

Alpine Journal;
Cultural Frictions of a Border Town

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Body

For nearly a year, employees of the grocery store in this quiet town near the Mexican border kept a yellow ledger titled Mexican Incident Book, which chronicled their complaints about the migrant workers who camp across the road.

"Record all Drunks, Shoplifters, Customer Complaints, Stabbings (Ha, Ha)," read the instructions on the book's cover.

In its log of daily irritations and minor incidents ("He laughed as he left the store," it recorded about one suspected shoplifter) the ledger is a portrayal of the frictions that characterize many San Diego County communities, where a comfortable middle class brushes against the poverty that is spilling north across the border.

Throughout the county, and elsewhere in California, homeless Hispanic day laborers and migrant workers play an important role in the local economy but have become the target of growing anger as their numbers increase and their encampments become more visible.

"I realize these are people who are hungry and who come across the border to find work," said William Logan, who owns the Alpine shopping center that includes the grocery store, as well as the land where the immigrants make their camp.

"But it would help if they were more respectful of our property," he said. "It gets filthy and it looks like Tijuana."

Over the years, cultural frictions throughout the county have flared into violence that has included beatings, shootings and, in at least one instance, hunting down migrant workers for sport.

On the night of Oct. 1, this hillside town of 12,000 residents -- which has become, for reasons no one seems to understand, a regional focal point for the hiring of Hispanic day laborers -- was the scene of a particularly gruesome incident. Half a dozen white men swinging baseball bats charged into the workers' camp and severely beat three migrants, all of them legal residents of the United States.

"They said we raped a woman," said Oscar Alfonso Mendoza, 33 years old, who came to the United States 14 years ago to escape violence in his native Guatemala. "I said it wasn't true, but they didn't believe us. I was trying to protect my head, and then I managed to run away."

The baseball bats shattered his left arm and caused cuts requiring 55 stitches on his arm and 18 on his head, he said as he rested at the home of a relative in nearby National City. He also said he owed a hospital \$19,400 for five days of treatment.

Mr. Mendoza's friend Leobardo Zarco, also 33, who came here from Mexico 16 years ago, fared worse. He slipped as he tried to run up the side of the gully, and he remembers losing consciousness to the thudding sound of the baseball bats.

His head, arms, legs and body were battered, he has lost the hearing in his left ear, his left knee was splintered and he can walk now only with the aid of crutches.

Like many of the other subsistence workers who offend some residents as they wait for work on street corners, Mr. Zarco has lived his life from day to day and has no savings. He has been taken in for now by a well-to-do widower in San Diego who read a newspaper account of his mistreatment.

The incident has embarrassed the residents of Alpine. The yellow log book has been removed from the grocery store by the manager, and developments in the town's most celebrated Mexican incident are now chronicled in local newspapers.

Sheriff's deputies have charged five men with assault, battery and commission of a hate crime.

Officials decided not to pursue the rape accusation after they found inconsistencies in the woman's account and because of evidence that she may have had consensual sex with one or more of the laborers.

One of the men charged in the beating is the woman's 35-year-old husband. He has twice been convicted of abusing his wife.

The husband has denied any connection with the beatings of the laborers, but he was quoted by local newspapers as saying: "Good for them, whoever it was. Maybe they'll get rid of the Mexicans down there."

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