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The closest neighbors living on the ranch are seven miles away. A Mexican cowboy works there, who worked at the old ranch as an 11 year-old. He was part of the big migrations of the 50s when unpapered aliens swarmed up Devil's River by here to hit the railroad track, or Dry Spring Creek to end up at the Big Boss's headquarters at Monument.

Several 10 and 12 year-old boys came in the big groups of foot soldiers. After a few weeks in camp, the teasing by the older men drove the kids back to the ranch house, where we taught them to work in the yard, or tag along on a Shetland pony in the pastures.

My neighbor's cowboy was one of those waifs, yet he was able to drive the mules to haul water for the camp. Like a lot of the passport Mexicans in the U.S. today, his lifestyle improved considerably from the 175-mile walks from the Border and the sometimes too-soon trip back in a green Border Patrol wagon. He lives with his wife in San Angelo on weekends in a decent part of town. At the ranch, instead of driving a team of mules hitched to a water wagon, he feeds cattle in a pickup and takes care of a flock of goats.

During the slow months for workers in San Angelo after Christmas, he looked for a couple of hands to patch up my fence down on the highway. The first prospect spent two days wandering around hunting for the ranch. We'd find his tracks turning back down at the railroad crossing eight miles away.

Signs and directions over the telephone failed to help. We finally snared him by tying a paper feed sack over the county road marker at the railroad crossing.

The interview went well. Jose's green card was legal to work over here. He had a valid driver's license, a rare instrument in these times of serious driving laws. He and his wife were ranch people, having worked down on Devil's River for 20 years. He owned a saddle and a few fencing tools. Had a bedroll and a pair of worn chaps. Knew how to shoe horses and had enough sense to say he could ride the gentle ones. Best of all, Jose was one of those agreeable sorts of Mexican cowboy, who are so much fun to ride back to the house with after work, or to visit around a cook stove.

Timing was critical. The shearing crew was coming in three days. But right on tap, he was out the next morning to help round up sheep. Old jokes returned from other works. The trapper down at the line camp took him in like an old friend. My son liked him. Two or three times, I found myself staring off in space thinking about all those men from Northern Mexico riding off early of mornings at the old ranch, smoking Bugler brand tobacco and laughing off the promise of the long day's work.

One thing a herder can't stand is too much prosperity, or a short run of good luck. After finding a hand so easy, and one I liked so much, I let one of my friends have Jose. She was out of help and needed a man of Jose's temperament to lift her spirits. Just like everything else, the change

suites Jose. I wasn't worried about a replacement. I figured all I'd need was to alert my neighbor's cowboy and tie a feed sack on the county road marker to bring on another Jose.

Things haven't turned out as planned. I talked to a number of men from Mexico in person, or over the telephone. Culled the ones who claimed to be wild horse riders, knowing they were liars, or idiots, or both. Turned back the men carrying green cards specifically stating, "not for employment," to avoid a federal rap. Rejected the opportunity to hire the father of five children, 45 years of age, who wanted to know the amount of hours the job required and the amount of time for vacations and holidays. I countered his inquiry by offering four days off to go to the Shrine Circus and make the Water Carnival in the same trip, plus an open policy furlough for all the holidays celebrated by the Republic of Mexico and the Catholic Church. Might as well be generous from the start, was the way I saw it.

Last week, I removed the feed sack. The past 25 years' lag in exposing new men to country life has virtually ended a supply of ranch people. I always was too soft hearted for my own good. The last report on Jose, he had planted a garden by the tank's overflow and gentled a big-bagged range cow to furnish him milk ...