

Lost in Marfa

Illegal immigration into the US is not just a recent phenomenon, penetration of the American border by Mexicans seeking work has been occurring for generations. In fact, one of the rights of passage for young Mexican men since the 1800s has been the experience of traveling north across the border into the U.S. to work on farms and ranches. They send money home to their families for several years before getting married and talk about their great adventure.

When my family lived in Marfa, Texas about 65 miles north of the Rio Grande River near Big Bend National Park, we heard stories of *wetbacks* traveling through the countryside on their way to New Mexico and Colorado. The term wetback is derived from illegally swimming the Rio Grande to enter the U.S.

My mother was especially susceptible to stories of illegal aliens kidnapping children and mistreating them or taking them back to Mexico with them. She frequently warned us to be on the lookout for suspicious looking men when we played outdoors away from the house.

Her worst fears came home to roost when she dropped my younger sister, Billie, and me off at the Palace Movie Theater in Marfa one Saturday to see the afternoon matinee. She told us she would pick us up after the show and not to leave the area. I thought she meant for us to meet her in the park on the road to our home, but apparently, she had intended for us to meet her in front of the theater. Billie and I waited for about an hour in the park, but she didn't arrive.

Finally, after what seemed like many hours, a policeman pulled up at the edge of the park, opened his window, and asked if we were the Vardiman children. When I said yes, he asked us to get in and he would drive us to meet our mother. She was obviously greatly relieved we were okay, but when we got into our car, she yelled at us all the way home for disobeying her instructions. She said we had been told to wait at the theater, had intentionally disobeyed her orders, and walked around town. I was unable to get a word in to explain that I thought she had told us to meet her at the park. When we arrived home, we were both spanked and sent to bed without dinner.

For years afterward when this topic came up, my mother would never listen to our explanation. She had been so traumatized by the thought that we had been kidnapped by *wetbacks* that she had become hysterical. She believed we had deliberately disobeyed and there was no other explanation. She felt it was a miracle we were still alive.