

# Pablo Cruz and the American Dream

The experiences of an undocumented immigrant from Mexico



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Manufactured in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Cruz, Pablo.

Pablo Cruz and the American Dream.

1. Alien labor, Mexican--United States. 2. Cruz, Pablo.

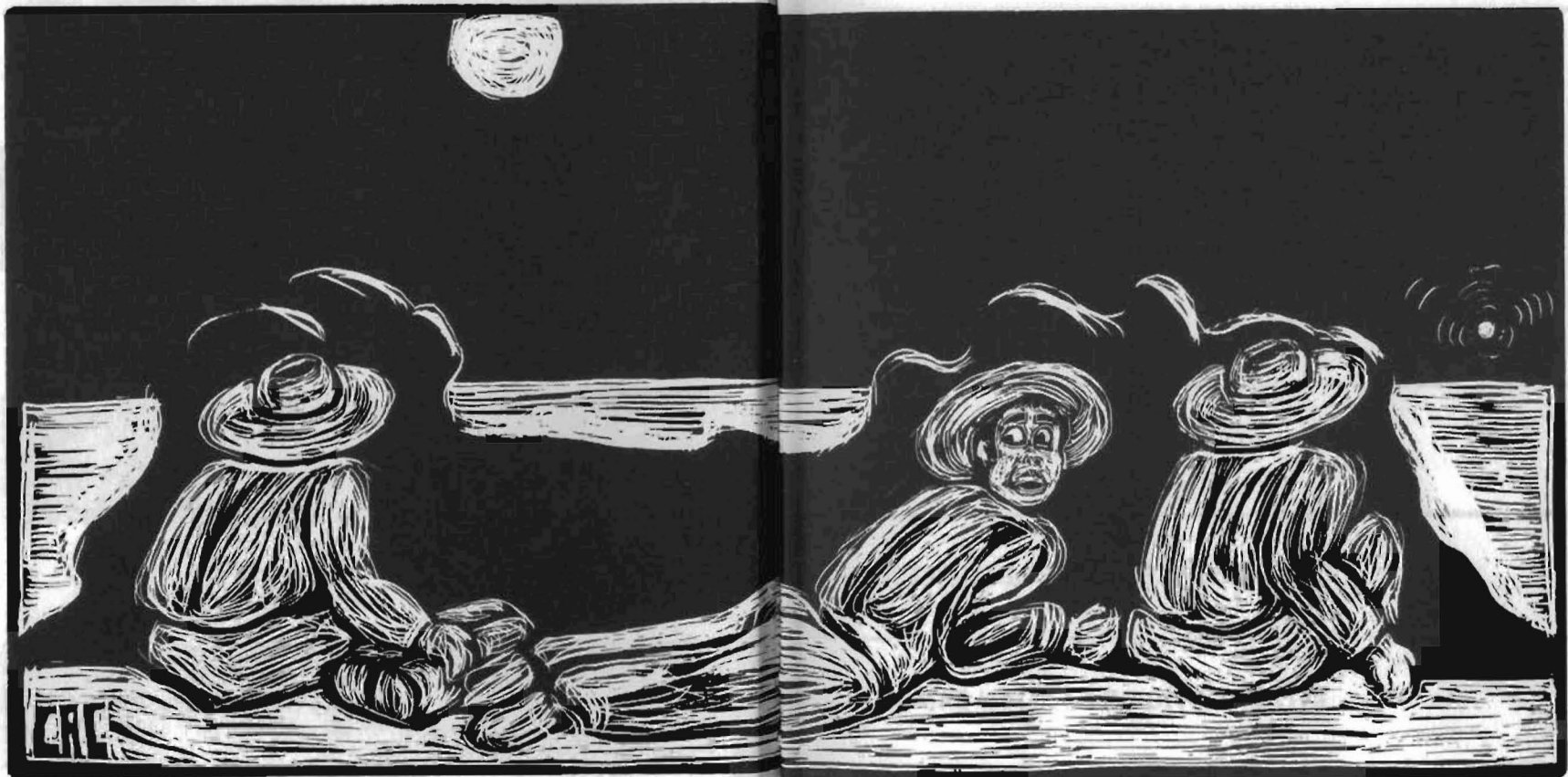
I. Nelson, Eugene, 1929- ed. II. Title.

HD8081.M6C78 331.6'2'720794 [B] 74-19157

ISBN 0-87905-021-7

It was a clear night,  
and there was a full moon and  
many stars. And we didn't have  
any trouble. The red lights  
in front lead us, you see.  
And when we came to fences, we  
would throw a stick into the  
fence to see if it was electrified.

If it was electrified,  
we crossed a little more care-  
fully. We crossed a lot of fields,  
and a lot of cow pastures,  
and saw a lot of houses where  
they milked cows. We walk around  
the houses. And there were a  
lot of dogs barking at us.



I was always  
dreaming to  
be inside  
the Statue  
of Liberty  
and walk  
through the  
arm to the  
hand holding  
the torch,  
the fire,  
just to get  
the feeling  
of America.



And the  
Alambre  
tried  
to hit  
El Cojo.



## Introduction

This is the life of Pablo Cruz which has been repeated over and over again by hundreds of thousands of his compatriots.

We are presented with details of the life of a man whose overriding ambition is to survive in a world which he entered but has trouble understanding. Nor does the world care to understand much about him.

Of interest to the reader will be the detailed background on the early childhood of Pablo Cruz as he is reared in an extended family in rural Mexico.

The harshness of life, the limited opportunities available, the desire and motivation for self-improvement are well presented.

Of particular interest will be the lure of the United States, the magnetism of the "land of opportunity" and the "American Dream" as these ideas are perceived by a young boy who watches American movies and hears about the adventures of *Braceros* who have been employed in the United States.

In pursuit of the "Dream" he moves to Tijuana, the entry port for so many undocumented Mexicans. One learns of his many attempts to enter the United States without inspection and his eventual decision not to try to become a *Bracero* but instead to enter the United States as an

*alambre* or "wire-jumper." One also learns the tricks of crossing the border, the smuggling process, and the strong probability of being caught. Jails, detention centers, and deportation proceedings are part of the process.

Exploitation is a common theme. Aliens are exploited by employers, by Mexican Americans, and even by compatriots. Yet there can also be cooperation, friendship, and lasting ties to employers, Mexican Americans, and compatriots. Some of these become moving relationships.

And the remarkable thing about this true account is that Pablo Cruz maintains his humanity and sensitivity throughout brutalizing experiences—never losing his sense of personal worth and his desire to better himself in an honorable way.

This story, like so many similar ones, begins in a village in Mexico and ends in a metropolis in the United States. This is a story of "success"; most are not.

Success here is not measured in the attainment of high status, or prestige, or power. Rather, it is keeping warm at night, avoiding the *Migra* (Immigration and Naturalization Service), having something to eat, getting a miserable temporary job, entering the society legally, and maintaining a personal integrity and dignity. For these seemingly small rewards, the price in physical and psychological suffering is high.

The United States acquired what is now the Southwest (more than half of Mexico's territory) by conquest through an unjust war. The movement of people throughout this region, before and after the war, was a relatively free and open affair. It wasn't until the middle 1920s with the establishment of the Border Patrol that travel between Mexico and the United States was restricted to a large degree.

Although legal immigration of Mexicans has never been on a quota system as it has for countries of the Eastern Hemisphere, it has not been particularly easy for Mexicans

to enter the United States because of regulations specified in the Nationality Acts relating to language, mental and physical health, occupational skills, family relationships, considerations of good citizenship and evidence that the immigrant will not become a public charge. The numbers of immigrants (1869-1885, 1894-1973) from available (but faulty) statistics reveal a total of 1,754,611. A few examples will indicate the fluctuations: 1900, 237; 1910, 17,760; 1920, 51,042; 1930, 11,915; 1940, 1,914; 1950, 6,841; 1960, 32,684; 1970, 44,469 and 1973, 70,071.

Presently, many more persons apply to enter the United States than are accepted in any given year, and the lists of applicants at the various consular offices are increasing daily.

A special category of immigrant to the United States is that person who holds a legal immigrant visa to work and reside in this country but who has chosen to live in Mexico and work in the United States. Many of these are daily commuters; others enter periodically for temporary or indefinite periods. All are known as "green carders." Estimates of "green carders" range from 60,000 to 400,000.

Another category of persons who enter the United States is "border crossers." These are persons who have a border crossing card which allows them to enter the United States for business, pleasure, or shopping for a seventy-two hour period. These individuals are not permitted to work in the United States. Should they be caught in violation of this condition, they are subject to expulsion from the country and the card is confiscated. It is estimated that at least one million such cards are in existence. Hundreds of these cards are revoked each month because of violation of the work clause; thousands, however, are issued by American consulates each month.

A fourth category is those persons who enter the United States with a tourist card. Some may cross the

border by car, train, bus or on foot. Others fly in to more distant cities. Most are legitimate tourists. Others, under the guise of tourism, begin working and overstay their visit. If caught without documents or with expired documents, they are expelled from the country.

The largest category of persons who enter the United States is those who enter without inspection or with false documents. These are called variously "mojados," "illegals," "wetbacks," "alambristas" or "undocumented aliens." It is not known how many such persons enter the country in any given year. All that is known is the number who are apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Between 1924 and 1973 over 7.5 million Mexican illegal aliens were reported.

There are many reasons why persons from Mexico enter the United States without inspection, without documents, or with false documents.

To begin with, Mexico has one of the world's fastest growing populations. With a population that is extremely young and doubling every twenty years, Mexico has been unable to develop sufficient resources in the form of raw materials to produce irrigation, steel, power, electricity, etc. to meet the needs of the population. Employment opportunities have never caught up with the demand. Nor have sufficient houses, schools, and hospitals been built for the growing population. For hundreds of thousands there is little opportunity for a reasonable livelihood. Thus many persons who seek only employment for the basic necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical expenses, will leave their communities for the larger urban areas. Some will end up in Mexico City, Guadalajara, or Monterrey. Others will head to the northern border to Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juarez, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, or Matamoros. Many will have heard of the numerous job opportunities in agriculture across the border in Texas, California,

or Arizona. They will have heard of service jobs in Los Angeles, domestic work in El Paso, industrial jobs in Chicago, construction in Indiana. They will also have heard of discrimination and exploitation. Smugglers will take their money, and they will not reach Chicago. Employers will hire them and turn them in to the Border Patrol before payday. Mexican-Americans might overcharge them for shelter or cashing checks. Under threat of being turned in, few can complain. They will hear of the thousands who are caught before they find jobs; of the many who die of thirst or starvation; of those who suffocate in smugglers' vans; of those who are shot at or mistreated by the Border Patrol. They will hear of the *Migras*' "right" under the law to board buses, search trains, enter houses without warrants, raid factories and fields without warning, and stop persons anywhere in search of a document. But they will also hear of people who have "made it," who have eluded the *Migra*, who have found good jobs at good wages, who have married and become legal, bought houses and educated children. These latter stories, many of them true, are more pleasing and more likely to be believed.

Persons from Mexico without documents have been apprehended every year since the turn of the century. The volume of apprehension began to grow considerably with the introduction of the *Bracero* program in 1942 during the Second World War. As the number of *Braceros* who were contracted increased, so did the number of applicants, many of whom entered the United States illegally and ended up in the northern border cities. During the decade of the 1940s, 600,000 *Braceros* were contracted and 800,000 undocumented Mexicans were apprehended. In the decade of the 1950s, slightly over 3 million *Braceros* were contracted and 3.4 million undocumented Mexicans were apprehended. The volume of illegals was growing so rapidly that the United States Government instituted "Operation Wetback" which

was a military type operation with military efficiency and cruelty. Its efficiency resulted in the apprehension of over one million illegals in 1954. Its cruelty is evidenced in the separation of families during the round-ups. Those members of a family who were not United States citizens were put on airplanes and dumped in the interior of Mexico; or they were herded onto boats under very bad conditions and sent to Vera Cruz or some such port.

The *Bracero* program came to an end in December of 1964 because of strong public opposition to this kind of managed labor that was in direct competition with United States citizens, particularly Mexican-Americans. During the decade of the 1960s, 1.5 million *Braceros* were admitted to the country and the number of illegals apprehended dropped to 770,000.

From a high of 1,075,168 apprehensions in 1954 the number dropped to 29,651 in 1960. Between 1961 and 1968 the number of apprehensions increased from 29,871 to 151,000. The number of apprehensions in fiscal year 1973 was 577,000. Thus we have seen a steady increase of apprehensions since the late 1960s of approximately thirty per cent each year. We have also seen an increase in smugglers. In 1972 alone, over 4,000 smugglers of aliens were identified.

In the past, illegals have usually been associated with agricultural work, but as the movement of illegals has proceeded beyond the border checkpoints or by plane directly into Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, and other major cities, employment patterns have changed. In 1972, for example, of the more than 380,000 adult Mexican *males* located, 215,000 were apprehended while seeking employment, 53,000 were employed in industry, and 86,000 were employed in agriculture, when apprehended.

As we indicated earlier, many Mexicans leave Mexico in search of opportunities for employment which are not

available there for reasons of population growth and insufficient economic development. Others leave without documents because, for reasons beyond their control related to the work of Mexican as well as American bureaucracies, they are unable to get official permission and therefore proper documentation. Others are lured by the "American dream" of Pablo Cruz—plenty of jobs and high wages. Most have few options open to them. For whatever reason, they come to this country in large numbers, but few reach "success."

There are numerous consequences to this vast population movement. In the first place they compete actively for unskilled jobs—although some are highly skilled and professional—in a highly competitive market. Without rights and being outside the law, they have no bargaining position with regard to wages. Since they are generally willing to work for lower wages, fewer fringe benefits, and longer hours than American citizens, they have a depressing effect on wage scales. To the extent that illegals obtain jobs, they displace United States workers. Along the border this displacement occurs mostly among Mexican Americans. The Mexican American is thus caught in the ambivalent position of being, on one hand, very sympathetic for and encouraging to a "cultural brother," relative, or compatriot, and on the other hand of seeing that his unemployment or low wages are directly related to the presence of the illegal. To be sure some Mexican Americans exploit the illegal in much the same manner as do members of the dominant society. Attempts at unionization are sometimes thwarted by the presence of large numbers of illegals in certain job categories.

For the immigrant himself there are dangers and problems posed in a number of ways. He may work and not be paid. He may be sent to federal prison for a period of time. He may go into debt for funds to reach the border or to pay



smugglers then be apprehended before finding work, thus adding to his financial burdens. He may die in the process.

It is said that Mexico profits from this traffic in several ways. Those who succeed in obtaining jobs in the United States evidently send money home in such amounts that presumably the balance of payments between the two nations is effected favorably for Mexico.

The employment of illegals in the United States relieves Mexico of some of the burdens of providing employment, housing, and other services for some of her population.

The costs to the United States for this vast movement of people may be reflected in lower wages for some of its citizens as well as in increased welfare payments to those who are displaced in employment. There is also the cost of keeping aliens in Federal prisons and in detention centers. Maintaining these facilities as well as a Border Patrol and all of the equipment necessary for its operation is very expensive.

Those who profit most from the traffic in human lives appear to be the employers who exploit aliens and the smugglers who take advantage of their aspirations and helplessness.

No one, to our knowledge, has studied other important consequences of this situation. For example, what is the effect on a Mexican community when large numbers of its able-bodied males are absent for months or years? There must be changes occurring both in the family structures and in the institutions within the community. For instance, the author knows of some married men from Mexico who established a common-law relationship in the United States and then were apprehended. The second wife and children are United States citizens, thus creating a rather complicated family situation.

Health and health delivery systems must be affected by the influx of a large number of people in given areas. Is there an increase in delinquency, crime, or prostitution in areas of entry or settlement of illegals? The traffic in fraudulent documents (visas, birth certificates, marriage licenses, social security cards, tourist cards) is certainly on the increase. There are no data to suggest that traffic in drugs and other contraband is related to the entry of this population.

There are few if any political borders in the world where a situation of this magnitude and complexity is encountered. One would think that given this situation, both nations would have given high priority to the discussion, investigation and final resolution of the perplexing problems posed in this region. On the contrary, either because of ignorance, myopic vision, or general disinterest, the border region is permitted to develop in whatever haphazard direction internal forces dictate. Only at intermittent intervals do representatives (low level) of both governments acknowledge a concern for the intensive and tragic human drama being enacted before the world.

Some day these governments will "discover" the United States-Mexico border. But it will take more than pooling their ignorance or vying for political advantage to bring human dignity to the actors enwrapped, if not trapped in the drama for survival.

Pablo Cruz reveals the details of the struggle.

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1974