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One of the men at the ranch drove to the border to Ciudad Acuna across from Del Rio, Texas, to check on his house. He arrived within the period of President Bush's appeal to send troops to help the Border Patrol enforce immigration.

Back at the ranch, he reported that more than 100,000 citizens are packed in this once thousand or so population border watering spot, popular among Texans wishing to escape the state's curfews and near prohibition laws regulating beverage alcohol. How many more Mexicans congregate to scheme ways of entering the U.S. is never tabulated, according to my source.

For 10, maybe 20 years, we worked up to 30 unpapered aliens in various seasons at the old ranch, grubbing prickly pear cactus. On payday 90 percent of the payroll left the Mertzon post Office by registered post with a cashier's check in dollars to become much-needed pesos for the mothers, wives and grandmothers in Mexico.

Those were good years. Hard, dry years, yet leaving the ranch saddled at daylight, hearing the soft Spanish blending in laughter, the aroma of tobacco burning in rolled brown paper, and horses snorting at the first shadows charmed life.

But was it the 1960s or the 70s when employing and transporting aliens became a criminal offense? Right quick the Border Patrol changed from being our friends to serious law enforcement officers. In months, only a few sore-footed stragglers passed through hoping for work.

Before the President announced his plan, I favored building a Mexican-proof fence from the Pacific Coast west of San Diego to Brownsville on the Gulf, an extension of Pat Buchanan's idea of fencing 800 miles of border to catch the unpapered traffic drifting into north winds.

The additional 1200 miles would stop wets from going around the fence, or force the declaration that they were genuine by wading in the Pacific Ocean or swimming the ship channel leading to the Gulf of Mexico to come over here. (Mr. Bush, Mr. Buchanan, and myself choose to ignore the open waters of Amistad and Falcon lakes - "Under fencing consideration U.S. Border." Please to do press the point.)

One of my pals made strong objections to fencing the border since a grass fire last winter turned him back to open range.

"Fencing crews," he said, "are busy up in North Texas, where losses were so horrible months ago."

He further took exception to my idea of using "wets" to build the fence, claiming the idea was the same as

depending on the river hogs running on his country to keep up his water gaps.

Sure, using unpapered aliens to build a fence to stop unpapered aliens takes time to accept, but no other workers are going to scale the canyons and pack rolls of wire over rock slides except the Mexicans.

Technical information on the gauge of net-wire needed to deter humans, other than the chain link used in prisons, is another problem. Say a 135-pound man desperate to make his way across a desert before his water supply depletes, or a young mother from the state of Sonora determined to make an appointment with a "coyote" to haul her back to Chicago come to the fence.

The net is going to have to be stretched tight enough to bounce the human challenger back into Mexico. Isn't going to be simple or easy. Longhorn cattle and buffaloes are still in the training stage of being fence-broke. In the dim past, Texas passed a law making carrying wire pliers illegal. Again, that's a problem to be solved - whether to search the fence builders going back to Mexico or risking arming the very ones we are trying to keep out.

The San Angelo newspaper reports the proposed 6000 National Guardsmen allows two soldiers to each mile of border. Be better to coordinate building the fence with the

dispersion of the troops. Sounds fetched, if not far-fetched, but down in that lonesome, rough country, the sentries could be prevailed upon to pop a white tail deer or two to swap for tortillas and beans from the fencing camps. Exchanging food will also help teach the soldiers tolerance for the point of origin of the crews.

But if I decide to bid on the job, workers losing time dodging back and forth across the border to avoid apprehension by the Border Patrol are going to be a factor. (Been looking at a second-hand jeep that deer hunters want to sell. We already have plenty of wire stretchers and crowbars.)

Appealing to the nationalism of the unpapered aliens by posting signs on the fence saying, "Hecho Por Mejicanos" could preserve the integrity of a boundary fence. One last thing, if any holes are found in the South Texas portion of the fence, the javelinas running in the cow jungle will be prime suspects over a few oversights by the fencing crew.