

Immigrants face deadly trail

Kenedy sheriff saves many from thirst

Alison Gregor EXPRESS-NEWS RIO GRANDE BUREAU

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When Sheriff Rafael Cuellar drives through his desolate, wind-scourged county, he points out various landmarks with a cartographer's precision.

Most are not visible to the eye, instead existing only in Cuellar's memory. They are the long-gone bodies of dead or dying undocumented immigrants, and each of them has a story.

"I remember where we found each one," says Cuellar, a genial 33-year veteran of the Sheriff's Department who oversees almost 2,000 square miles of ranch land in Kenedy County.

Snarled mesquite and huisache along with white-hot sand dunes make the South Texas terrain some of the most forbidding in the country. It has claimed the lives of nine undocumented immigrants since January.

The toll comes in a year that has seen heat exposure - with 136 casualties - become the leading cause of death for undocumented immigrants crossing into the United States along the Southwest border, according to unofficial U.S. Border Patrol tallies for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30.

Since the Border Patrol began keeping fatality statistics in 1998, heat-exposure deaths had been second only to drownings.

Robert Smith, coordinator of the agency's Border Safety Initiative, said the reasons for the change may be multifold. An oppressive heat wave throughout the Southwest this summer, for instance, may be to blame, he said.

Also, Border Patrol apprehensions of undocumented immigrants are up, indicating more may be trying to cross - and doing so in more dangerous places.

"Those areas where they're choosing to cross or where smugglers are choosing to cross are less than hospitable," Smith said.

Cuellar, 61, is one of the few hospitable things about Kenedy County. The monotony of its dry, chaparral-covered land is broken by the odd symbol of civilization: a windmill or microwave tower.

Rattlesnakes slither in camouflaged abandon over sun-baked salt flats. Vultures circle and coyotes hunt.

Plump wild grapes lure the gullible - their insides nourish, but their toxic skin can kill.

"You can survive here, but you have to know how," said Cuellar, who has spent years memorizing the land with one object in mind: saving undocumented immigrants.

They venture into the harsh areas to the east and west of an immigration checkpoint on U.S. 77 about 15 miles south of Sarita, the county seat. Pushed by smugglers to the limits of physical endurance, they may trek 25 miles or more through rugged terrain to circumvent federal agents.

The more the immigrants sense the presence of law enforcement, the farther they travel from the highway, Cuellar said.

"The farther away the trail, the more dangerous it becomes for them," he said.

Smugglers often force undocumented immigrants to travel through the brush, except at night, when they follow the narrow sand trails that glow in the moonlight.

In November 1999, Cuellar became the first sheriff in the nation to be given the authority to arrest undocumented immigrants if they lack proper entry documents.

Cuellar said he believes that is a blessing in disguise for immigrants. Now, he can approach them to inquire if they've left anyone behind in the brush.

Cuellar expects he will find three or four more bodies by the year's end.

Last year, he discovered 12 dead undocumented immigrants; in 1998, he found 16. Tallies before that were even higher.

But Cuellar said the falling statistics could be misleading in a county too wild to be thoroughly patrolled.

"Maybe the (immigrants) are out there dead," he said. "Nobody knows. Maybe we just didn't find them."

While Cuellar and his officers have found the bodies of dehydrated, dead immigrants a mere yard or two from the highway, they also have found vulture-picked skeletons tucked into thickets that are not negotiable by four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Some of the dying immigrants are lucky. A ranch hand spots them and calls Cuellar. Or they're discovered by Border Patrol agents.

Others perish. While some Border Patrol agents say they have seen evidence that immigrants are using life jackets to protect themselves when swimming the Rio Grande, protective measures are not being taken in the outback, they say.

"We haven't noticed any different patterns in their method of travel," said Nicolas Prado Jr., Border Patrol supervisor at the Sarita checkpoint. "So we carry bottles of water in all our vehicles ... and sent six agents to get certified as EMTs."

Cuellar and Border Patrol officials said they have seen a consistent pattern of immigrants, who carry little water with them, stopping to drink or refill their bottles from contaminated ponds and troughs.

They quickly get sick, develop diarrhea and vomit until they dehydrate, becoming too weak to continue.

Some ranchers in the county of 422 people, such as the Tijerina family at the Santa Rosa Ranch, have posted numerous signs with maps on the edges of their property:

"Si esta enfermo, camina para el rancho (If you're sick, walk to the ranch house)."

While public service announcements detailing the dangers of crossing the outback are broadcast in Mexico, Cuellar said he wished the Mexican government would distribute something as simple as water purification tablets.

The sheriff estimated he and his deputies have rescued 40 to 50 people since January.

The rescues often are prompted by calls from undocumented immigrants who successfully make it into the nation's interior. They will alert Cuellar with rough directions to an abandoned friend or family member in the stark desert.

But the vigilant officials can't always outrun death. Cuellar recounts the tale of a young woman whose even younger sister died in her arms.

After being abandoned by a smuggler, the woman cradled her dead sister through the night. The next day, though on the brink of dehydration, she dug a 4-foot-deep grave in a sand dune and placed a crudely fashioned mesquite cross at its head.

She stumbled out to the highway to get help.

Once recovered, the young woman had the help of Cuellar in locating her sister's body.

The families of many undocumented immigrants never learn what's become of their loved ones. About 40 percent of those who die crossing the border never are identified, Border Patrol officials said.

Thirty or so of the unknown rest in a pauper's graveyard on land donated by a Kenedy County rancher and maintained by Cuellar, with assistance from deputies and ranchers.

The sunflower-dotted graves in this isolated place bear small metal tags inscribed with "unknown female" or "skeletal remains" and the date of recovery.

Periodically, Cuellar's investigative skills in conjunction with help from the Mexican Consulate turn up the identity and family of one of the buried immigrants. Then the body is exhumed and returned.

Death is an acknowledged risk.

Ten undocumented immigrants in Brownsville, relaxing before making the perilous journey north, said there is little either the U.S. or Mexican government could do to stop their migrations or make their passage safer.

"We all come over here for the same thing: jobs," Alvaro Escamilla Chavez of Veracruz said. "There's so much poverty in our country that we'll risk everything, even our lives, by coming over here illegally."

Such a fierce determination to seek a better future isn't easily quelled by law enforcement or governments, Cuellar said.

He will retire in January, after eight years as Kenedy County sheriff. Luckily for undocumented immigrants in peril, he is as stubborn as they are.

Despite poor health, he said his plans are to work private security on the local ranches, where he will continue to help with the immigrants when he can.

"This takes a special effort," he said. "You have to have a feeling to do it, and it's hard to explain that. I don't think everyone has it in them."

agregor@express-news.net

Caption: A small tin plaque is placed Tuesday on the grave of an unidentified immigrant in Sarita. The sand dunes near Sarita, encountered by many of the immigrants as they travel north, sometimes become their final destination as many fall victim to dehydration. Kenedy County Sheriff Rafael Cuellar looks Tuesday for fresh tracks from immigrants on a ranch near