pay him. The guide comes on foot, too. They all come on foot through the monte. And the one that knows the route the best, that knows all the paths to follow, he guides them. They walk at night, guiding themselves by the radio antennas. ... They walk for five, six, or even seven days. But they don’t walk during the day. They just
keep coming until they get here. I used to have a little room in an outbuilding in back of the house that always stayed dry in the rain. It’s all broken down now, but even still people who know this place come here and knock on my door. I used to have some bales of hay in the room. I’d tell them they could sleep on the bales. Just that they shouldn’t smoke because they could catch fire and burn the place down! They’d spend the night there and leave the next day.

Spener: How many people would there be in a group?
Don Ignacio: Sometimes there’d be a lot. I used to get ten or twelve at a time.

Spener: Wouldn’t you be afraid being out here all alone? With that many people coming through?
Don Ignacio: No, not at all. [Chuckles]. They were good, hardworking people. They just didn’t have papers, that was all.

People didn’t always spend the night. Sometimes they’d just want to use the phone to call to have someone come pick them up. Or they’d just ask for some water or food. Don Ignacio and Alicia were always happy to help out in that way.

One of the migrants that Don Ignacio helped out was a young man from Querétaro named Juan. The first time he passed by Don Ignacio’s ranch, he was by himself. Later he brought other people with him, guiding them through the brush. After learning to hike the route himself, he “went pro” and began to work as a small-time coyote. First he brought along just two or three people. Then it was four or five. Later he would bring up to ten or twelve at a time. Most of the people he brought were paisanos from his part of Querétaro, but later he also brought people from other parts of Mexico, including Guanajuato and Zacatecas. Back home in Querétaro he went by the nickname El Correcaminos—The Roadrunner. He offered a low-cost, no frills, fly-by-night service. He was, as a migrant from Nuevo León state once describe to me, a typical coyote rascuache. The Correcaminos’ customers may not have had to pay him as much money as other coyotes charged, but they made up the difference in toil and suffering:

Don Ignacio: Listen, when they get here they’re in bad shape. We give them clothing—shirts, pants—because they are absolutely destroyed when they arrive, shoeless, hungry. They tell us, “We haven’t eaten for three days!”

Spener: How is it that their guide doesn’t give them anything to eat?
Don Ignacio: He doesn’t have any food to give them either. He suffers the same as they do.

Spener: Don’t they stock up on supplies before they start walking?
Don Ignacio: They do bring some food along. They bring things like *pinole*. It's made of dried corn. They grind up the corn into a powder and mix in some *piloncillo* [a kind of brown sugar], put it in a plastic bag and eat it on the trail. They bring cans of beans. That’s how they come, bringing as little as possible and sometimes they run out on the way and really have to struggle to make it.

Spener: And why do they walk all the way here? We're a long ways past the *garita* [highway immigration checkpoint].

Don Ignacio: Look, there’s a lot of *migración* [Border Patrol] on the highway. If you drive along the highway between here and the border, you’ll run into the *trocas de inmigración* [Border Patrol vehicles] right away.

Don Ignacio empathized with the Correcaminos and the migrants who traveled with him. As he had done with other groups of migrants, he gave them food and water and let them use his phone and spend the night in his outbuilding.

He was a good guy. He was one of those guides who suffers right alongside the people he’s guiding. If there’s no food, there’s no food for anybody. If there’s no water, there’s none for him either. If they get caught, everyone gets caught. Because they’re all in it together. The coyotes, the real coyotes are the ones that travel by car and if the Border Patrol comes, they’re nowhere to be found. They charge a thousand or two thousand dollars. But those are the coyotes from the border. The big coyotes. This guy was a *coyotito*, a little coyote. There are thousands of them. They know the route and come walking all the way from the border.9

The Correcaminos and Don Ignacio got to know one another as the coyote made repeated stops in at the old ranchero’s door in the latter half of the 1990s. One day the Correcaminos made Don Ignacio a bold and unexpected proposition: He would be willing to pay the old man fifty dollars a head to drive the migrants he was leading from the ranch to the town of Von Ormy on Interstate 35 just south of San Antonio. Don Ignacio was leery of doing this. He knew that he could get in big trouble if he got caught. It so happened, however, that his ailing sister was living in a nursing facility in Allende, Coahuila and depended on him to help support her. He had been sending one-hundred dollars a month to cover the costs of her care, something he could scarcely afford, living on his monthly Social Security check and meager savings. He realized he could make $500 on a single trip carrying ten migrants in the back of his pick-up truck. So, he decided to do it and see how it worked out. The first trip went well. The Correcaminos and his ten customers loaded into his pick-up one evening and drove to the Von Ormy without incident. He dropped them off at the house of one of the
Correcaminos’ contacts who would take them further north and help them find work. When they got there, the Correcaminos collected fifty dollars from each of the migrants and handed Don Ignacio the cash. He drove home five-hundred dollars richer for only a couple of hours of easy work.

Don Ignacio and El Correcaminos continued their working relationship for several years. Sometimes the coyote would pay him as much as one-hundred dollars per migrant to drive them further, to Bulverde, Texas, north of San Antonio on U.S. Highway 281. Don Ignacio liked the money, but after his sister died he really did not have need for it. He began to get cold feet. Moreover, his grown kids insisted that he stop working for the coyote, fearing that their elderly father would spend his final years in jail instead of with their mother on the ranchito. El Correcaminos kept coming as often as once a month, but Don Ignacio began to tell him he wanted to quit.

I would tell him he should stop doing this. “Stay here and find work here. Get a regular job! You’re making me take risk that I don’t want to. I don’t need the money. I like it, but I don’t need to do this. For me, it would be better if you left me alone. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in jail!” And he would say, “No, please, just this one last time.” And then another and another.

The end of their working relationship came rather dramatically one night in the first year of the new century.

I was on my way to Bulverde with my wife and ten migrants in the truck. They were paying me really well, one-hundred dollars a person. We had five people in the bed of the truck under a tarp and five more lying down on the floor of the back seat. And a police officer pulled me over just as I was about to get on 1604 [the outer loop highway that circles San Antonio]. So I stopped and I looked at my wife, who was in the front seat with me. I thought, “Here we go!” The policeman says to me, “Why are you driving so slow?” I told him, “Well, I don’t know my way around here very well.” And he asks me, “Where are you going?” I said just up to Bulverde. He said, “I got a call on the radio that you were driving really slow. You really need to pick up the pace, sir.” Fortunately, it was dark and he never looked in the back seat. He didn’t even give me a ticket. And I said, “That’s it! I’m never doing this again.”

After that he told the Correcaminos that he would not be driving for him again under any circumstances. Besides, he told me, “I can’t see at night anymore anyway. I can’t drive at night, and after that scare with the police, I swore that was the end of it.” Later, Ignacio heard that his coyote friend had finally taken his advice and gotten out of the guide business. He took a
job and Houston where they paid him well. The former Correcaminos had even brought his wife and kids up to live with him. In addition, the flow of migrants hiking through the brush on the route leading to Don Ignacio’s ranch slowed considerably after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the subsequent economic recession in the United States.

At the end of our interview, I asked Don Ignacio how he felt in retrospect about having illegally driven all those times for the Correcaminos. His feelings about the experience were ambivalent:

**Don Ignacio:** On the one hand, I felt guilty because I was breaking the law. And my son told me to stop doing it. He said they were going to catch me. So, I don’t do it anymore.

**Spener:** And how did you feel about it in a moral sense, as opposed to in a legal sense?

**Don Ignacio:** Like I was saying, I regard it as a blessing from God, since I had this expense for my sister, and my [retirement] check was so little.

**Spener:** It was a blessing because of the money.

**Don Ignacio:** Because of the money.

**Spener:** But how did you feel in the sense of your relationship with the migrants and with this guide. Did you think you were doing something good? Or was it bad?

**Don Ignacio:** I feel good about it, because, look, I had also suffered a lot . . . I like to be able to help these people because I know what they suffer. And they’re my *paisanos*. They’re the same as me.

Although the flow had diminished, migrants continued to pass near Don Ignacio’s place. He had heard there were other men who lived nearby who were willing, like he had been, to drive them further up the road towards their destinations in the state of Texas and beyond.

Not too long ago a lady came by who owns a restaurant a little down the road from here. She came because she had been at church and a Mexican man was waiting there outside at the end of services looking for a ride. She wanted to know if I would take him. I told her I couldn’t. She asked if I knew anyone else who could take him and said he could pay. I don’t know who took him, but someone did. And they got paid.
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. References to Don Ignacio’s story appear in *Clandestine Crossings* on pages 106, and 136-137. 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.

2 *Ejido* is the name for collectively-owned lands given to peasant communities as part of the land reforms of the Mexican Revolution.


4 One of the colloquial meanings of the term *coyote* in Mexican Spanish refers to a bureaucratic “fixer” that knows how to help his or her clients avoid government red tape in exchange for a fee. See *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration” for a more extensive discussion of this meaning of coyote.

5 Interestingly, in our interview, Don Ignacio referred to the processing center using the Spanish word *campo*, as in recruitment/contracting camp. This made sense insofar as the conditions he described there more closely resembled those of a refugee or concentration camp than those of a government office.

6 To learn more about how the “specials” program worked, see Calavita, Kitty. 1992. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* New York: Routledge.

7 Juan practiced what I call a *professional migration coyotaje* strategy. See *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 4, “Coyotaje in the Contemporary Period.”

8 Literally, a “low-quality” coyote, but the term *rascuache* in colloquial Mexican and Chicano Spanish has rich connotations, as does the term coyote. For a more complete treatment of the meaning of *rascuache* as it relates to clandestine border-crossing and undocumented migration, see Spener, David. Forthcoming. “Movidas rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border.” To appear in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. 
The distinction between the “good” coyotes from migrant-sending communities in the Mexican interior and the “bad” coyotes of the border towns was one I heard repeatedly in my interviews with migrants and coyotes alike. See *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment: Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.”