

# IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

## VIGIL ON THE BORDER

By Ian Polumbaum

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Richford, Vermont. The view from the patrol car showed a ridge to the left where Quebec began, a barn and silo to the right, snow falling all around and no one in sight.

It was a far cry from the Mexican border, where Josefa Puentes grew up and three years ago joined the U.S. Border Patrol, trying to stem a flood of illegal immigrants across the desert.

"To me this is a different country," said Puentes, who was transferred to the patrol's Richford office four months ago. "This I've only seen on Christmas cards."

The tranquil surroundings fit a workday less frenetic than in Nogales, Arizona. There, the job was a constant cat-and-mouse game with people who waited for opportunities to cut holes in the border fence and slip through. Some would taunt Puentes from the Mexican side, then make a run for it as soon as she moved on.

One day at Nogales, Puentes said, she was involved in picking up more than 100 would-be immigrants and carting them back to Mexico, while "more than three times that number" no doubt got through.

In Vermont, there is no fence - just a line of electronic motion sensors in the woods - and Puentes considers it a busy day when she stops more than a handful of border crossers. Most of those, she said, drive past the customs stations because "they say, 'I didn't see it,' or 'I forgot,' or 'I didn't know there was inspection.'"

At least once on a typical day, however, she encounters someone who appears to have sneaked into the United States, often after a local

resident calls to report a suspicious person outside. These people are held for deportation proceedings and may be prosecuted in federal court if their case involves false documents or statements, unlike on the southern U.S. border where they generally are dumped back in Mexico and may try to cross again within minutes.

Explained George Terwilliger III, U.S. attorney for Vermont: "You don't have Canadians beating feet to try to get into the United States on a regular basis the way you have with Mexicans, where it's mainly for economic reasons. And secondly, it's just a question of sheer numbers."

Many who enter illegally from Quebec are Latin Americans. Even though all Border Patrol agents study Spanish during training, Puentes - who was born in the Rio Grande town of Eagle Rock, Texas, but grew up speaking the language of her Mexican great-grandparents - is Vermont's only agent fluent in Spanish.

She sometimes is called from afar to question immigrants, as happened Dec. 21 when she drove to I-89 in Middlesex to confront a Colombian and two Ecuadorians in a car stopped by state police. The incident led to alien-harboring charges against the Colombian.

Driving slowly through a recent blizzard, Puentes said she feels accepted by both residents and a law enforcement community dominated by white men. But there have been awkward moments, like the time she went alone to a police station to take charge of three foreigners and was told she needed help.

"I told them I have carried people in a Suburban (van) by myself, 12 or 15," she said. "I thought it was kind of funny."

The northern border's more languid pace has given Puentes, 37, time to enjoy the back roads of Richford, Berkshire, Franklin and her new hometown of Enosburg, where

her 16-year-old daughter attends high school. This month she planned to try cross-country skiing for the first time as part of her extended honeymoon with winter.

"I was dreading January and February, but I think I'm adjusting pretty good," she said. "My very first snow, I used to just park in some areas and admire. I couldn't believe!"

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## HALT! BORDER PATROL'S TOUGH LATINAS GOTCHA COVERED!!

By George A. Miller

Andrea Flores hears the crunch of footsteps coming up the trail and stiffens. Alone in the vast silence of the Arizona desert night, the petite 34-year-old waits in the moonshadow of a palo verde, a Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle cradled in her arms, a .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson strapped to her hip. She has lost radio contact with her partner but is confident she can handle the situation by herself.

As the footsteps draw nearer, she counts the shapes of seven men, each with a plastic garbage bag slung over his shoulder. When they are within easy pistol range, she shines a light on them and identifies herself. As if on command, the men drop their loads and scatter hurriedly. The discarded bags Flores recovers contain 245 pounds of carefully packaged marijuana.

Miles away, on a windy hill overlooking Nogales, Marina Luz Garza Shelton stops a band of men who have crawled through a hole in the chain link fence that separates Mexico and the United States. She corrals them into a tight knot and radios for a van to pick them up.

Who are these women and what are they doing alone at night in Arizona's Sonora Desert - out there

with the dust, the snakes and the scruffy strangers? Flores and Shelton are U.S. Border Patrol agents on "stillwatch," waiting for narcotics smugglers and illegal aliens to cross the border.

The Border Patrol, an arm of the Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization Service, has 4,195 agents, about a third of whom are Hispanic. Among the 146 women agents, 64 are Latinas.

"Today, more than 40 percent of the new agents are Hispanic," says Ronald J. Dowdy, chief of the Tucson sector, which controls eight Border Patrol stations in Arizona. Statistics indicate that Hispanic women are more inclined to join the Patrol than Anglo women. Among non-Hispanics, women make up only 2.9 percent of the agents; among Hispanics, they constitute 4.5 percent.

These Latinas go to work slinging a 2-pound revolver, spend nights in the desert—often alone but sometimes with a male agent—and frequently earn more money than their husbands or boyfriends. Moreover, their job is rife with danger. At least 150 agents were attacked during the past year, 64 have been killed since the Patrol was organized in 1924.

"It has become a lot more dangerous in the past two years," Flores admits. "Before, the illegals were just campesinos coming to harvest crops. Now, we're getting a criminal element."

Worse, Arizona has become a focal point for drug traffic in the past year. During the 12 months after October 1987, Border Patrol agents in the Tucson sector, which covers 240 miles of international frontier, seized 86 tons of marijuana and 1.35 tons of cocaine. Aggregate street value of the haul: \$214 million.

The image of armed Latinas patrolling the toughest stretch of the U.S./Mexico border rattles long-standing concepts. But, as Hispanic women shed some of their traditional roles, they are assuming new, unexpected ones. Few roles are more

dramatic than being an agent in the Border Patrol, one of the country's more macho law enforcement agencies.

Flores and Shelton are assigned to the 90-agent Nogales station, one of 66 along the 1,945-mile border with Mexico. Twenty-four of the agents are Hispanic, as are six of the seven women agents. Flores and Shelton have much in common. Both are mothers, attended college, married twice, like to work outdoors and thrive on the challenge, the danger and the freedom of being field agents. While most women do not last more than three years in the Patrol, these two are in their fifth year, with no plans to quit.

Flores, whose 5-foot-1-inch, 109-pound physique belies her toughness, joined the Patrol in October 1984. Before that, she was chief dispatcher for the Sheriff's Department in Cotulla, Texas. The daughter of a Laredo, Texas, railroad foreman, she studied data processing and computer science at two colleges before dropping out to get married.

She went to work for the sheriff after her first marriage broke up. Then she read a book about the Border Patrol. "I thought the job would be exciting," Flores recalls. "It seemed to offer a challenge and the salary wasn't bad." (Salaries range from \$15,738 for recruits to \$37,510 for top agents.) Following a 20-week training course at the Patrol's academy in Georgia, she was assigned to Nogales.

At the academy, recruits are required to learn Spanish and must pass a stiff language test before graduating. They also study immigration and naturalization law, criminal law, rules of evidence and court procedures. They are taught the use of firearms, self-defense, fingerprinting, first aid and tracking.

A week before Flores left for the academy, she remarried—this time to a deputy sheriff. "When I was sent to Nogales, he left his job, came here with me and went to work as a jailer," she says. "He was very

good about helping around the house and taking care of my little girl. But it bothered him that I was the one wearing the badge and carrying the gun, and that my paycheck was bigger than his. So, after a while he went back to Texas."

Now, she is engaged to a building contractor who is "very proud of me and very supportive." They plan to marry in the spring.

To hear Flores describe her duties as an agent, there's nothing to the drudgery and danger. "I love the outdoors," she says. "There's nothing more exciting than stillwatch surveillance at night out in the bush. You lie there, listening to the sounds of the desert, the owls hooting, the crickets chirping and an occasional coyote yapping. I really enjoy that."

She also likes hunting, fishing and horseback riding; when she has time she reads Greek and Roman mythology and listens to country and classic music. But free time is in short supply, for agents work long hours—50 to 55 a week, often—times—and earn between 25 and 35 percent above their basic salaries in overtime and differential pay.

Both Flores and Shelton seem to have resolved personal conflicts associated with pursuing and arresting border trespassers, most of whom are Hispanic.

Illegals are surprised to see a woman agent, especially a Latina. "They are startled when I speak to them in unaccented Spanish," says Shelton, who was born in Mexico and came to the U.S. as a child. "We may feel sorry for them sometimes, but these are people who broke our laws and that's all there is to it."

Flores echoes similar sentiments. "They look at me and say, 'You're a Mexican. Give me a break.' And I reply, 'No, I'm an American.' My parents and grandparents were born here. I suppose some of my ancestors came from Mexico, but that doesn't matter. As far as drug smugglers are concerned, I treat them as I would any other criminal."

As law enforcement officers, these women cannot afford to be soft, says Melvin Robbins, a Patrol supervisor in Nogales until last summer. They have to be tough, but they also are fair."

Shelton was born in Nogales, Mexico, in 1949. She went to live in Arizona with her mother at age 6 when her parents divorced. Her father was an officer in the Mexican Immigration Service. That may have sparked her ambition to do something about border control.

Shelton, who stands 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 120 pounds, entered the Patrol in May 1984, after her first marriage went on the rocks. She is now married to William G. Shelton, a Border Patrol agent also assigned to Nogales. By working different shifts, they are able to take care of their four children them-

selves. She has three by her first marriage; he has one.

The Sheltons live in a house outside Nogales with four cats, three dogs, a canary, two cockatiels, two lovebirds, three gerbils and an iguana. In her free time, Marina rides horses and her four-cylinder Honda 550 - and reads suspense novels.

The home menagerie perhaps reflects her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian. Fate had other plans. She ended up studying art at Pima College in Tucson, working at a variety of jobs and getting married.

Flores has evidently found a home in the Border Patrol. When she was assigned to Nogales, she was only the third woman to serve at the post. "I strive to be a good agent and I think I have achieved that goal," she says. Her supervisors

apparently agree, because they have promoted her three times in less than four years.

Male agents have not always taken kindly to the presence of women in their ranks. Nevertheless, scores of serious, hard-working agents, such as Flores and Shelton, appear to be turning around that attitude.

John Poole, agent in charge of the Nogales station, says his Latina [women] agents are "as good as any of the male agents. They are doing as much as the men."

Perhaps the ultimate seal of approval comes from a 13-year veteran: "When it comes to a crunch, I'd rather have either of these women with me than many male agents I know."