

## The Risk of the Road



**F**or the past year and a half, Joe and I have been following the three surviving siblings of the Chávez family—brothers Florentino and Fernando and their wives and kids, sister Rosa and her husband and daughter—as they've crossed the border north and south several times since the accident, and I've frequently visited the matriarch and widows back in Cherán.

**T**he amazing thing is precisely that the Chávez siblings continue to move back and forth despite the brothers' deaths. Florentino and Fernando can do so with ease—they have migrant worker permits and sometimes even hop on a Mexicana Airlines flight that takes them from Guadalajara to San Francisco; from there it's only an hour and a half by bus ride to the picking fields of Watsonville. But Rosa, who was working at a greenhouse nursery in St. Louis, Missouri when the accident occurred and returned home immediately to bury her brothers, has crossed illegally since the accident.



**W**hat does this say about Rosa? That she is fearless? Or that she's a mother who should be brought into court on child endangerment charges? (After all, she took her two year-old daughter on the harrowing, 2,000 mile overland journey, for almost half that distance travelling in an overloaded van with balding tires along freezing roads often patrolled by the BP.)

Is she an Indian with a vision? A New American pioneer? A woman so desperate she'll do anything for a chance at the American Dream?



**A**fter several trips to Cherán, I gained the family's trust and began getting to know other migrant families. This last Spring I undertook a cross-country trip Stateside and visited several towns—Watsonville, California; Nogales, Arizona; Dallas, Texas; Warren, Arkansas; Benson, North Carolina; Norwalk, Wisconsin; where natives of Cherán live and work before returning home in the winter. In each a different story, a different point on the migrant cultural and economic map, a different impact on an American city or town, and, of course, more change back home in Cherán.

So what's this story about? Certainly about death—about the risks of the road taken by the migrants. And it's not just a risk of physical death. Migration might mean the "death" of particular family when a father leaves to try his luck in the north and then shacks up with a woman in the U.S. and never returns. Some people see cultural death resulting from an Indian culture coming into contact with MacDonal'd's, Michael Jordan, and Protestantism.



But most of the migrants I know from Cherán feel the opposite: that they are fleeing economic and cultural death at home and are finding life on the road. The people of Cherán, after their stints in the States, have become quite enamored of postmodern media. They want their MTV. In Cherán, there are hundreds of satellite dishes crowning the homes. At Christmas, the Indians dress up the dishes like Christmas trees. It is quite a sight to approach Cherán at night in the winter and see the great bowls blinking red and blue and yellow and green, a sight that can only be seen from above, as if it were a message to the Indian gods: we've arrived, we are no longer chained to history, we are riding it.



Most of the images in this initial exhibit are of migrants from the town of Cherán, Michoacán. I went to Cherán initially to meet the Chávez-Muñoz family, which first came to my attention when I read a story in the papers last year about a horrific accident near the town of Temecula (northeast of San Diego) in which three Chávez brothers were killed as they attempted to cross illegally into United States.

The coyote that was driving the GMC truck carrying Benjamín, Jaime and Salvador Chávez-Muñoz, along with 22 others crammed inside the camper shell, took secondary roads north from Tijuana to avoid the major Border Patrol checkpoint on I-5 just south of San Clemente, but BP trucks also regularly comb the Temecula hills. A border patrol truck spotted the GMC about 45 minutes before dawn, clearly overloaded, its fenders practically scraping the tires. From this point on, there are differing versions as to what happened. The BP maintains that their officers did not conduct a high-speed pursuit, but rather followed the vehicle at a discreet distance and are thus not responsible for the tragic outcome. Lawyers representing the victims say that the BP wrecklessly and needlessly endangered the lives of the migrants by engaging in a high-speed pursuit.



However the pursuit was conducted, it ended at Avenida del Oro and Calle Capistrano, streets baptized with Mexican names by gringo migrants who came from the Midwest to spend their final years in the California sun. The coyote's truck, travelling west and downhill along Avenida del Oro, a narrow two-lane with long but dangerous curves, at speeds almost certainly above 60 miles an hour, failed to negotiate the bend at Calle Capistrano, its right front tire striking the curb above a drainage ditch. The truck flipped over into the drainage ditch, most of the bodies of those inside the camper spilling out as the shell cracked open. Benjamin, Jaime and Salvador were crushed under the chasis of the truck.

They had been making their way to Watsonville, California, to their usual stint of seasonal work picking strawberries in the fertile hills east of Santa Cruz. The accident made headlines in the U.S. as well as Mexico for the enormity of the tragedy (in addition to the Chavez brothers, six others were killed, and 19 were injured, many critically) and because just a few days before another incident involving Wetbacks had made headlines too—a Rodney King-like videotape that aired on the evening news showed Riverside Sheriff's deputies beating undocumented immigrants who were unarmed and offering no visible resistance on a Southern California freeway at rush-hour.



No one in Cherán doubts the Border Patrol killed—perhaps even with intent—the Chávez brothers. Their funeral was a majestic affair, every single resident there, from the Jehova's Witness doctor to the toothless alcoholic lady who claims to be 103 years old to the Chicano-style gangster kids who tag up the town with spraycans to the nouveau riche migrants who return from the U.S. with thick gold chains dangling from their necks, looking more like Dominican baseball players than Wetbacks who've worked 15 years picking fruit from California to Florida. For the Chávez brothers were martyrs in a cause: to have the freedom to move. To get the hell out of Cherán—whose local timber-based economy is in tatters—and find new horizons. Mexican Joads.



To move, to make some money, to buy some gold chains, or a 1984 Plymouth with 145,000 miles on the odometer but a nice interior, or an Osterizer for mom, or some snazzy snakeskin boots, or hell, just come back home with a wad of greenbacks in your billfold, enough to peel off a few Jacks and pin them on the statue of Saint Francis, the town's patron saint, during Cherán's fiesta and buy a dozen bottles of Bacardi Rum, enough to get your entire block drunk for at least one night. And then, after a winter's rest, return to California... to Arkansas... to Wisconsin... to North Carolina... to Pennsylvania... to again come back to Cherán—they always come back—a Wetback Hero.

**N**oticing the tremendous amount of cars in Cherán, with their license plates from over half the states in the American Union, I thought that this was perhaps a story that would lead to me to discuss much more than than just the tragedy at Temecula.