INTRO

Do good fences make good neighbours?

Less than a decade into North American free trade, and with renewed vigour since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 on the United States, the continent's three countries are drawing closer together.

But there are lingering questions:

With increasing concerns over security, is it rash to claim that the border between Canada and the U.S. is "obsolete," as Canada's ambassador in Washington has put it?

Should it become "seamless," a concept Canada's trade minister has floated? And should Mexico be treated the same way, with greater ties with the U.S. in policing, immigration and business?

To look at those questions, The Gazette's Jeff Heinrich went to the U.S.-Mexican border, a place that has been trying to balance bi-national interests for years.

He then turned his attention to Quebec's own border with the U.S., in the Eastern Townships that abut New York and Vermont, asking some of the same questions that concern border dwellers down south.

Trade, immigration, health care, culture, bilingualism and law-enforcement – in his seven-part series Heinrich examines those and other preoccupations in the borderlands of North America's three countries.

Today: IDENTITY

xxday: IMMIGRATION

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xxday: HEALTH

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IDENTITY

[Main story]

TX.identity.1

How can life on a border be other than restless? You are pulled by different ties of hate and love.
– Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, 1939

By JEFF HEINRICH

Two languages. A huge geographic territory. Historical grievances dating back to the colonies. A majority once conquered, now holding the reins of political power.

Sound like Quebec? Guess again. It's Texas.

Thousands of miles apart, the two share surprisingly similar histories. And their founding peoples have a shared sense of who they are and where they stand on the national scene.

Nurtured on 'Je me souviens' and "Remember the Alamo!' they have their roots planted in a past of perceived injustice, of oppression, of manifest destiny denied.

Here, French-Canadians were once told to 'Speak white.' There, Mexican-Americans were punished for speaking Spanish in school.

Here, French Québécois remember Meech and Charlottetown and two failed referendums on sovereignty. There, anglo Texans with a Confederate bent remember the Union rout.

But they live in the present, too – an increasingly multicultural one, where intermarriage and religion and bilingualism have made traditional divides disappear.

The common denominator: they live on the border, and the border lives in them.

They are societies where internal boundaries are constantly being bridged – between French and English, Anglo and Hispanic, immigrant and native.

The way they speak sets them apart. Their heavy accents are easily parodied: the cowboy with a Texan drawl, the wetback who talks like Speedy Gonzales, the Québécois' incomprehensible joual.

They think of themselves as something special, too. Each takes a certain reckless pride in being a rebel, while at the same time proclaiming that what makes him distinct gives him strength, is his source of power. There's a Spanish-speaking premier at the National Assembly, a "little guy" from Shawinigan in the Prime Minister's office, a good ol' Texas boy in the White House.

To an outsider, Quebecers and Texans can seem exasperatingly provincial, nursing a chip on their shoulder, each proclaiming a belief that their part of the country is the best place to be, the best place to defend.

Living on the edge, risking a separateness, straddling the line between being in and being out (of confederation, of the republic), each reminding "the feds" that they were once independent and could be again – they are border cultures incarnate.

Don't Mess with Texas. Quebec sait faire.

The Lone Star State. Egalité ou indépendence.

Two huge territories casting long shadows.

Two peoples.

Two borders.

One story.

And they both might just be at the vanguard of new continental identity, starting at the border, where identities clash, get defined, become an example for the nation.

"Like it or not, we are attending the funeral of modernity and the birth of a new culture," the Mexican American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña noted in his 1993 manifesto Warrior for Gringostroika.

"Today, if there is a dominant culture, it is border culture. And those who still haven't crossed a border will do it very soon. All Americans (from the vast continent America) were, are, or will be border-crossers."

Is a hybrid in the making?

* * *

A couple of years before his death in 1915, Rupert Brooke, the famous British war poet, travelled to Canada and made this observation about the two founding peoples he found there.

"The French and British in Canada seem to have behaved with quite extraordinary generosity and kindliness towards each other.

"But it is not in human nature that two communities should live side by side, pretending they are one, without some irritation and mutual loss of strength.

"There is no open strife. But 'incidents,' and the memory of incidents, bear continual witness to the truth of the situation. And racial disagreement is at the bottom, often unconsciously.

"Montreal and Eastern Canada suffer from that kind of ill-health which afflicts men who are cases of 'double personality' – debility and spiritual paralysis."

Brooke may have been right for the era he lived in, but no longer. The world has evolved since then.

As nations – and the minorities in them – become more interconnected, it is precisely the blend of cultures that makes societies rich, and isolationism and appeals to racial purity that make them poor.

Only by "contaminating" each other, as Pablo Neruda liked to say, do cultures grow.

Take the example of El Paso, Texas.

As in Quebec, an overwhelming majority dominates – in their case, Spanish-speaking Americans of Mexican descent.

In this far western corner of Texas where the Rio Grande bends north and away from the U.S.-Mexican border, Spanish is the majority tongue but English is still the official language.

It is a place where schools are heavily Mexican-American, where Anglos – yes, they're called that there, too – are outnumbered, and language immersion in class is an everyday fact of life.

Part of imperial Spain and then independent Mexico until a mere 165 years ago, Texas and lonely outpost of El Paso haven't shaken off their Hispanic past. If anything, their ties to that past have deepened, as more and more Mexicans cross the border in search of a better life.

The result is a society that on the outside looks like it could be a part of Mexico, but whose inhabitants are ambivalent over to whom they owe allegiance – the old world or the new.

It used to be that Mexicans dreaded the U.S. and its influence. As Luis Echeverria, president of Mexico in the early 1970s once famously put it: "Poor Mexico – so far from God, so close to the United States."

But that attitude has begun to change. Now Mexicans feel they can enjoy both sides of themselves on the border divide.

"You don't have to stop loving Mexico to be American," said Guadalupe Cano Daley, 54, a U.S. citizen since 1973 who originally came from Chihuahua, the state just across the Rio Grande from El Paso.

Daughter of an American who had lived and married in Mexico, she worked most of her life as an insurance agent, selling policies to Mexicans. Today's she's a Salvation Army administrator in El Paso.

"I call myself an American, but when I need to be Mexican, I can just switch like that," she said, snapping her fingers.

For the younger generation, those born and educated in Texas, identity issues can be a little more confusing.

El Paso university student Cindy Juárez sells clothes in a retail store part-time. Despite her name (fittingly, it's also the name of El Paso's sister city on the other side of the river, Ciudad Juárez), she doesn't speak Spanish.

Her customers are often surprised by that; some won't buy from her because of it. They call her a "white taco" – a Mexican-looking girl who doesn't speak Spanish.

"They say I'm useless because I don't know my heritage," said Juárez, a second-generation American. "But it's just that my parents didn't want me to be discriminated against – that's why they didn't teach me Spanish."

It's like that scene in the Selena, she said, the 1997 movie about the young Mexican singing sensation murdered in the prime of her career. In the film, Selena's father laments the identity crisis of his people.

"Being a Mexican American is tough," he says.

"Japanese Americans, Italian Americans, German Americans – they're homeland is on the other side of the ocean. Ours is right next door, right over there.

"We've got to prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are, and we have to prove to the Americans how American we are...It's exhausting."

For the old guard, anglo Texans for whom the life of the cowboy is part of a lamented past, preserving an identity has been just as hard. In the heartland, resentment over the Mexican "invasion" dies hard.

Two hundred miles southeast of El Paso, in the mountain town of Fort Davis, cowboy artist Bill Chappell is selling his roadside home and gallery.

He and his wife are getting old, and Chappell laments the good old days, "back when Texas was Texas, before the Jews and the rich people from Dallas and Houston started coming out here to make money."

He has no time for Mexican cowboys, the *vaquerros*, says they are inferior wranglers and can't break a horse as well as a Texan. He thinks the anglos were the best thing that ever happened to the borderlands.

It's a tough attitude – with a long tradition rooted in Texican-ism.

Think back to that 1956 John Ford movie The Searchers, a classic Western starring John Wayne.

"It just so happens we be Texicans," the pioneer ranchmother Mrs. Jorgensen says in the film. "Texican is nothin' but a human man way out on a limb, this year and next, maybe for a hundred more.

"But I don't think it'll be forever. Some day, this country's gonna be a fine good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come."

Some oldtime anglos think it's foolish to imagine they settled Texas alone. Where would they be today, they ask, if not for the Mexicans?

Two dozen miles south of Fort Davis in a little town called Marfa, Fritz Kahl was unseated as mayor last summer by a Mexican-American candidate. He doesn't mind.

"Mexicans put me in office, not gringos, and they're free to vote me out, too," said Kahl, an Iowa native who has lived in Marfa since he came there in 1943 to fly airplanes for the U.S. Army Air Corps.

Three out of every four people in Marfa's population of 2,600 are Mexican-American. They and the anglos get along better than most other parts of Texas, Kahl said.

"When I came here in the 40s, I was one of the few people who would play baseball with them," he recalled. "Now we're way ahead of the game – no problems of segregation or anything like that."

In his 1996 movie Lone Star, a murder mystery set on the Texas-Mexico border, director John Sayles captured the intercultural essence of the borderlands well – especially the way identity is defined.

In an interview with a cinema magazine that year, Sayles said the borderlands reflect what the U.S. is becoming, a place where "English-speaking culture is just one of many cultures."

As one character in the film says:

"We got this whole damn *menudo* down here."

* * *

Just like Quebec and U.S.'s northern borderlands, ethnic purity doesn't exist in Texas and its frontier with Mexico. Being of mixed heritage is the rule: Indian, Mexican, and the catch-all Anglo that lumps anyone of white European stock – or not – under the same label.

Falling between the cracks of the ethnic mosaic can be both a blessing and a curse. People born of intermarriage are perhaps more versatile, more at ease in society, but they are also misunderstood.

"A Mexican nationalist friend of mine once said I was like a door frame – part of two rooms, not just one," said ex-university professor and author Gloria López-Stafford.

"That's the duality: anglos never forget I'm half-Mexican and Mexicans always remind me I'm half-anglo," said López-Stafford, whose mother was Mexican and whose father was an anglo from South Texas.

"But I've always thought that's been a gift. I can't understand everything of both peoples, but I can explain the one to the other."

Now retired from teaching social work in Las Cruces, New Mexico, just across the state line from El Paso, López-Stafford described her mixed feelings as a Mexican-American in her 1996 memoir A Place in El Paso.

It's the story of a Mexican-American childhood where every movement, every word and every gesture was made under a dual identity, half-Mexican, half-American.

Getting advice from the local *padre* before confession when she was 12, she had an existential crisis. Was she American or Mexican? "Which one do I say I am?" she wondered.

"Gloria, you are both," the *padre* replied. "You have both bloods in you. And that will be a problem for you all your life if you let it." Bigots, he said, will always find her out, but she will find acceptance in good friends.

Blending cultures goes way back in the history of the American southwest – even including French Canadians, who ventured there as explorers, fur trappers, traders and merchants in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Consider this lament of an old trapper named Francisco Laforay (François Laforêt), whose jumbled mix of Spanish, English and French was captured by an amused English traveller named George Ruxton.

"Sacré enfant de Gârce," the old man cursed, complaining that he'd run out of precious coffee since his last trip to Sante Fe.

"Before I vas siempre avec plenty café, plenty sucre, mais now, God dam, I not go à Sante Fe, God dam, and mountain men dey come aqui from autre côté, drink all my café," he said.

"Sin café, enfant de Gârce, I no live, parceque me not sacré Espagnol, mais one Frenchman."

Contrast that to people of French Canadian stock living today in New England, who speak joual as easily as they do American.

"I was born on the border, raised on the border and I live on the border," said Phil Letourneau, 60, a dairy farmer in Holland, Vt., whose property ends at the international boundary with Quebec, home of his ancestors.

"This is my boundary, my customs post," he said with a laugh the other day, standing next to a steel obelisk in his field that marked the frontier. "You're free to go through whenever you like."

That attitude has got him in trouble over the years with the U.S. Border Patrol and the RCMP on the other side; he's done some hunting on the other side without authorization, and has helped a smuggler or two.

"You see that building next to the customs house?" he said, pointing down the hill towards town. "Smile, you're on candid camera!" Sometimes

he waves to the border guards he thinks must be watching him.

"Je les donne mon salut!"

Do franco-Americans think of themselves as torn between two identities?

Maybe a few generations ago, but not anymore, said Fern Tanguay, a retired Orleans, Vt. insurance agent who tends the local Catholic cemetery, which is full of French names like Auger, Leblanc and Perrault.

"I think of myself as an American, even though I was raised in French and didn't speak English 'till I went to school," said Tanguay, 65, whose parents emigrated to the region during the Depression.

"I go to Canada often, because I speak the language they speak in Quebec, and that helps the walls come down," he said.

"You'll find some Americans feel the people on the other side are cold, not receptive, but that's just because they can't get past the language barrier."

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Paradoxically, in Texas people from the other side of the border learn quickly that the best way to get ahead is not to speak Spanish, the language of the majority.

It's to speak English, They may be in the majority, but the Mexican-Americans of Texas can't ignore the fact that English is the language of America.

Unlike legislation here to promote French over English, in El Paso there is no sign law to give the city a Spanish face, no language law to force new arrivals to the city to put their kids in Spanish-language school.

Quite the opposite.

In the schools, when Spanish is promoted, it's through programs modeled on Canadian bilingualism – so-called "dual language" education.

In dual language, students are taught all subjects in both Spanish and English, whether one is their first language or not. The goal, from kindergarten right through Grade 12, is to produce bilingual students.

Other Western states with large numbers of unilingual Spanish-speaking students have banned bilingual education – California in 1998, Arizona in 2000, and next year perhaps Colorado, too.

But Texas is resisting.

About 12 per cent of the 4 million public-school students in Texas are enrolled in bilingual education programs. In the Rio Grande borderlands stretching from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico, 25 per cent are enrolled.

Advocates of complete immersion in English argue the programs give neither a good education nor enough English. Proponents counter they keep Spanish speakers happy and in school, lowering the drop-out rate.

"This is a constant controversy that will never be settled," said Sue Hodson, who teaches at El Paso's Bowie High School where one in four students doesn't speak English.

Almost the entire student body of 1,200 are Mexican-American or Mexican, some of whom come across the border every day to go to class, giving a false address of relatives living on the Texas side.

"It's our duty to help those who can't speak English get an education," said Hodson, a teacher for the past 30 years. "And if they're scared, if they can't understand what's going on in class, they won't get it."

What a change from just a few generations ago, when Spanish was banned from the classrooms and schoolyards of an education system run almost exclusively by anglos.

Until the Bilingual Education Act of 1963, when a "no-Spanish rule" dating back to 1918 was revoked to allow teaching in languages other than just English, Spanish was taboo in Texas schools.

If they were caught speaking Spanish, students faced a variety of punishments.

Sometimes they were fined – typically, a penny for each Spanish word. Sometimes they were shamed – for example, by writing "I must not speak Spanish" 100 times in their notebooks.

Sometimes the punishment was physical. It wasn't uncommon, for example, for students to have their knuckles rapped with a ruler or blackboard brush.

Not only Texas, but other states also bordering Mexico had repressive laws through the early 1960s to keep Spanish at bay and English supreme in schools.

In a study of the "secret language" that Spanish was in border schools up until the mid-1960s, New Mexico State University education instructor Michele Stafford-Levy recounts numerous anecdotes of abuse.

In one case, she tells the story of Robert, the son of a Mexican housekeeper and WWII veteran-turned-farmer who learned early on in his Mesilla valley school just how unacceptable Spanish was.

In 1954, when he was in Grade One, a teacher made him gargle with liquid soap as punishment for answering a question in Spanish. In Grade Four, his teacher kicked him with her high-heeled shoes. In Grade 5, a teacher made him stand for an hour, arms outstretched with two English dictionaries in each hand, "so that English words will travel up your arms and into his brain."

The civil rights movement of the 1960s gradually brought an end to incidents like that – and the start of a backlash against anglo students who suddenly didn't fit in.

Stafford-Levy's husband is Randy Levy, a prosperous El Paso businessman. They were in the same inner city high school in the 1960s when Levy, a blond anglo Jew, felt the full brunt of reverse discrimination.

Outside class in the heavily Hispanic El Paso High School, he had to endure slurs like *Pinche Gringo!* (damned little white greaser). On the football field, he'd be blindsided then beaten up after the game by *cholos* – thugs.

"It was frightening to grow up in El Paso at that time," said Levy.

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To get over the "indignity" of speaking English, some Spanish-speaking Texans enjoy what they call "small victories" over the dominance of the minority tongue.

Like anglos in Quebec who make a point of getting government correspondence in English or pressing their telephone keypad "pour le service en anglais," these Texans stand up to be counted.

At the dry cleaner's, they object that there's no category on the bill for *sarape*, a traditional poncho, just 'blanket' – and it gets changed. At the bank ATM machine, they punch the button that says Spanish. Others insist on making Spanish part of their daily vernacular.

"I don't italicize the Spanish words in my novels anymore," said Las Cruces writer Denise Chavez, author of Loving Pedro Infante. "Readers are more willing to go to their dictionaries now."

There's an analogy to be made between worries over language purity in Texas and worries in Quebec, according to Jon Amastae, a border studies expert at the University of texas at El Paso.

"A lot of countries don't think languages enrich each other," he said. "The French are prone to outbreaks of worries over 'franglais', and it's the same in Mexico and here."

But consider European history, he said. Without the Norman conquest of England and the infusion of English with French words that resulted, there would have been no Chaucer, no Shakespeare.

"It's a myth that there must be linguistic purity for a people to survive."

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On the border, it's a daily struggle for identity. Might the experience of border life be a model for the world?

"We're all coming to inhabit a transnational space," said Ruben Martinez, author of Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail.

"It's not a geographical space anymore. It's swallowing the world."

There's a young American in Quebec who thinks this province is the epitome of that – outward-looking, international but with a strong sense of its own "national" identity. Sometimes it takes an outsider to see it.

His name is Paul Adams, he's a geographer, and he's here on a couple of American fellowships teaching and researching Canadian studies at McGill University. Normally, he teaches at Texas A&M University.

He's a scholar of cosmopolitanism (yes, there is such a discipline) and he's here finding out how it exists in a "rooted" society like ours. How is it that Quebec can seemingly balance both, with no loss of vitality?

"Language is just a container," Adams contends, " and in a place like Quebec it gets diffused in a bunch of different identities, whatever you choose to be – Montrealer, Quebecer, Canadian, North American."

That's the border here: a variety of definitions of who one is. Like Texas, where a person can be a *fronterizo* first and a Texan second, the dividing line between one's background and one's current life is a fuzzy one.

"There are other issues you worry about when you live here or there – family, human rights, the environment," Adams said.

"Eventually it becomes rather arbitrary what language you speak. You can't just protect your part of North American culture with language.

"It belongs to everyone."

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On the Web:

www.us-mex.org (New Mexico-based clearinghouse on border info)

www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/sayles.html (John Sayles interview in 1996)

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pix:
alamo
mexican angel

IDENTITY
[Sidebar: Music]

NOT FINISHED - add david Francey for Quebec content

TX.identity2

By JEFF HEINRICH

EL PASO, Texas – They sing of the border.

Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Willie Nelson, Doug Sahm, Ry Cooder, Joe Ely, Tom Russell, and before them the "singing cowboys" – Gene Autry, Bob Wills, Marty Robbins.

All have found inspiration south of the line, in Mexico.

Popularizing a mythic way of life on the frontier, of dark-eyed temptresses, whisky-fueled gunbattles and desperado flights across the border, American songwriters have looked to Mexico as muse for years.

Their tunes have become artifacts of popular Tex-Mex culture, with lyrics that have entered the American music lexicon:

"Out in the West Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a Mexican girl"

(Robbins, El Paso, 1959)

"When you're lost in the rain in Juarez and it's Eastertime, too"

(Dylan, Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues, 1965)

"Who are all these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?

The radio says, 'They are just deportees'"

(Guthrie, Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos), 1948)

Others songs, less well-known, carry similar power:

"Carlos Saragosa left his home in Casas Grandes when the moon was full" (Russell, Gallo del Cielo, 1991)

"In the cool of the evening she calls me to dance

My back's almost broken from choppin' the plants"

(Ely, Ranches and Rivers, 1995)

"And the cowboys down in Texas

They polish up their guns

And they look across the border

To learn the ways of love"

(Lyle Lovett, North Dakota, 1992)

On the other side of the Rio Grande, Mexican norteño balladeers singing corridos have glorified outlaws and attacked those who would stop them, from *los federales* (police) to *la migra* (the U.S. Border Patrol).

They also champion the underdog on the right side of the law, like the slain journalist Felix Miranda, immortalized by the superstar group Los Tigres del Norte in their 1989 song El Gato Felix:

"He had seven lives and he had to see them through...

Now Felix the Cat is dead. They are carrying him to his grave."

A new variation in the Tex-Mex corrido genre – narco-ballads – is increasingly popular. Chronicling life in the drug trade, they speak of – some say glorify – the blood and violence that are part of the scene.

So much so, that last February they were officially banned from the airwaves of the TV and radio stations of northwest state of Sinaloa, one of Mexico's most violent regions.

Other Mexican music borrows from both sides of the border – and beyond. In Tijuana, for example, a new "techno-norteño" style exemplified by groups like the Nortec Collective has emerged that fuses old and new.

In both Mexico and the U.S., the border not only comes alive in song but achieves a certain permanence.

Wrapped in a tune, the two cultures on either side – Mexican and Anglo – arrive at a kind of harmony, a rhapsody the borrows themes from both and spins them into song.

What is it about the borderlands that inspires songwriters?

Over supper in an El Paso Mexican restaurant, Jerry Jeff Walker, the Austin, Tx.-based "gonzo" artist best known for his classic Mr. Bojangles, told me his theory about why Tex-Mex music is popular.

It's all a question of roots, he said.

"Texas is becoming California-cated," screwed out of its culture by "LA-aliens coming in with their Evian and call-forwarding, their malls and freeways," said Walker, who is originally from New York.

"So people start looking to the border towns for their identity, for that ol'-town feel," far from the commercial pull of mainstream American culture, he said.

Listening to Tex-Mex songs is a way to find style and adventure of a kind Hollywood and the pop-oriented music industry – and even mainstream Texas country music – can't provide, Walker said.

"All the flair of Texas comes out of Mexico: pointy-toe boots, bell-bottom pants with conchas on the side, even the idea of the singing cowboy came from the other side, from the *vaquerros*."

American songwriters have learned to spice up their music with Mexican mariachi guitars and fast-paced accordion, and throw in a word or two in Spanish for authenticity.

Exotic, yes, but also familiar.

Think of the campfire intimacy of Dylan's version of Spanish is the Loving Tongue, from 1973: *"Soft as music, light as spring, 'twas a girl I learned it from, living down Sonora-way."*

Or the Mexican guitar stylings and plaintive harmonica of Nelson's 1993 version of Cooder's Across the Borderline:

"There's a land, so I've been told, where every street is paved with gold, and it's just across the borderline."

Or the bouncy border bop of the Grateful Dead's 1974 song Mexicali Blues:

"And it's three days ride from Bakersfield, and I don't know why I came

I guess I came to keep from payin' dues."

Or the trumpets that herald the start of Russell's Touch of Evil, the opening track of this year's Borderland album

"The night my baby left me I crossed the bridge to Juarez Avenue,

Just like the movie Touch of Evil, I've got the Orson Welles, Marlene Dietrich blues."

There's a lonesome quality to much of Tex-Mex songwriting, something that Austin ethnomusicologist Américo Paredes has called "that mood of meditative yearning" that epitomizes the border style.

In his latest album, Russell, a journeyman artist who grew up in Los Angeles but spent 15 years in New York City before moving to El Paso in the mid 1990s, looks to the border for answers to a failing love affair.

The Rio Grande became a metaphor for the border between a woman and a man, as Russell tried to patch up a real-life breakup with the woman he moved to El Paso with from New York.

In the end, El Paso won; Russell moved out of their farmhouse by the river and into an apartment. He went on tour, and passed through Montreal in August, opening a show for folk legend John Prine.

"I've always been attracted by opposites, and that's why I moved to El Paso," he told me over breakfast the next morning.

"But sometimes when you move somewhere else with someone, you find you're not as close as you thought. There's a gap there you didn't know existed before."

In El Paso, Russell and his girlfriend crossed to Juárez for excitement, attending bullfights where the real blood sport was in the street outside – dodging bullets from narco-traffickers in Wild-West-style shootouts.

"There's a degree of tension you get in a border town, a lot of history, and just looking across the river you can see up close how the other half lives," he said.

"You see 100,000 people living in shacks. Something like that, it makes you want to do something – like write a song."

On the Web:
www.bobdylan.com/songs/tomthum

b.html (lyrics and audio clips of Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues)

www.tomrussell.com (Tom Russell's home page)

http://ss.cdnow.com/H/43/02/06454302.mp2 (audio intro to Robbins' hit El Paso)

www.laweekly.com/ink/98/50/reverb-quinones.shtml

(long Los Angeles newspaper feature on Los Tigres del Norte)

http://music.barnesandnoble.com (look up artist and hear song clips)

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IMMIGRATION
[Main story]

NOT FINISHED - compare Candelaria to a place like Stanstead (border hoppers),, give Canadian stats re. immigrants crossing here (200,000 a year?), and give Cdn and INS figures re. personnel on northern border

TX.immigration1

Up and down the Rio Grande
A thousand footprints in the sand
Reveal the secret no-one can define.
- Ry Cooder,
"Across the Borderline," 1982

By JEFF HEINRICH

CANDELARIA, Texas – A quarter mile down a stony road hedged with mesquite and salt cedar trees, Israel Baeza Jr. trudged to the footbridge linking Texas and his native Mexico.

The 15-year-old was weary. The bus ride from the American high school he attends in Presidio, Tx., the closest large town, had been long and the afternoon heat was oppressive.

But there was one blessing, something Baeza and his family across the Rio Grande now take for granted. At the bridge there were no border formalities, no customs officer, no hassle of interrogation.

Just 20 strides across the wooden planks of the unofficial crossing was all it took to pass from one world into another, from the Texas hamlet of Candelaria to the Mexican one of San Antonio del Bravo.

In this remote part of the 2,000-mile borderlands separating the U.S. and Mexico, just west of Big Bend National Park in the Chihuahua desert, it's done all the time.

Not even the events of Sept. 11 have taken away the urge.

By footbridge or rowboat, SUV or donkey, the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo del Norte, as the Mexicans can it) is still crossed daily here, routinely and in a multitude of ways. Without incident. Without paperwork.

"To us, it's all the same place around here," said the boy's father, Israel Baeza Sr., 37, a welder who normally works in Odessa, Tx., five hours away, but who this day had come in his truck to pick up his son.

He brought along his other son, 11-year-old Eric. The younger boy wore a sombrero vaquero, a cowboy hat of black felt. His brother sported the official cap of the Nebraska Huskers baseball team.

They made for a portrait of two Mexicos – and two Americas.

Both boys are Mexicans with (if anyone wished to check) the necessary documentation to circulate on both sides of the border, thanks to their father's employment in Texas.

But they could just as easily be Mexican-Americans. Out here, no-one cares, no-one counts the numbers flowing back and forth, nor the identities they claim.

If they and their father were smuggling drugs or guns or U.S, dollars, that would be one thing. But the Mexican army units and the U.S. Border Patrol who keep a low profile here know better.

Even in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, this ordinary traffic is harmless. It's just too far away from anything to matter.

Which begs the question: Why is there a border here, anyway?

Israel Jr. offered an answer.

"So there won't be any conflicts. No killing, no fighting," he said.

Are there any problems there? "No, sir," he said.

And people on both sides of the river like it that way.

Some Americans even keep a weekend place on the Mexican side, fording the river in their 4X4s with impunity. Theresa Chambers, a Texas rancher's daughter, is one of them.

They live with the border and the border lives in them.

"You have to respect the border. It's real, even if you can't see it," said Chambers, 48, a Presidio schoolteacher who six years ago opened a bed-and-breakfast in tiny San Antonio, her spiritual home.

With a deep tan, laconic way of talking, quiet stubbornness and family history intertwined with that of her Mexican neighbors, Chambers is in many ways typical of the desert-hardened people of the region.

She's a dead ringer for Texana Jones, the heroine of the mystery novels of Allana Martin, whose Spanish-tinged fiction is based on life in Candelaria.

Chambers' brother, Robert, is a convicted drug trafficker implicated in a smuggling scheme in the early 1990s along with the local county sheriff, Rick Thompson. But Chambers herself has steered clear of trouble.

Like an enlightened white South African, doing her best to blend in with the landscape and the Spanish-speaking majority that inhabit it, she keeps her restored 1885 adobe house open to visitors year-round.

Her doors are always unlocked, much like the open border around her.

"I don't know what it is about this place," she said, sipping a Bacardi-and-lime in her backyard as the sun set in the Chinati Mountains of Texas to the north. "I can't define the feeling, but it's different. It feels different here."

As an American, doesn't she wonder whether some of the footbridge traffic will try to make it farther north, as illegal immigrants?

Chambers is skeptical.

"Where would they go when they get to the other side? It's just too far from everything down here."

* * *

Some try anyway.

A report of the U.S. Congress in August said that between 1994 and 1997 more than 1,013 immigrants died trying to enter the country from Mexico – a toll that does not include unreported deaths. The immigrants-rights group StopGatekeeper.org estimates 1,500 have died between 1994 and now.

The vast majority were trying to cross the desert into the southwestern U.S. states of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Most died of exposure to the sun and lack of water – or in winter, the cold night air.

The crossings are so dangerous that the Border Patrol is planning to install beacons in the desert with a red button that migrants can push if they're in distress and need help. That move was prompted by the highly publicized death last May of 14 Mexicans who had been trying to cross the desert east of Yuma, Ariz., where temperatures had hit 46 degrees.

Critics say it's hypocritical for the authorities to offer succor to people it has deliberately forced into a life-threatening journey.

"More and more people are dying for a simple reason: the stakes have been raised higher than ever before," said Maria Echaveste, a former White House deputy chief of staff under the Clinton administration.

But for every death in the desert, countless more have made it safely across the line.

One of the lucky ones was a young Mexican man from the faraway state of Chiapas, who turned up one day last spring at a railway siding near Valentine, Tx. where cattle are corralled before heading for auction.

"My daughter found him sleeping by the scales over there," said LeNell Brown, who helps receive the cattle for shipment. "He said he'd walked all the way from the Chiapas and was headed for North Carolina."

The corral is across the highway from a restricted U.S. Air Force site that sends up huge, white radar-equipped blimps to spot low-flying aircraft coming in from Mexico with drugs.

On ranchland next to it are the weathered timber ruins of the set of Giant, the epic 1956 movie about Texas

that starred Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean.

Suspended through the magic of helium 15,000 up in the air, the tethered blimp – technically, an aerostat – can see within a 200-mile radius. Apparently, nobody saw the man from Chiapas.

"He didn't stick around – just left, who knows where?" said Brown.

If it can't spot strangers hoofing it in from Mexico on foot, what's the use of the blimp? "I don't know what it does," she said.

"It's probably just there to give a few people some jobs."

* * *

Jobs, indeed. And money.

Since the early 1990s, when then-U.S. President Bill Clinton stepped up what has since been called the militarization of the U.S-Mexico border, the number of people defending the southern frontier has exploded.

The desert blimps – six of them stretching from Yuma in the west to Rio Grande City, Tx. in the east, each costing $2.8 million a year to operate and maintain – are just part of the picture.

In the last five years, the Border Patrol, which is the policing arm of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, has more than doubled its staff to about 9,500 and tripled its budget to about $1 billion a year. Since Sept. 11, there have been calls in the U.S. Congress to expand the agency even more – with hundreds of more agents and millions of dollars extra.

As well, 10,000 U.S. soldiers and National Guard militia are now employed along the border, building fences and roads. Dozens of other government agencies – from drug-enforcement personnel to U.S. Customs officers to city police – have also been assigned permanent border duty.

* * *

Nowhere is this Fortress America more evident than in the far western corner of Texas. There, 230 miles upriver from San Antonio and Candelaria, are the twin border cities of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso.

They are twins of a different sort altogether, more like Cain and Abel than Castor and Pollux. Their umbilical cord is the Rio Grande, but fate has shown little regard for Juárez and much to El Paso.

It's the largest border metropolis in the world: 1.3 million people in Juárez and 700,000 in El Paso. It's also a place where the Third World meets the First – and where the U.S. works overtime to keep Mexico at bay.

To that task is fitted a veritable gauntlet of wire fences, fortified bridges, infrared-camera towers, precipitous concrete canals, floodlights and buried motion sensors, monitored by hundreds of federal agents.

There is considerable traffic, and it has only eased somewhat in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. A succession of frustrating waits and long lines has not stemmed the tide, only slowed it down, according to the INS. Legal crossings have dropped by one-third in the aftermath of the attacks; arrests of illegals are down by 40 per cent or more.

On a normal day, 150,000 people drive or walk across one of the cities' four international bridges, mostly Mexicans headed to El Paso to work and shop. Some never leave; others cross illegally, evading the technology.

"They like the city, because they can get lost easier here than in the desert – at the bus station, the railyards, the safe houses," said Border Patrol agent Bob Calderone.

From his bank of a dozen video monitors in an east-end El Paso control room, Calderone can keep an eye on activity – benign and otherwise – along the 14 miles of the city's river border with Juárez.

He alerts agents on the ground to suspicious movements away from the main bridges, cataloguing each coming and going as an entry into his computer database.

It's a cat-and-mouse game.

Sometimes *coyotes* (the word used for smugglers who help people across) stage a diversion with a few illegals in one area while downstream they try to bring a larger group across. Other times the underground sensors send out false alarms, tripped by a dog or a fox or a Border Patrol agent tracking footprints and other clues.

Last year, the Border Patrol and its 1,100 agents in El Paso made 116,000 "apprehensions," mostly Mexicans and many of them repeat offenders (a typical border jumper is apprehended five or more times).

Illegals who make it through the river gauntlet are lucky, but never in the clear. Local churches and social-service agencies may give them shelter, but those shelters are often raided – under protest – by the Border Patrol.

Social activist Ruben Garcia runs a shelter called Annunciation House in downtown El Paso. For him, the way the city treats Mexican illegals is shameless and hypocritical.

"If 'Maria' crosses the border this morning and buys $25 worth of goods at Target, the manager thinks she's the greatest person in the world – as long as she goes back to Mexico at the end of the day."

And while illegal immigration is fine with El Pasoans who employ black-market labour, they're the first to complain if those illegals want health care or an education for their children, Garcia said.

"We enjoy their services but not their demands."

Some Mexicans try to immigrate the legal way, long after they've entered the U.S. – through amnesties or breaks offered by changes in visa regulations.

Loreto Sanchez is one of them. The 26-year-old wants to be machinist like his brother-in-law, Luis Escudero, 30, who came to El Paso from his native Chihuahua nine years ago.

"I want to live here because Mexico is too ugly," said Sanchez, waiting in line to apply for permanent residency at INS headquarters in El Paso.

Ugly is a code word for poor. Low wages are what drive most Mexicans to leave their homeland. Escudero, for example, earns $45,000 a year in Texas; back home, he said, he'd be lucky to get $14,000.

* * *

Whatever their motivation, would-be immigrants don't let the border faze them.

It is, after all, an artificial boundary, "a legalism laid across the land," as border author William Langewiesche, an Atlantic Monthly writer, described it in his excellent 1994 book Cutting for Sign.

And as the imperfect work of man, not nature, "without an ocean, mountain range, or other natural barrier" but the piddling Rio Grande to mark the dividing line, the border will continue to be breached, he predicted.

Such is the power of the American dream. Millions chase it.

Others bide their time, hoping for the right opportunity.

West of downtown El Paso, where the river bends northward into New Mexico and ceases to be the international boundary, there's a little park on the south side of the waterway where Mexicans come to picnic. A white stucco boundary marker – International Boundary Monument Number 1 – shows where Texas and New Mexico and Mexico begin and end. Children playfully straddle the lines with their feet.

It's an idyllic spot, except for one thing.

Across the water in Texas, against a backdrop of smokestacks of a century-old but now idle copper smelter, a Border Patrol car with an officer inside sits parked at all hours of the day.

The Mexicans swim under his gaze.

Sometimes they cross to the U.S. side, only to dive off the platform of a disused cotton mill. Sometimes they raise their middle finger and "flip the bird" to *la migra* on the other side.

It's not so much an insult as a warning.

Just you wait, the gesture seems to say. Just you wait.

* * *

On the Web:

ins.usdoj.gov (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service)

www.nclr.org (National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic-American lobby)

www.cis.org (Center for Immigration Studies, anti-immigration think-tank)

www.theatlantic.com/issues/92may/border.htm

(Langewiesche's border series in the Atlantic Monthly)

www.theatlantic.com/issues/98jul/future.htm

(another excellent Atlantic Monthly series, by Robert D. Kaplan)

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pix:
brothers on candelaria bridge
migrants on piedras negras bus
BP processing in EP (hands up)
amnesty guys at EP INS centre
EP triangle of land
EP overpass to nowhere
arizona dead file pix?

IMMIGRATION

[Sidebar: 'The invasion']

NOT FINISHED - work in parallel to Quebec welcoming immigrants (not an 'invasion' but 'une richesse')

TX.immigration2

For what are we
Without hope in our hearts
That someday we'll drink
From God's blessed waters
And eat the fruit from the vine
I know love and fortune will be mine
Somewhere across the border.
- Bruce Springsteen,
"Across the Border" (1995)

By JEFF HEINRICH

Is Mexico "invading" the United States by stealth – through illegal immigration?

It's a question that has polarized the immigration debate in the U.S., where an estimated 3 million undocumented migrants from Mexico now live clandestinely.

In an ad in the Washington Post in early September, the anti-immigration group Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America suggested Mexico's goal is to "extend the Mexican nation" into the U.S.

As proof, the group quoted prize-winning Mexican novelist Elena Poniatowska, who said this to a Caracas audience at a book launch last July:

"The people of poverty, lice and cockroaches are moving forward in the United States, a country that wants to speak Spanish because it has 33.5 million Hispanics who are imposing their culture.

"Mexico is recovering the territories yielded to the United States by means of migratory practices," continued the author, who was born in Paris of Polish descent and who came to Mexico as a child in the 1940s.

"It fills me with joy, because Hispanics can have an ever-greater influence all the way from Patagonia to Alaska," she said.

Poniatowska's remarks prompted some commentators to warn that Mexicans are splitting the U.S. in two along ethnic lines – akin to the divide between French and English in Canada.

"The danger of balkanization, of creating an officially bilingual nation like Canada, should set off alarm bells," Herbert London, head of the right-wing Hudson Institute, wrote in a BridgeNews editorial.

"Even if one regards Poniatowska's views as extreme," London wrote, "the dramatic difference in Hispanic and European birthrates and the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico will undoubtedly have a profound cultural influence on the nation."

* * *

There's no question that immigration from Mexico is at an all-time high, slowed only somewhat by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S.

Crossing the border is still so common it could be a Mexican national sport.

Across the 2,000 miles of the U.S.-Mexican frontier last year, Border Patrol agents made about 1.6 million apprehensions, up from 1.1 million in 1992. Most were repeat offenders.

(Compare that to the 12,000 people caught annually entering the U.S. illegally from Canada. Along the entire 4,000-mile frontier the Border Patrol has as many agents as it has in a single Texas border town.)

The caught ones were the unlucky ones.

The lucky ones are the estimated 8 million people living illegally in the U.S., mostly Mexicans and Central Americans. In the last decade undocumented immigrants have been arriving at a rate of 500,000 a year.

Since the election of reformist Mexican President Vicente Fox last year, the numbers have been dropping somewhat, as prospective migrants stay home in anticipation the economy will pick up under their new leader.

Not that he nor his counterpart in Washington, U.S. President George W. Bush, are doing much to prevent the outflow.

Indeed, as a former governor of Texas who successfully courted the Hispanic vote to win the presidency, Bush has taken a strongly pro-immigrant stance, as has his Republican administration.

"Family values don't stop at the southern border," Bush likes to say. He understands the desire of Mexican to cross the border "to work to provide food for their families."

The U.S. Congress is considering a new program, proposed by Texas Sen. Phil Gramm, that would bring about 250,000 Mexican farmhands temporarily into the United States as seasonal guest workers.

It's a revival of a similar program the U.S. and Mexico had during the labour-scarce years of World War II, when thousands of Mexicans were given work visas so they could enter the U.S. legally and work on farms.

It's unclear whether the crisis following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. will affect how that program will be implemented. In a weekly radio address shortly after the disaster, Fox said Bush had assured him personally that the reform is still on schedule. But faced with inevitable calls for tighter security and stricter immigration policies, it may be wishful thinking to believe the U.S. will welcome more migrants, least of all ones who come to the country illegally.

Not that getting across the border is always a clandestine affair. In fact, it's often done quite legitimately.

Since 1998, over 1 million Mexicans have been issued "laser visas" – a kind of day pass that allows them to cross the border to shop or see relatives. Many use the opportunity to look for work.

And another 70,000 Mexicans a year enter the U.S. with legal work visas – a number that Fox hopes Bush will convince Congress to almost quadruple to 250,000 this year.

Then there's this elusive possibility: a general amnesty for undocumented migrants akin to the one the U.S. granted in 1986 to 3 million illegal immigrants.

QUOTE re. chances now

(Only about 20 per cent of Mexicans living in the U.S. actually ask for citizenship. The only other group of foreign nationals with as low a naturalization rate is, interestingly, Canadians.)

Mexico has a financial stake in its citizens heading north and sending home a cut of their wages from the higher paying jobs they snag there. These "remittances" totalled $10 billion U.S. last year, Mexico's third-largest source of foreign revenue after oil sales and tourism.

It's something Fox – who has otherwise lamented that fact that emigration robs the Mexican countryside of its youngest and strongest farmhands – doesn't appear to object to.

In Los Angeles last March, at a luncheon hosted by California Gov. Gray Davis, the Mexican leader said: "There's no more defining migration as a problem. Migration is by definition an opportunity.

"It must become an asset to both our countries, an opportunity...to help us grow our economies," Fox said.

In Fresno, where he addressed cheering migrant workers during the same trip, Fox said "the passionate, productive, quality work of Mexicans should be legally recognized."

* * *

In border towns like El Paso, Tx., and other checkpoints, the processing of illegals continues. Determined to make a better life for themselves, undocumented Mexicans are still coming in waves.

They're allowed to try – a lot.

CHECK WITH MOSIER IF STILL TRUE SINCE SEPT. 11

In El Paso, you can try anywhere from five to 20 times before you're considered a lawbreaker. Only then are formal deportation proceedings – not just a simple escort back across the border – instituted against you.

And if you're under 17, you can try as often as you like. The crossings aren't held against you; only your face is kept in the Border Patrol's photo database, so they can keep track of who you are and where you're headed.

Along the border this year, the Border Patrol has caught fewer illegals than in 2000 – 24 per cent fewer, in fact – as fewer Mexicans make the trek in the hope of good job prospects at home. But in El Paso, the reverse has happened: apprehensions were up by 12 per cent from May through August over the same period last year. That includes a good number of repeat offenders.

The events of Sept. 11 threw a spanner in that traffic. But it's just a matter of time before the numbers return to normal, experts say.

QUOTE

As long as the cat-and-mouse game continues, many Mexicans, it seems, are willing to take the risk of being caught and sent back across the line – or make it in and start a new life in America.

On the Web:

www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/lawenfor/bpatrol (U.S. Border Patrol)

www.free-market.net/directorybycategory/news/T21.3/#1

(libertarian-oriented news updates on immigration)

http://www.pulitzer.org/year/2001/public-service/works/oregonian19.html

(Pultizer Prize-winning feature by The Oregonian newspaper on abuse and racism in the I.N.S.)

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DRUGS

NOT FINISHED - see inserts

TX.drugs

It's the stick of law enforcement that creates the carrot of huge profits. That's economic truth.
- from Traffic, the Oscar-winning movie, 2000

JEFF HEINRICH
The Gazette

MARFA, Texas – The deputy sheriff's car passed me once, then doubled back and stopped where I was parked, on a bluff at the entrance to the W.E. Love Ranch on a little-used byway called Farm Road 2810. We were a couple of dozen miles up from the Mexican border in west Texas, in one of the most sparsely populated regions of the United States. The deputy wanted to know what I was doing there, in my rented car with Corpus Christi plates.

Journalism, I said. Looking into life of the border. Illegal immigrants. The drug war. The deputy started to grin.

"Let me tell you a little about where you are," said the deputy, who identified himself as Mitchell Garcia, a third-generation Mexican-American.

Garcia, 38, had a drug-sniffing dog in his car, and an arsenal. One shotgun. One assault rifle. A .357-calibre pistol. Five hundred rounds of ammunition for the rifle, 75 for the shotgun, 200 for the pistol.

"The road you're on is a big corridor," Garcia said. "It's U.S. dollars going that way," he said, pointing south to the border. "And it's marijuana, cocaine and heroin going that way," he said pointed north.

The drugs come wrapped in hermetically sealed bags hidden in gas tanks, in false floors of cattle trucks, in cars reeking of air freshener and Downy to mask the odour from the dogs.

"The drug traffic is horrendous down here. But we don't have the manpower. I'm here all by myself, sometimes to 3 in the morning," said Garcia, who is paid $9 an hour to "interdict" the drug trade.

Half a dozen U.S. Border Patrol officers also patrol the area, mostly along nearby Rte. 67 which leads to the official border crossing at Presidio, Tx. and Ojinaga, Mexico.

Even with that help, many of the Mexican "mules" who haul contraband on their backs through the ranchlands slip through their hands.

"We have motion sensors buried out there, but they can trick us," Garcia said. "They trip one, then they wait a few hours before moving on, so it doesn't look like a sequence.

"They're not dummies. They're real smart, and they beat us."

* * *

It's just a fact of border life. The war on drugs permeates life here, even in the wake of the tighter border controls imposed since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S.,

And short of a complete shutdown of the border – of which residents got a taste under the emergency measures that followed Sept. 11 – it shows no sign of ending soon.

Quite the contrary.

Begun in the 1970s by then-President Richard Nixon as a way to fight addiction in a generation of Vietnam War veterans, the campaign to end narcotics use – colloquially known as "the war on drugs" – has escalated steadily in the span of two generations.

So has consumption. With 15 million Americans – including a good many teenagers – admitting to using drugs and an estimated 52,000 a year dying from overdoses, the problem is huge.

It has also spawned a growth industry, the kind of business that a myriad of law-enforcement agencies are paid to do: stop some of the $10 billion worth of drugs that are trafficked across the border every year.

The war reaches into Canada, too, targeting party drugs like ecstasy, potent "B.C. bud" and hydroponic marijuana from Quebec that are all destined cross-border, and preventing payments in U.S. cash for them from going undeclared.

Unlike the Mexico-U.S. border, most of the drug traffic is done by air and sea, not land, although small loads of cocaine and heroine do get smuggled in by truck from the U.S. at highway crossings like Lacolle.)

RCMP QUOTES FROM SGT. BOUCHER

On both ends of the border, the drug war has its skeptics.

Without a real clean-up in Mexico, where the export trade in illicit drugs is part of the corrupt political fabric of the nation and the basis of its underground economy, there will be no end to the supply, they say. And without a decriminalization of drugs, especially marijuana – by far the most common drug flowing between the two countries and the source of close to half of all arrests – there will be no end to illegal efforts to get it.

Working with legalization advocates as unlikely as the Republican governor of New Mexico, Gary Johnson, critics of the drug war want addiction treated more as a social and medical issue than as a crime. At a meeting last June in Mexico, Johnson and governors of the nine other U.S. and Mexican border states created a new commission to look at trafficking in this new light – as a public-health problem. For example, by steering addicts towards expanded detox programs on both sides of the border – and not simply putting them in jail – money will be better spent, they said.

But they and other reformers face a formidable opponent: the administration of new U.S. President George W. Bush, who, like his predecessors, is a big proponent of prohibition. "The only humane and compassionate response to drug use is a moral refusal to accept," he said last May, announcing the appointment of the country's new "drug czar," John Walters. "We emphatically disagree with those who favour drug legalization," Bush said. Dedicated to re-launch the war on drugs, Bush's new attorney general, John Ashcroft also said last May he wants to use his $20-billion budget hire more border personnel and install more equipment to detect traffickers.

"Drug lords are on notice," he told a gathering of Border Patrol agents in El Paso during his first tour of the southwest borderlands since being appointed to the job. "Drug trafficking will not be allowed in the U.S. or Mexico."

Ironically, those fighting words were turned into near-reality in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. With security intensified at each border crossing, drug seizures were down by 80 per cent in the first two weeks after the attacks, according to the U.S. Customs Service.

Mexico is also stepping up its drug-enforcement efforts.

Although he favours eventual legalization of marijuana, once other countries do it, Mexico's new president, Vicente Fox, has also vowed to crack down on the traffickers. Last April, he lauded the arrest of several top-ranking Mexican military figures, including a brigadier general, active in the trade.

"Actions like this...are the kind that generate confidence, and we will continue with them," said Fox.

And in a speech to California business leaders last March, Fox said he wants Mexico to become a country "where corruption and impunity are eradicated and where the rule of law prevails." This fall, he said, the U.S. and Mexico will issue a joint "report card" on how their mutual war on drugs – against organized crime, trafficking, consumption and money laundering – is going.

WHAT BECAME OF IT?

* * *

In his 1998 book Drug Lord, an ex-

posé of the life and death of Mexican drug kingpin Pablo Acosta, American author Terrence Poppa wrote that the solution to ending drug trafficking and drug abuse lies in the nature of political evolution in Mexico itself, in whether it can change from "a charade democracy into a real democracy" and eliminate the systemic corruption that has created "a juggernaut of crime all along the border."

But as long as there is money to be made, with law-enforcement crackdowns merely keeping the price of illicit drugs high by limiting demand, people will deal and do drugs. As a character in Traffic, the drug-war movie that won four Academy Awards this year, put it:

"You're not battling traffickers or dealers, but a market."

One of the biggest launching pads for that market is Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican border city across from El Paso, Tx. that is home to an infamous drug cartel.

The supply coming out of Juárez – like the demand that fuels it north of the border – is inexhaustible. And most of it is smuggled successfully across the border,

"A lot of it gets through – that's no secret," said Joe Moore, 28, a former San Diego police officer who works as a U.S. Customs inspector in El Paso, one of the busiest crossings in the country. Last year in El Paso, 16 million cars, 725,000 trucks and 5 million pedestrians came across the city's three bridges from Mexico. Most go unchecked STILL?, but random searches turn up drugs all the time along the West Texas and New Mexican border crossings– 155 tons last year, almost all of it marijuana, along with more than $1 million in cash. Every nine weeks, Customs holds an auction for the 200 or so cars it seizes with drugs in them. The drug busts are so common, the local media in El Paso have stopped covering them – even the big ones – relegating them instead to the back pages.

To an outsider, though, they're impressive. On a blustery afternoon last May, I stood on a loading dock at the Customs station of El Paso's main truck crossing, the east-end Zaragosa bridge over the Rio Grande, as National Guard reservists removed the roof panels of a seized tractor-trailer. An X-ray scan had revealed the roof was dense with some unknown material, and an eyecheck confirmed the panels had been installed with two sets of rivets, the original ones and another brand-new set. Wearing pink Dayglo plugs in their ears, Customs officers armed with circular saws methodically cut through the first of 33 panels. It was quickly clear what was inside: the cutting burned the material underneath, and across the concrete Customs loading dock wafted the pungent, intoxicating smell of fresh marijuana.

By the end of the afternoon, the tally was 2,349 pounds. Two weeks later, more was seized at the same bridge: 8,212 pounds concealed in a load of windshield wipers. A week after that, this time at the downtown Bridge of the Americas, another haul: 1,042 pounds of marijuana hidden in hollowed-out chess tables. And a few days after that, a near-repeat of the first haul: 2,466 pounds, again in the ceiling of a trailer. Finally, a month after that, El Paso scored a record bust for the year: 9,367 pounds of marijuana – in a shipment of bingo game cards, no less.

The Customs people like to think they're making a dent.

"We take this very seriously, this war on drugs," said David Longoria, who heads the El Paso Customs operations and has experience on the Canadian side, too, in Ontario and B.C. "Our job is to be guardians of our national border, and keep bad things and people people out of our country."

But he's realistic: throwing more manpower at the problem won't do much to stem the illicit trade.

"You can't grow proportionally to the volume of drugs coming into the country, otherwise you'd be stumbling all over each other. We just have to think smarter than the other guys."

* * *

On the Pinto Canyon Road, after our brief encounter, deputy sheriff Garcia stowed his dog back in the rear of his cruiser and contemplated the hard-scrabble landscape around him, miles of barren ranchland as far as the eye could see. Inhospitable as it was, the land was America and it was his to protect. I asked him if the war on drugs was winnable, and if so, how.

He answered the second question first. "I think the only way would be to block up the border completely, build a big fence and if people cut it, you go down and give them all you've got," he said – arrest, jail, deportation, whatever. But then he laughed at his own idea. In the borderlands, Mexicans and Americans need to be able to circulate freely, more or less, he said. Good fences don't always make good neighbours.

"You're Canadian," he said.

"How would you like it if we built a fence along your border and stopped you from coming in? It's no different for Mexico. Out here, we've got so much border. We're just going to have to live with it, holes and all, even if the drugs keep coming in."

HOW DOES HE FEEL SINCE SEPT. 11?

* * *

On the Web:

www.usdoj.gov/dea (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration)

www.customs.gov (U.S. Customs Service)

www.narconews.com (controversial Mexico-based webzine)

www.druglord.com/home.html (Poppa's book)

* Jeff Heinrich can be reached by phone at (514) 987-2428. His E-mail address is jheinrich@thegazette.southam.ca.

pix:
pinto sheriff
ysleta bust
customs sweep of bridge (B&W)
laredo gun shop

Health

NOT FINISHED - needs reference to Quebec cross-border health viz. New England (Americans buying scrips here, Canadians getting surgery there)

TX.health

The difference between a developed country and a developing country is that, in one, billboards hype remedies for constipation, and in the other, for diarrhea.

- Ramón Eduardo Ruiz,
On the Rim of Mexico, 2000

JEFF HEINRICH
The Gazette

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico – She came from the high Sierra Tarahumara in the northwest reaches of Mexico three years ago, to a city of 1.3 million people on the American border.

Ambition: a better life. Modus vivendi: begging.

But Maria Perez, 23, got more than just a few pesos thrown her way on the streets of Juárez. This year her 8-month-old son caught tuberculosis, a deadly disease that has devastated the US.-Mexico frontier.

Fueled by migrant traffic and by an increasing number of strains resistant to traditional medications, TB rates along the border are more than six times higher than the U.S. national rate.

That's a concern for the country as whole. Germs are citizens of the world; they don't respect lines on a map. And the bacteria that make TB – the world's No. 1 killer disease – so contagious are no exception.

Luckily for Perez and her boy, somebody's doing something about it – with help from an unexpected place, the other side of the Rio Grande, in El Paso, Texas.

Every day, a minivan with Lone Star licence plates trundles up the dirt road towards her cinderblock home in one of the poorest colonias of Juárez, where stacks of tires shore up the slopes beneath Cerro Bola mountain.

The van stops, and out get a Mexican-American physician named Fernando González and his assistant Cynthia Espinosa, a 20-year-old nurse trainee. She carries a bottle of anti-TB syrup and a plastic syringe.

They head up the road to their patient, leaving behind another nurse and a social worker as back-up. This is the team's sixth on a morning tour to treat TB patients in their homes around Juárez.

Already seen earlier today were Adrian, an HIV-infected homosexual; Oscar, an undernourished man living in a trailer; Felipe, a factory worker on sick leave; José, a retired diabetic; Vanessa, a 20-month old girl and her infected grandfather, Carlos. Now there's Perez's son.

From as far away as El Paso, you can see the gigantic letters painted on the hillside behind their house. "La Biblia es la verdad. Leela," the inscription proclaims. (The Bible is the truth. Read it). In a gully nearby, a dead dog's body pokes out of a garbage bag, covered in flies. Perez's one-room house has electricity but no running water. A toilet connects to a septic tank.

"Buenos días, señora," González says, as Perez emerges from her home carrying her naked boy and wearing traditional Tarahumara Indian women's attire, a long skirt, flouncy blouse and colorful kerchief.

"And how is the little one today? Ready for his medication?"

After more pleasantries, Espinosa gently presses the child's cheeks together to open his mouth, then squeezes the plunger of the syringe to release the cloudy liquid of the TB drug into it.

Seeing the patient take the medicine – an approach called "directly observed therapy," or DOT – is key to halting the spread of the disease. Incomplete treatment can make strains resistant to drugs.

Also key is making the treatment easily accessible, even to Juárez's most destitute people.

There is no fee to pay. The program, which has operated since 1991, is cofunded by the Texas Department of Health and its counterpart in the neighbouring state of Chihuahua, as well as by both federal governments.

They call the project Juntos – in English, Togetherness.

* * *

Cross-border TB treatment programs exist all along the Rio Grande, in border towns like Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, McAllen and Reynosa.

It has to be that way. In the battle against disease, there can be no border.

"In an era marked by increased international travel and a global marketplace, no region of the world is immune from outside influences," the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention stated last year in a study of border TB.

"International collaboration will be essential to eliminate TB. TB does not stop at the U.S. border, and neither can prevention efforts."

Canada is not immune to this international spread of disease, either. "In reality," as a 1999 report of the Canadian Paediatric Society pointed out, "the border is the (Canadian) health-care system."

TB tops the list of diseases brought in by the 200,000 immigrants and refugees who enter Canada each year. A report last year by the federal immigration department said TB poses the greatest risk to public health.

It also said that the country's system of medical surveillance of infected immigrants is too "fragmented," leaving Canadians exposed to the potential spread of diseases.

Montrealers recall the case last year of a Peruvian refugee who belligerently refused to take his TB medication, causing public-health officials to take him to court to force him to comply.

In the end, he did.

On the U.S.-Mexico border, health in general is in dire straits. Eleven million people call the American side home, a 2,000-mile swath of mostly barren land extending 100 kilometres north of the line.

From San Ysidro, Ca. in the west to Brownsville Tx. in the east, people suffer every day.

"If made the 51st state, the border area would rank last in access to health care, second in death rates due to hepatitis, and third in deaths related to diabetes," according to the U.S. Department of Health.

"It also would rank last in per capita income, first in numbers of school children living in poverty, and first in numbers of children who are uninsured," the department said in a 1999 report about the border.

On the Mexican side, where millions more live clustered in border towns like Tijuana and Juárez and cross daily into the U.S. for work, poverty and an underfunded public health network have left disease unchecked.

* * *

Desperate for treatment, many Mexicans cross the border and check themselves into a U.S. hospital. It's expensive, but in Mexico the service is slower and patients without insurance have to pay up front.

In the U.S., with help from relatives whose U.S. salaries are higher than their own, the Mexicans find they can pay in installments – a luxury they don't enjoy back home.

Felipe Martinez is one of the Juárez TB patients. He was first diagnosed two years ago while visiting his daughter in Austin, Tx. and went through treatment in San Antonio before returning home by bus to Juaréz.

Now no longer contagious but under Juntos's care, the 48-year-old refrigerator factory worker says the hands-on home visits saved his life. "Without

Juntos, I wouldn't have been cured."

He's one of more than 700 TB patients the project has treated in the past decade – more than 10,000 visits. It's been a success; over 80 per cent have been cured, including even many drug-resistant cases.

As well, the number of new cases has been declining, despite rapid climbs in the number of migrants arriving in Juárez from inner Mexico looking for work.

"TB is a terrible disease, and we've lost a lot of patients over the years," said González as he headed back to El Paso after morning visits were done.

"Sometimes you feel very frustrated, other times not. It depends. But doing nothing – that just isn't an option for us. You have to do what you can."

On the Web:

www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5001a1.htm

(U.S. Centers for Disease Control report on TB on the border)

www.tdh.state.tx.us/tb/default.htm

(Texas Department of Health anti-tuberculosis program)

www.usmbha.org (U.S.-Mexico Border Health Association, in El Paso)

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pix:

pill-popping man in bus house

tarahumara indian with baby and nurse

MEDIA

[Main story]

NOT FINISHED - needs Quebec content (John Mahoney), and what contrasting how about English and French press here go after allophone audience?

TX.media1

JEFF HEINRICH
The Gazette

El PASO, Texas – Two years ago, newspaper publisher Daniel Cavazos realized he wasn't reaching half the readers he wanted: the swelling numbers of new immigrants who only knew Spanish.

His paper, the daily Brownsville Herald, was an almost exclusively English-only product in a Rio Grande border town that was 95-per-cent populated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

Since the Herald's founding in 1934, the paper had included only a small Spanish-language supplement with its regular edition. But times had changed; new immigrants, Cavazos realized, wanted more.

"Most Mexican-Americans can read English, but there is a large number of people who still only use Spanish – amnesty cases, resident aliens, new citizens and illegal immigrants," he said.

"I was going to hire a consultant to see if Brownsville had enough Hispanics to justify publishing a Spanish-only version for them," Cavazos recalled at a Texas editors' conference in El Paso last spring.

"He told me, 'I can save you my $140,000 fee. The answer is yes.'"

And so El Nuevo Heraldo was born. Since its launch last October, the daily paper, priced at an affordable 25 cents a copy, has steadily expanding its readership.

It joins a burgeoning roster of Spanish-only publications, TV and radio stations and Web media sites that are transforming the language of news in America, reflecting a major demographic shift in American society.

The last U.S. census, released this year, showed the country's Hispanic population had grown by nearly 60 per cent since 1990. For the first time, they outnumber African-Americans – 35.3 million versus 34.7 million.

And the media have caught on, feeding the new "majority minority group" with information in a language that for many is the only one they can understand – Spanish.

According to data compiled in the June issue of the American Journalism Review, there are now 34 daily Spanish-language language newspapers in the U.S., compared to 14 in 1990. The number of Spanish-only weekly newspapers have almost doubled (265 now versus 152 a decade ago), as have magazines (352 now versus 177 before). There are also more radio stations – 594 now compared with 463 in 1995. As well, the country's dominant TV networks, Univision and Telemundo, have expanded amid competition from the upstarts Hispanic Television Network and Azteca America.

Much of the new media is simply Spanish speaking to Spanish. But the trend that has culture vultures salivating is influence that Spanish has had on the mainstream, previously English-only media.

Besides the Brownsville Herald, three major newspapers have moved to separate Spanish-only editions: the Miami Herald publishes the top-selling El Nuevo Herald; New York's Newsday, the country's 8th largest daily, publishes Hoy; the Chicago Tribune (7th largest) has come out with Exito! and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram has La Estrella. At least 127 of the 651 Spanish-language papers in the U.S. are non-Hispanic-owned, the AJR notes.

Other big papers are testing the waters. The website of the 5th-ranking Washington Post, for example, includes a weekly column by Univision reporter Marcela Sanchez in both Spanish and English.

But not everyone agrees that going Spanish is the way to sell more newspapers. In fact, some say, it's a money-losing proposition – at least for now.

"How are we going to market a paper that costs $17 a month to people who make less than $30,000 a year," Houston Chronicle executive editor Tony Pederson asked at the El Paso conference.

"The economics of the issue are less than certain."

There's also another side to the equation: By fragmenting the market into exclusively English and exclusively Spanish media, there's a risk that neither group will end up learning much about the other.

Call it ethnic ignorance. Reaching unilingual Spanish readers is one thing. What about getting unilingual English readers to care about the new Hispanic reality?

In his 1939 travel book on Mexico, Graham Greene described being holed up in Nuevo Laredo, the border town, waiting for a ride into the interior. He picked up the morning paper.

"Several people had been shot by a police chief in a quarrel – that was the regular feature of a Mexican paper; no day passed without somebody's being assassinated somewhere," Greene observed.

"At the end of the paper there was a page in English for tourists. That never included the shootings, and the tourists, as far as I could see, never read the Spanish pages.

"They lived in a different world, they lived in a few square inches of American territory; with Life and Time and coffee at Sanborn's, they were impervious to Mexico."

Today as then, the plethora of crime, immigration and environmental news that is the bread-and-butter of local media in Mexican border towns barely make it into anything read by anglo-American newspaper buyers.

The El Paso Times, for example, which is part of the giant Gannett chain of U.S. dailies, has only one reporter covering news just across the river in Ciudad Juárez, a sister city twice El Paso's size.

"We read them to know what's happening in El Paso, not here," said Elias Montánez, editor of the Juárez top daily El Diario.

"The Times doesn't cover our side of the river. They're writing exclusively for an audience that is disappearing – WASPs."

During last summer's mayoralty campaign in the city, the Times drew flack for snubbing the main Hispanic candidate, Ray Caballero, and endorsing the anglo Republican candidate, Larry Francis.

Caballero won, becoming the second Hispanic mayor in a row to run El Paso. His supporters weren't finished with the Times, though. They printed up T-shirts denouncing the newspaper as out-of-touch.

From a Mexican point-of-view, the critics are right.

"What makes the border a special place is the concentration of things happening here, and the way they affect both sides," said Javier Arroyo, who works for the Juárez daily Norte, El Diario's main competitor.

"The immigration problem, drugs, education, politics – there's a lot to investigate here. But with the Times, it's as if they don't think they're readers care much about that."

Filling the void, some Mexican papers are planning expansions into the U.S. market – some, it's rumoured, even financing their ventures with illegal profits made from supposed ties to the drug trade.

This summer El Diario's parent company, which also publishes a free English weekly called Looking at El Paso, bought an office building on the American side – a block away from the Times.

A cross-border war of words erupted shortly after, when the Times picked up a story out of a Mexico City daily claiming that El Diario's publisher has links with major narco traffickers in Chihuahua, his home state.

Denying any involvement, El Diario

speculated in print that the Times was simply trying to smear a future competitor that threatens someday to do a better job of covering the local community.

It's a charge the Times – and the U.S. media in general, facing a growing Hispanic audience hungry for news of itself – is loath to ignore.

On the Web:

www.elpasotimes.com (El Paso, Tx. daily)

www.brownsvilleherald.com (Brownsville, Tx. daily)

www.diario.com.mx (Juarez daily, in Spanish)

www.nmsu.edu/~frontera (New Mexico-based coverage of the border)

http://ajr.newslink.org/ajrlaurajun01.html (American Journalism Review feature article on the rise of Spanish-speaking media in the U.S.)

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pix:
none

MEDIA

[Sidebar: In Ciudad Juarez]

NOT FINISHED - could use mention of Michel Auger case in Quebec

TX.media2

The freedom to write and publish ... has no limit but the respect of private life, of morals, and of public peace.
- Article 7, Mexican Constitution

He who serves two masters has to lie to one. - Portuguese proverb

By JEFF HEINRICH

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico – It's a dangerous job, being a journalist in a Mexican border town. If the narco barons don't get you, the corrupt police will. Writing the truth can be deadly.

But there's another menace the media face every day. It's the insidious influence that government has in budgetary decisions of newsrooms – and indeed, in their very survival.

Case in point:

There are two daily newspapers in Juárez, the bustling city of 1.3 million that is just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. Norte sells 18,000 copies a day, El Diario 22,000. They are full-colour, graphics-laden, multi-section, thoroughly modern products. But unlike papers in Canada or other developed nations that rely solely on advertising revenue to turn a profit, these take government handouts.

And when they write the truth too close to the bone of people in power, they get slammed. When Norte bore down hard in its coverage of state potentates in the Chihuahua government, for example, it lost its subsidy.

"The governor cut us off for being too aggressive; we lost 15 per cent of our budget overnight," said deputy news director Javier Arroyo.

"'I don't feed the hand that bites me' – that was his explanation.'"

Another tentacle of government – its monopoly on newsprint production – also has had budgetary implications. To ensure a reliable supply, free of the vagaries of official favour, Norte used to import its paper from Canada.

"It was the only way we could be sure there'd be enough paper to print on," Arroyo said. "If the government wanted to impose censorship, all they had to do was limit our supply."

When Mexico privatized its newsprint production in 1998, Norte started breathing more easily. Last spring it went back to the Mexican supplier, still the country's largest but without the same strings attached.

In Mexico, freedom to publish is a relative thing. If Liebling's dictum is true elsewhere – that freedom of the press belong to the man who own one – it isn't necessarily true south of the Rio Grande.

During the peso crisis of 1992, for example, some Mexican newspapers had to print their editions outside the country, in Texas, because their own presses weren't running any newsprint through.

Other problems also affect the bottom line. Government advertising, a big source of revenue can be yanked at the slightest provocation. So can ads from local bars, which do a heavy drug trade.

There's also the continuous threat of violence.

If you stand on Norte's loading dock, you can see the sun shining through three holes in the sheet-metal door. They've been there ever since the day in 1997 when a gunman sprayed the building with unfriendly fire.

No-one was hurt. But the target was Arroyo, who had got death threats over the phone for a story he'd done on a corrupt ex-state police chief with narco links who was then working as a consultant to Juárez's mayor.

Of course, living in a violent town has some benefits for a paper like Norte: there is no shortage of news.

"It's a very interesting place to work, because a lot of things are happening here," said Norte photographer Miguel Perea, a laconic, dark-skinned man with a grey goatee and several missing teeth.

"When you live in hell, you have to report the heat."

On the typical day he'll cover fires (the cardboard and plywood shacks of Juárez's poor are an easy trap), execution-style slayings (sometimes one or more a day), and armed robberies (half-a-dozen a day).

Last winter, Perea and a reporter went to Juárez's red-light district to check out what's known in local slang as a picadero (literally, a paddock for racehorses), a bar where hookers hang out and drugs are sold.

A sign outside beckoned with this cryptic inscription: "Tortas y algomas" (Cakes and something more). The Norte journalists didn't get a chance to investigate.

"I leaned out of the car to get a picture, but before I could, some guy on a bike swung towards us and threw a big rock at the window. We had to get out of there."

Violence is never far away from a reporter's mind in Juárez and other border towns. "Narco-traffickers and corrupt security personnel" are a constant threat, "particularly along the U.S.-Mexican border," the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists reported this year.

Dogged coverage of organized crime is suspected in the deaths of at least three border journalists in the last 18 months – Ojinaga tabloid editor José Luis Ortega Mata, 37, found shot in the head last February; Matamoros reporter Pablo Pineda, 38, whose body was retrieved last year from the banks of the Rio Grande outside Harlingen, Tx.; and, less than three weeks later, Juárez talk-radio host (and former Norte reporter) José Ramírez Puente, 29, stabbed 35 times and left in his car.

Others faced non-violent – but official – repression last year. In Monterrey, a newspaper reporter was prosecuted for electoral fraud after writing about how he obtained a voting credential using a false birth certificate. In Juárez, a police commissioner sued a weekly newspaper for criminal defamation after it linked him to the drug trade; two staffers were arrested, but the charges were eventually dropped when the commissioner – who was touted for a job on the security team of new President Vicente Fox – resigned his position.

Fox's election last year does hold out some hope for improvement on official meddling in the country's press.

One of his government's first promises – astonishing for some – was to stop spying on journalists, a common practice under the previous Institutional Revolutionary Party regime that ruled Mexico for 71 years.

And this past June, another symbolic move: the government said it would no longer play a direct role in awarding the country's annual National Journalism Prizes, leaving the judging instead to an independent agency.

"It's a different era now in Mexico," said Miguel Acosta Valverde, a spokesman for the Mexican Academy of Human Rights, in Mexico City.

"This is the first time in our history, for example, that we can openly criticize the president. Before, he was an untouchable, like the Virgin of Guadalupe."

But there is still considerable official power waiting to be wielded against the press, if it goes too far.

Still intact, for example, is legislation established in 1997 that punishes the press for attacking the "honor" and "good name" of politicians or businessmen.

A drug trafficker could even claim self-defence if he murdered a journalist who besmirched his "reputation" in print, Valverde said. "He would have a right to sue, protected by the law."

Not a pleasant prospect, perhaps, but that is the Mexican media reality.

On the Web:
www.cpj.org/attacks00/americ-

as00/Mexico.html
(Mexico page of the Committee to Protect Journalists)

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pix:
norte bullet hole

Business

NOT FINISHED - needs couple of grafs on NAFTA's effect on Quebec, with update since Sept. 11

TX.business1

She left the fields far behind her
A sun-dried earth and el patrón
It's a new kind of work on the border
Now the modern world is her home.
- Francisco Herrera & Greg Landau, "El Corrido de La Maquila" (2001)

By JEFF HEINRICH

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico – In a sparse office plastered with trade-union posters from around North America, Beatriz Lujan keeps a lonely vigil over the precarious life of the modern Mexican factory worker.

A serious woman, trained as an industrial engineer, she runs a small organization fighting an uphill battle: trying to organize Juárez's 235,000 *maquiladora* assembly-plant workers into independent unions.

"It's hard," said Lujan, whose Labour Workshop and Study Centre is partly funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, along with U.S. and Mexican labour federations.

"The only unions in this town are the official ones, and they're all friends with *el patrón* (the boss). It's just like as if there were no union at all."

Right across the river from El Paso, Texas, Juárez's 360 maquilas employ roughly 20 per cent of the industry's entire Mexican workforce , even more than Tijuana, the boomtown south of San Diego, Calif.

But while roughly one in five of those plants is officially unionized, membership carries few privileges. With some rare exceptions – such as an upstart union known by the unwieldy acronym STIMAHCS that in 1998 defied intimidation and struck against a major automotive factory in Tijuana – unions in Mexico are undemocratic affairs, either affiliated with the government or with the company they work under.

Normally, the cozy relationship between Mexican labour and employers makes for seemingly harmonious labour relations. But activists like Lujan say that stability comes at a price.

Low wages, poor working conditions and little recourse for the disgruntled worker are part-and-parcel, they say, of an official system that has only gotten worse under the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994.

And maquilas are front-and-centre, what Canadian writer John Ralston Saul (husband of the country's governor-general) has called places that use "mid-19th-century production conditions in order to reduce costs."

"They are at the hub of a trade system which puts constant downward pressure on established wage, environmental and social standards," Saul wrote in his 1997 book Reflections of a Siamese Twin.

Up and down the border, NAFTA has led to an explosion in trade and increased employment in maquilas, which assemble consumer goods as varied as TV sets and door locks for tariff-free export. In 1994, maquilas exported $50 billion U.S. worth of goods across the border; last year that number had tripled to $150 billion.

Since 1994, employment in maquilas has more than doubled – from 546,000 to over 1.2 million – mostly in the electrical and electronics sector (in Juarez it's said that a new TV set is assembled every four seconds), textiles and clothing, and automotive equipment industries.

Typically, the workers came from the countryside, young men and women who gave up on farming and the meagre income it provided in exchange for hope of a more prosperous life along the border.

Nine years ago, Felipe Martinez, 48, came north to Juárez from his home in the neighbouring state of Durango.

He got a job in a maquila, wiring electrical components in refrigeration units. The job supports him and his family, who live in a small house on an unpaved street typical of Juárez's down-at-the-heels neighbourhoods.

"Life is better here," Martinez said, standing by a front door patched with a flattened-out Corn Flakes box. "Back home, all the agricultural work has dried up. Here, there's work for everybody."

But Mexican government statistics also suggest that the maquila boom has not translated into better wages for workers in manufacturing. In fact, they've dropped by 10 per cent since NAFTA was signed.

That's a fact that galls union organizers but is greeted with equanimity by major maquila employers and the official unions, who say wages are at the mercy of the market – a market that can go elsewhere.

"Employees want more; that's normal human behaviour," said Michael Hissam, spokesman for Delphi Automotive Systems, whose 17,000 workers in Juárez make parts for General Motors, Ford and others.

"But the reality check is what your customer is willing to pay for."

And with this year's slump in the North American economy, exacerbated by the devasting effect on trade of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., keeping a job along the border has become increasingly precarious.

It began in January, when maquila workers who'd been sent home for the Christmas holidays didn't get their jobs back . This "attrition" and other examples like it have contributed to a more than 6 per cent drop in employment at Juárez maquilas this year. Major employers like Delphi have lost over 15 per cent.

Across Mexico, the entire maquila industry has lost more than 100,000 jobs since January, including 59,000 in Chihuahua province and 23,000 in Tijuana, Mexican Labour Dept. statistics show.

It's gotten so bad, Juárez maquilas want to stop paying health-coverage and housing allowances to their workers, and in August asked the state government to stop collecting payroll taxes until the economy recovers.

The crisis atmosphere following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has only made things worse. Economists have revised their forecasts for Mexican growth in 2001; it's now pegged at around zero per cent, compared with 7 per cent last year.

The slowdown – just like NAFTA itself – hasn't been kind to businesses on the U.S. side of the border, either, where warehouses, shops and equipment suppliers depend on Mexican business to survive.

In El Paso, where the price of labour has been easily eclipsed by the average $8 a day paid to maquila workers in Juárez, free trade has been a disaster to anyone operating a labour-intensive business there.

"The lower wages in Juárez have had a depressing effect in El Paso," said George McAlmon, a retired El Paso lawyer and Democratic Party organizer who had studied the maquila phenomenon.

Not only have companies relocated to the Mexican side to take advantage of cheaper labour, but Mexican workers have increasingly been coming north to work, bringing wages down as a result.

"You've got Mexicans coming over here and taking small construction jobs for $6 an hour," said McAlmon. "Where does that leave the local guy who used to make $12? Out of work, or working for less."

El Paso lost more than 16,000 jobs after NAFTA was signed, most of them in traditional manufacturing industries like textiles and clothing. The major loss everyone still talks of today was Levi Strauss and Co., which in 1997 cut 1,500 jobs – 40 per cent of its local workforce.

Would the border be better without

the maquilas?

No – at least, Mexicans wouldn't be, said McAlmon.

"Even if it's subsistence work, it pays better than farming. The only thing is, it's not creating anything of permanent value to Mexico or to Mexicans. And it's bad for us all if they don't bring up their standard of living."

On the Web:

www.twinplantnews.com (maquila industry trade magazine)

www.ueinternational.org (info on cross-border union drives)

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pix:

delphi workers

a NAFTA casualty: dead coyote by the highway