

IMMIGRANTS FILL PAUPER'S CEMETERY IN CALIFORNIA TOWN

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Body

The two men were buried May 17 in a dirt lot at the edge of the Southern **California** desert.

A long path and tall bushes set their graves apart from the ornate headstones at the local **cemetary**.

No relatives were present as the men were buried in less than 15 minutes.

No one knows who they were.

Authorities believe they were illegal **immigrants** from Mexico, two more among the hundreds who die each year while trying to cross into the United States.

"I'm sure their families are waiting for them to return home, and here they are today being buried," said Bibi Jaime, an apprentice funeral director who read a brief prayer.

Unidentified **immigrants** are **filling** the Holtville **pauper's cemetery**, which opened in 1995, two months after a U.S. border crackdown began in San Diego that pushed migrants eastward to the deserts of Southern **California** and Arizona.

Since then, Imperial County has buried 122 unidentified **immigrants**, said Dennis Jones, superintendent of the **cemetary** district that manages the one-acre site in Holtville, a farm **town** 120 miles east of San Diego.

Jaime, an **immigrant** from Mexico, has presided over several dozen John Doe funerals in the past three years. He expects to see more as **immigrants** continue to risk desert crossings.

"I wish we could do something to stop them coming across the way they do," he said. "I wish they could see what goes on out here."

The bodies of **immigrants** known to be from a certain country are generally returned there, often with that nation paying some of the cost. But many don't carry identification or it is lost or stolen during their journey.

Of the 491 **immigrants** who died entering the United States last year through Mexico, 114 were classified as unidentified, according to a Mexican government report.

Immigrant deaths happen regularly in the Imperial Valley, a sparsely populated region of deserts and mountains that supports an agricultural economy via a network of canals that carries Colorado River water to the area.

The El Centro division of the Border Patrol - which includes the Imperial Valley - recorded 77 deaths last year, higher than any other sector patrolled by the agency for the second year in a row.

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Most are caused by exposure or from drowning in the All-American Canal, a fast-moving waterway that parallels the border for 82 miles. Last year, 26 drowned; the 11 that have died there so far this year included the two men buried May 17.

As summer approaches, deaths are expected to increase as immigrants risk drowning in the seemingly calm waters.

Notes

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