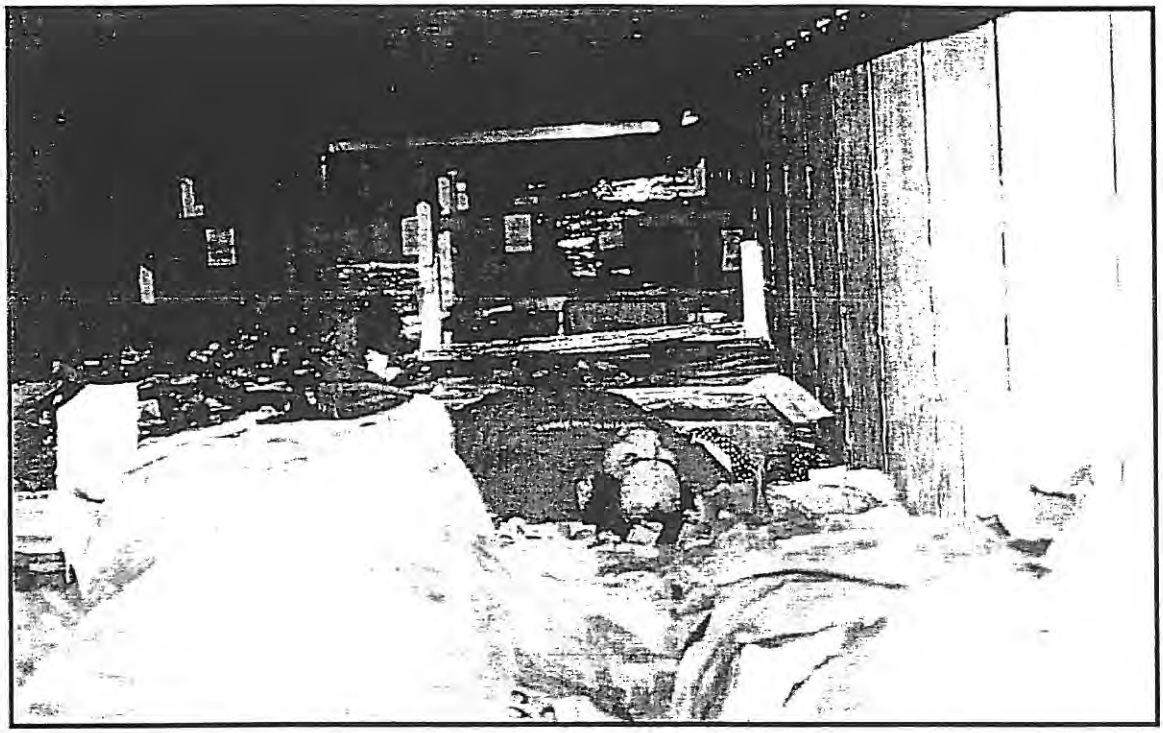
A deadly tractor-trailer run from El Paso, Texas, to Dallas reveals the desperation and greed fueling the booming business of smuggling human beings – and the police work involved in trying to stop the increasingly sophisticated smuggling rings.



# Doors to Death

A SERIAL NARRATIVE IN THREE PARTS

By Pauline Arrillaga

AP NATIONAL WRITER

PART ONE

# 'There's no air'

## *For migrants, truck trip toward salvation turns to terror*

By Pauline Arrillaga • AP National Writer

CHAPARRAL, N.M. – The 18-wheeler pulled off the desert highway and rumbled down a pockmarked clay road, its headlights raking a desolate hamlet of doublewides.

The big rig, making an unscheduled detour at the start of a midnight run from El Paso to Dallas, slowed as it approached a dingy mobile home. Then the headlights snapped off.

Moving as stealthily as a tractor-trailer can, it turned through a gap in a chain-link fence, backed up and stopped at the mobile home's back door.

Jason Sprague climbed down from the cab into the balmy night air and swung open the trailer's heavy cargo doors. Then he headed inside for his money.

That's when he saw them. Under a faint ceiling lamp, dozens of ragged people waited silently in two lines stretching between the kitchen and the living room, men on one side, women and little ones on the other. Some clasped small bags; others had only the clothes on their backs.

Avoiding their glances, Sprague hurried past and stepped into the bathroom where a woman was waiting. She handed him a bulging envelope. Inside was $3,000 in cash.

"You'll get the rest when it's completed," she told him.

Sprague walked back to the cab and settled into the driver's seat as the woman and her partner loaded the human cargo.

He had been told there would be 32 of them – illegal immigrants who had made it across the Rio Grande to this drop house 20 miles outside El Paso. Now they had to be smuggled past an internal Border Patrol highway checkpoint and dropped off at a truck stop in Dallas.

As they clambered into the

freight compartment, Sprague felt the rig rock. He wasn't counting, but the rocking went on and on. How many people were they stuffing back there?

"Uno por uno," the loaders hissed. One by one. Walk fast.

In the line, inching forward, Luciano Alcocer smiled to himself, grateful to be moving again.

Eight days earlier, the carpenter from Mexico City had kissed his wife and daughters goodbye. Don't cry, he told his children as their eyes filled; this could be our salvation.

The companies that once bought the tables and desks Alcocer built had shut down. But there was work to be had in the United States. A relative already in the States made the arrangements, sending about $1,500 to the smugglers. He gave Alcocer a number to call once he reached the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez.

Alcocer followed the instructions. He met a guide who led him through chest-high water across the Rio Grande. In El Paso, a car picked him up.

For days, he'd hidden inside the crowded mobile home, where two members of the smuggling ring gouged migrants $5 for three packages of ramen noodles, $10 for a six-pack of beer.

Now, half-past midnight on July 27, 2002, the slight, 5-foot-3, 41-year-old, carrying only his hopes and a couple of T-shirts, climbed a stepladder propped against the truck's open freight compartment.

Two of the others, Pioquinto Cabrera and Guillermo Gallo, grabbed his arms and hauled him inside. It was dark in there, and cramped.

The 53-foot-long aluminum-walled trailer, lined with plywood, was packed almost to the roof with cardboard boxes of medical supplies manufactured in Mexico and bound for Wisconsin.

Alcocer crawled three-quarters of the way in, settling atop a box on the driver's side. Stretching his legs out in front of him, he reached up and touched the ceiling.

Others silently climbed inside – about 40 people in all. Another seven or so, all women and children, piled into the sleeping compartment behind the cab.

Inside the dark trailer, Alcocer watched the shadowy outlines of the passengers filing in.

There was Jose Gaston Ramirez, a 59-year-old shoemaker from Cuernavaca, looking very American in a red Calvin Klein T-shirt. He was bound for Chicago to reunite with his daughter.

Edson Rojas, a tall, skinny 16-year-old from Mexico City eager to join his father in Kansas, climbed up and claimed a spot. Like several others, he'd paid extra to ride in the sleeping compartment but was herded into the back anyway.

A few complained. The smugglers told them to go back to Mexico if they didn't like it.

Cabrera and Gallo were the last to scramble onto the boxes. The 28-year-old Cabrera was traveling from Veracruz to Kentucky to work the cattle farms. Gallo, 32, was on

his way from Mexico City to New York for a restaurant job.

"Silencio!" the loaders ordered. Especially at the Border Patrol checkpoint, everyone must be silent.

With that, the heavy doors closed and everything went black.

Alcocer thought he heard a lock click. It was as if the doors were closing on an old life of despair. Later, he would invoke a different metaphor: Las puertas a la muerte.

The doors to death.

The engine roared to life and the truck began to roll.

It was the beginning of an American journey that thousands of illegal immigrants make. But this one would end almost a year and a half later – in a federal courtroom.

## Deadly midnight run

A truck ride smuggling Mexican immigrants from Chaparral, N.M., to Dallas ended in death.

SOURCE: ESRI AP

It was nearly 4 a.m. when Sprague picked up his co-driver, Troy Dock, in El Paso. Dock had made smuggling runs before, but this was Sprague's first, and he was jittery. With Dallas still at least 10 hours away, he wondered if they should call the whole thing off.

But there was money to be made – another $1,200 after the migrants were dropped at the truck stop.

Dock drove on; Sprague dozed.

Dock, 30, was short and stocky with the face of a choirboy. Sprague, 27, was built like the high school quarterback he once was, with a goatee and a tattoo of his name on his arm.

"Tweedledee and tweedledum," an acquaintance called them – a couple of bumbling good ol' boys. They'd just been hired as a driving team for Boyd Logistics Inc. of El Paso when Dock's contact in Ciudad Juarez, Pat Valdes, called to say he had a load that was ready to move.

Now, as they rolled down Interstate 10, Dock's cell phone kept ringing. It was Valdes, checking their progress, asking if they'd made it through the checkpoint yet.

Dock promised to touch base when they were safely through.

Ninety minutes east of El Paso, they drew near the Border Patrol checkpoint at Sierra Blanca, one of a network intended to intercept illegal immigrants and drugs moving north from the border.

In the blackness of the freight

Charlie Riedel • AP

**Edson Rojas stands in front of his home in Kansas City, Kan. Rojas nearly died in a sweltering semi-trailer after he was smuggled into the United States from Mexico.**

compartment, the illegals passed the time talking in hushed voices, always in Spanish. Alcocer listened politely as an Argentine barber boasted of plans to ply his trade in Los Angeles.

"Tengo sed," someone said. I'm thirsty. One of the men used the illuminated dial of his wristwatch to locate a water jug.

Sometime before sunrise, Alcocer felt the truck slow. The checkpoint, he figured. Everyone fell silent.

But a thought was nagging him: The smugglers had promised the trailer would be air-conditioned, but it was stuffy. Was any air getting in?

Outside, bright lights bathed the highway. Dock pulled the rig behind a line of trucks moving slowly past the checkpoint.

The checkpoint routine was like Russian roulette. Some trucks were stopped and searched, others waved through. Dock was pushing his luck; twice before he'd made it through with loads of illegals.

His stomach knotted. But even before he came to a complete stop, the agent waved him on by.

Dock let out a breath; Sprague dozed on.

A half-hour down the road, Dock pulled into a truck stop to get a drink. Using hand signals because he spoke little Spanish, he asked those in the sleeping compartment if they wanted anything. They declined. He didn't open the trailer to ask the others because he was

afraid someone might see them. Besides, Valdes' orders were to keep the doors shut.

The sun was coming up as Dock swung back on the interstate. It was still 7 1/2 hours to Dallas.

Inside the freight compartment, Alcocer licked a finger and held it up to see if he could feel any air moving. Nothing.

Slivers of morning light squeezed through the seals of the trailer doors. The temperature outside was rising, headed toward 95 degrees.

Rojas, the 16-year-old, stripped off his shirt. Alcocer did the same.

He grew very thirsty, but there was no water left in the jugs. They were urinals now.

"No hay aire," a woman said softly. There's no air.

The word spread quickly. No hay aire, other travelers murmured. No hay aire!

Suddenly a young man vomited.

Some of the migrants began moving toward the doors, praying that a little oxygen was leaking through.

Alcocer heard ripping. Others were pulling flaps from the packing boxes and using them to fan themselves. Alcocer snatched off a piece and waved it furiously.

The effort exhausted him.

Digging through the boxes, someone pulled out some plastic tubes and passed them forward. Those at the rear tugged away the gummy seals around the trailer doors in search of an airway, then forced one end of a tube through the crevice and tried to breathe through the other.

Nothing.

Gallo, the strapping man who had helped Alcocer aboard, began tearing at the plywood on the trailer walls, slicing his fingers. Alcocer tried to help, pounding the wood with his elbows. They managed to break off a few pieces, only to expose the trailer's aluminum walls.

How do we make a hole? someone said.

The barber, Alcocer thought. He must have scissors!

"No, my friend," the barber said. His kit was too expensive.

Suddenly, all eyes were on him in the dim light.

"Give them to me," Alcocer demanded, his voice harsh.

Gallo grabbed the scissors. He stabbed the aluminum walls again and again, gouging a couple of small holes before the scissors bent uselessly.

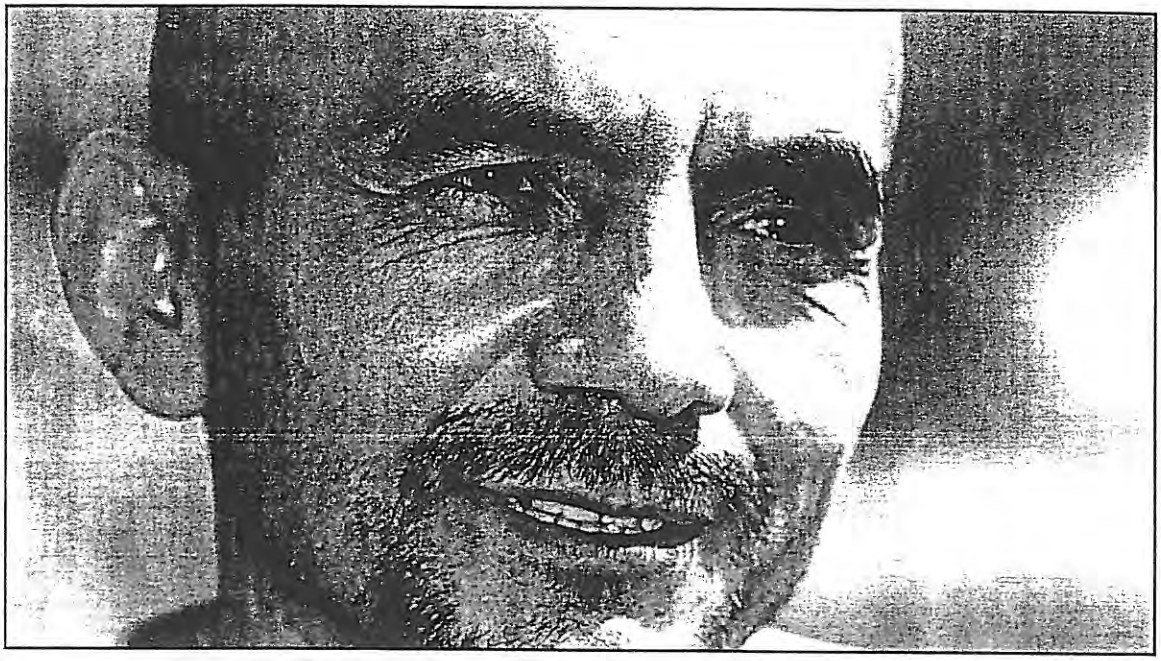
They tried everything. Nothing worked.

The temperature inside the freight compartment kept climbing. Later, police would estimate it reached 150 degrees.

"I'm thirsty," Alcocer cried out.

Someone passed him a jug. He knew what was in it, but what choice did he have? He drank.

Up in the cab, the roar of the engine drowned out the noise from the cargo hold. Sprague and Dock drove on, oblivious. Cruising through the blazing prairie outside Odessa, they popped a Garth Brooks recording into the tape player and switched on the cab's air



Rusty Burroughs • AP

**Luciano Alcocer, a Mexican who survived being smuggled into the United States thru Texas, smiles as he talks about this family back in Mexico, while Standing in his Creek Ridge neighborhood in Monroe, N.C.**

conditioner.

Back in the trailer, their passengers were swinging their arms wildly – pounding the walls, the doors, the ceiling. The sound was booming, but in Alcocer's oxygen-deprived state, it seemed oddly muffled.

They shouted: Open up! Open up!

Hyperventilating, a teenage girl crawled toward the doors and screamed, "Call 911! Call anybody!"

In the gloom, Alcocer watched Jose Gaston Ramirez lie down on the boxes. Back in the mobile home, he had snored when he slept, but he wasn't making a sound now.

Pioquinto Cabrera crawled by, clutching a jug of urine. Alcocer asked for another drink. No, Cabrera said. It's for one of the ladies.

Another traveler peeled off his shirt, put it in his mouth and tried to suck out the sweat.

Soon, the hallucinations started. A helicopter is flying overhead! someone shouted. The police are following! cried another. I have a gun; I'm going to shoot out the tires! another yelled. But none of it was so.

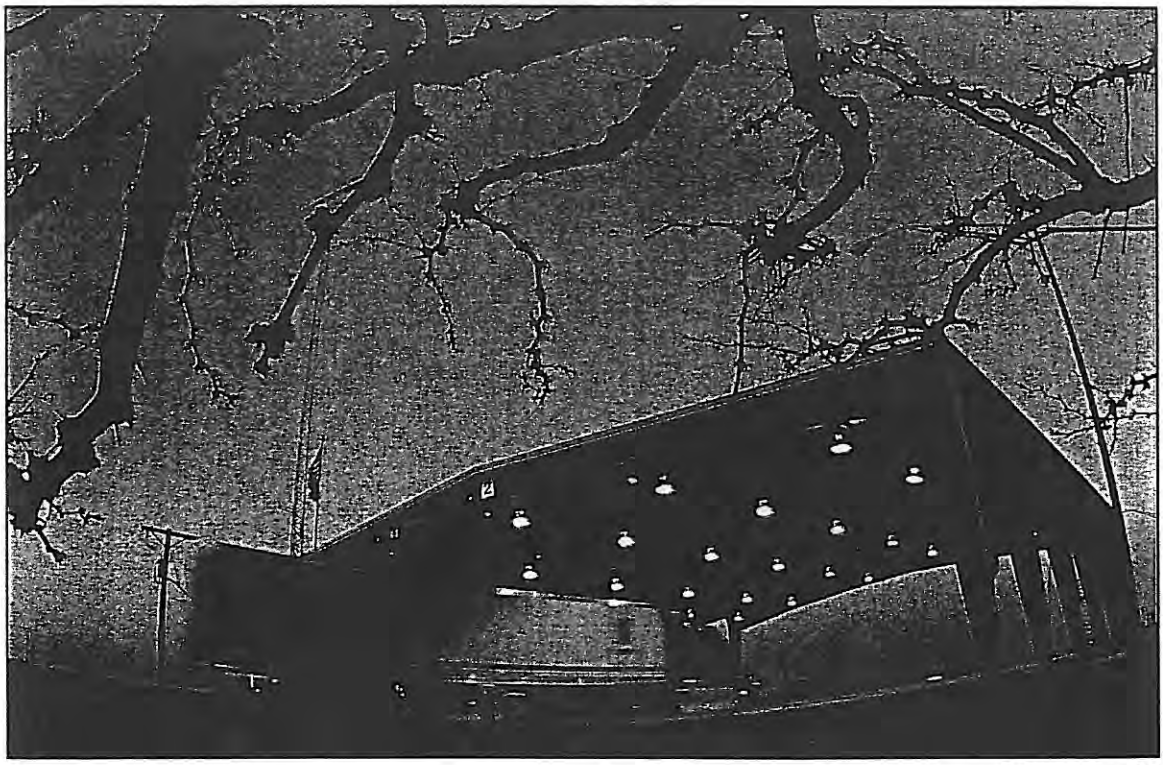
No quiero morir, someone whimpered. I don't want to die.

Alcocer whispered a prayer. "I'm in your hands, God. Take care of my family."

Then his head lolled back, and he closed his eyes.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The scenes inside the truck cab are based on jailhouse interviews with Troy Dock and Jason Sprague, on transcripts and videos of their police interrogations, and on court testimony of migrants who rode in the sleeping compartment. The description of the loading is from interviews with Sprague and migrant Luciano Alcocer, and on the testimony of other migrants. The movements of the truck come from the drivers and from the vehicle's Global Positioning System, obtained from court records. The scenes inside the trailer are from interviews with migrants including Alcocer and Guillermo Gallo, and from the testimony of 10 other migrants. The migrants' backgrounds come from interviews with them and investigators, and from medical records, death certificates and court testimony. The direct quotes appear as they are remembered by those who spoke or heard them.



.R. Hernandez • AP

**A tractor-trailer rig passes through the U.S. Customs inspection station at Sierra Blanca, east of El Paso, Texas. The checkpoint is one in a network intended to intercept illegal immigrants and drugs from moving north from the border with Mexico.**

PART TWO

# *Tracking the smuggling network behind a truck trailer that became a coffin*

By Pauline Arrillaga • AP National Writer

It was midafternoon by the time the big rig rolled into Love's truck stop off I-20 in Dallas. As soon as the drivers climbed out, they heard the sound of fists pounding on the inside of the trailer walls.

Jason Sprague lifted the latch. The cargo doors flew wide.

About 40 illegal immigrants – packed into the unventilated cargo compartment 12 hours earlier for the long, hot ride to this drop-off point – came tumbling out.

A woman, sobbing, hurled her fists at Sprague's co-driver, Troy Dock. Others, unable to move, slumped on the tarmac. Some staggered to a tap and filled their cupped hands with water.

Half conscious, Luciano Alcocer, a carpenter from Mexico City, first felt the air and then, somehow, he was out under the open sky. Guillermo Gallo, headed to New York for a restaurant job, fell face down on the asphalt, blood pooling from the impact.

Still inside the sweltering trailer, 16-year-old Edson Rojas was blinded by the burst of sunlight, then battered by his companions as they stampeded past him.

Get out, he told himself. Get out fast!

On hands and knees, he clawed toward the doors. The boxes shifted under him. A crevice opened, and he toppled into it. Now he could no longer even see the doors.

He screamed the only English word he could summon:

"Help!"

Outside, Sprague felt nauseated. He'd never seen anything like this. He turned and hurried for the bathroom. Dock, terrified, chased him down.

"We've got to go!"

Still in the trailer, Rojas pushed and shoved at the boxes, but his muscles were jelly.

Suddenly, the boy heard a slam, and the trailer was black again.

Someone had closed the doors!

Rojas peered over the boxes that entrapped him. There was no way out. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that he was not alone.

Jose Gaston Ramirez, still in his red Calvin Klein T-shirt, lay motionless. Pioquinto Cabrera,

AP Photo • Courtesy U.S. Attorney's Office

**An undocumented Mexican immigrant lies on boxes in the back of an 18-wheel truck near Dallas . He and other illegal immigrants were locked in the truck as they were smuggled into the United States.**

stripped to his briefs, was curled like a sleeping baby near the doors.

Dead, both dead, Rojas thought.

The trailer was a coffin now – and he was locked inside.

As Dock drove the 18-wheeler north, he panicked.

What if the truck stop had a surveillance camera? What if it recorded all those half-dead immigrants falling out of his freight compartment? What if the police had his license plate?

In the passenger seat, Sprague wondered about something else. Could there still be some illegals in the brutally hot trailer?

Dock knew of a truck stop in the little town of Anna, Texas.

"We can stop there," he said.

It was another 50 miles away.

As they drove on, the partners concocted a story.

When they finally pulled into the Drivers Travel Mart, Sprague popped open the cargo doors. He hoisted himself up. The first body was right by the doors. Among the boxes of medical equipment they

were hauling, he saw two more.

"Troy! There's still people in here," he called, then jumped down and slammed the doors shut.

Dialing their company, Boyd Logistics, Sprague recited their cover story: Somehow _ they couldn't imagine how it happened _ some "wetbacks" had gotten into the freight compartment. It wasn't their fault!

The company president called the police.

Dock and Sprague strode inside the truck stop to wait for them, and to get something cold to drink.

At his home on the outskirts of Dallas, David Fry, investigator for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, got an urgent call: A tractor-trailer smuggling case. Could be dead bodies.

Fry, 34, had followed his father into the U.S. Border Patrol before switching to INS, and was all too familiar with the ways migrants die crossing the border. Rarely were their smugglers caught; and when they were, the punishment, usually less than 10 years in prison, never seemed severe enough.

Fry raced toward the scene. This time, he would try to make sure that whoever did this would not get away so lightly.

Texas State Trooper Kam Pierce beat Fry to the Drivers Travel Mart. The trooper swung open one of the trailer's double doors. Immediately, the overpowering heat inside hit him. So did the stench, a rank mix of vomit, sweat and urine.

He climbed inside. To his left, a man stripped down to his underwear was curled in a corner. Pierce grabbed a leg and shook it. The joints were stiff.

Pioquinto Cabrera was dead.

The trooper heaved himself onto the boxes and spotted two more: A man in a red T-shirt. A skinny teenager.

Pierce crawled over to the man and felt in vain for a pulse. Jose Gaston Ramirez was gone.

The teenager was probably dead, too, Pierce figured. Then he thought he saw the kid's stomach move. He wriggled over and felt for a pulse.

Nothing.

The trooper put his ear to the kid's mouth. A wisp of breath brushed his skin.

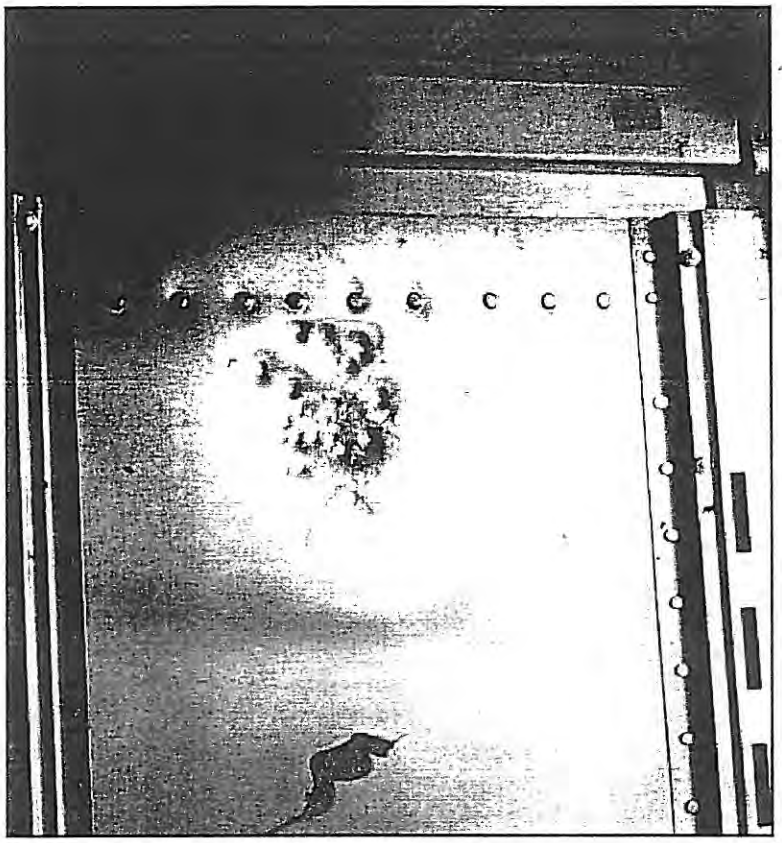
"Hey!" Pierce yelled. "We've got one that's alive!"

Pierce grabbed the boy by the shoulders and scooted backward on his belly, dragging him toward the door. Edson Rojas' eyes were frozen open. Pierce knew a death stare when he saw one.

"Don't give up, kid," he thought, a silent prayer to this boy in his arms.

With another trooper's help, Pierce lifted the boy out and laid him on the asphalt. As a police video camera recorded the scene, Pierce sloshed water onto the boy's burning skin.

Soon, the scene teemed with investigators. Not needed there,



**A group of dents in the sidewall of a tractor-trailer where illegal immigrants using scissors tried to gouge an air hole. The immigrants were smuggled from the Mexican border through Texas to Dallas in the rear of an unventillated truck in July 2002.**

AP Photo • Courtesy U.S. Attorney's Office

Fry headed for the Collin County sheriff's office, where Dock and Sprague had been taken for questioning.

County investigator Parrish Cundiff led Dock into an interrogation room barely big enough for a table and two chairs. Around the corner, Fry watched on a video monitor.

Dock was playing dumb. Maybe the illegals sneaked into the back when he and Sprague fell asleep in the cab at a truck stop in El Paso, he suggested.

"Let me explain something to you," Cundiff said in his deep Texas drawl. "You're a small-time guy. Who I'm after is the guy that sent you."

Dock twiddled his thumbs, scratched his chin, stuck to his story.

"The company was telling me they're looking at the shipper, saying the shipper might have done it," he said.

Cundiff tried again. Two were dead, maybe more.

"That's a lot," he said.

"One's a lot," Dock replied.

Unless he talked, gave up a name, Cundiff said, "any charges that may come out of this ... are Troy's and Jason's. OK?"

Finally, Dock caved.

"I just know one name," he said. "It's just a first name."

"What's that?"

"It's Pat."

Watching on the video monitor, Fry thought: "I know this guy."

Twice in the last two years, truckers caught hauling illegals said they were working for a smuggler named Pat _ Ruben Patrick Valdes. He was a major figure in the transporting of human cargo, a business that grows more sophisticated every year.

Not long ago, an illegal immigrant might lay out a couple of hundred dollars for a raft ride across the Rio Grande or a lift to Los Angeles.

In the 1990s, when U.S. agents began choking off border crossing points, immigrants turned to coyotes _ smugglers who knew other, often more dangerous, ways across. Between 1997 and '99, the number of intercepted illegals who had employed a smuggler increased 80 percent.

The fees smugglers charged rose. The danger also increased. Migrants drowned crawling through storm drains, died in the desert after being abandoned by their guides.

Independent coyotes were being displaced by smuggling networks with recruiters, stash houses, foot guides, drivers. The money was so good that drug traffickers got into the action, bringing a new level of savagery: kidnapping one another's loads, holding migrants hostage until their families pay up.

When the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect in 1994, cross-border truck traffic multiplied, opening a new way for smugglers to move people.

Using tractor-trailers became Pat Valdes' trademark.

At the Collin County sheriff's office, Sprague had also confessed. Now, he and Dock were trying to be helpful.

Dock offered to set Valdes up.

"I could track him down tonight," he said.

Dock dialed a number in Ciudad Juarez, the Mexican city where Valdes lived. Investigators listened in.

"Hey, Pat," Dock said. "I'm up here at the sheriff's office. ... They're asking me about all the people. ... We opened the door and a couple people just fell out and a couple people were dead."

"Died! That's crazy, man," Valdes said. "Well, I don't know anything about it. I didn't have nothing to do with it, you know what I mean?"

For 10 minutes they talked, the conversation going nowhere.

Finally, Valdes said, "Are they listening to you?" Then he hung up.

The investigators had a prime suspect now _ but he was beyond their reach in Mexico.

Cundiff's questioning was all but done. At one point he had snapped, telling Dock, "I don't want you to sit here and tell me ... you're

just an innocent victim. The innocent victims aren't here."

Two of the migrants were dead; Alcocer and several others who tumbled out of the trailer at Love's truck stop were being treated at Dallas hospitals.

And at North Central Medical Center in McKinney, Texas, doctors fed fluids intravenously to Rojas, the boy the trooper had pulled from the truck. They were fighting to save him from respiratory arrest, renal failure, severe dehydration and shock.

They didn't know if he would make it.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The scene at Love's truck stop is based on jailhouse interviews with Troy Dock and Jason Sprague, on videos of their police interrogations, and on interviews with and court testimony of migrants including Luciano Alcocer. The scene inside the truck cab is from interviews with and interrogations of the drivers. Details at the Drivers Travel Mart are from the drivers, from interviews with Texas State Trooper Kam Pierce and INS investigator David Fry, and from a state police video of the scene. Details of Sprague's call to Boyd Logistics come from the Sprague interview and interrogation, and from a deposition by company president Keith Boyd. Details of the Dock and Sprague interrogations and their call to Pat Valdes are from sheriff's department recordings. Background on the smuggling business comes from U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Robert Bonner, Joe Greene of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, seven other investigators and prosecutors, and from government reports and court testimony.

PART THREE

# *As evidence against him mounts, chief smuggler is betrayed by one of his own*

Unlike the people he transported, smuggler Pat Valdes never set foot inside the United States – although he sometimes sent flunkies over from Mexico to fetch him takeout from Red Lobster or the Olive Garden.

The son of a Texas lawyer, Valdes started out hustling drivers for another alien smuggler. But by the age of 28, with the help of his younger brother, Roman, he'd gone into business for himself.

His method: Enlist shuttle operators who ferry American truckers from El Paso across the border to Ciudad Juarez for a night of boozing in the red-light district. Pay them to steer the truckers to bars worked by his recruiters. Buy the truckers a few drinks, then ask if they'd like to make some easy money. Offer them $100 to $300 a head to haul illegals.

By the summer of 2002, Valdes was moving five loads a week, an average of 20 immigrants a load.

Now, in the aftermath of a smuggling run turned deadly, the Valdes brothers had gone into hiding.

A few weeks after that July 27, 2002, tractor-trailer trip, U.S. and Mexican authorities met at the Border Patrol office in El Paso. The subject: apprehending Pat and Roman Valdes – both American citizens – and returning them to the United States.

Negotiations had to be handled carefully. Informants warned that Pat Valdes had paid bribes before to prevent deportation. If tipped, he'd take off for good.

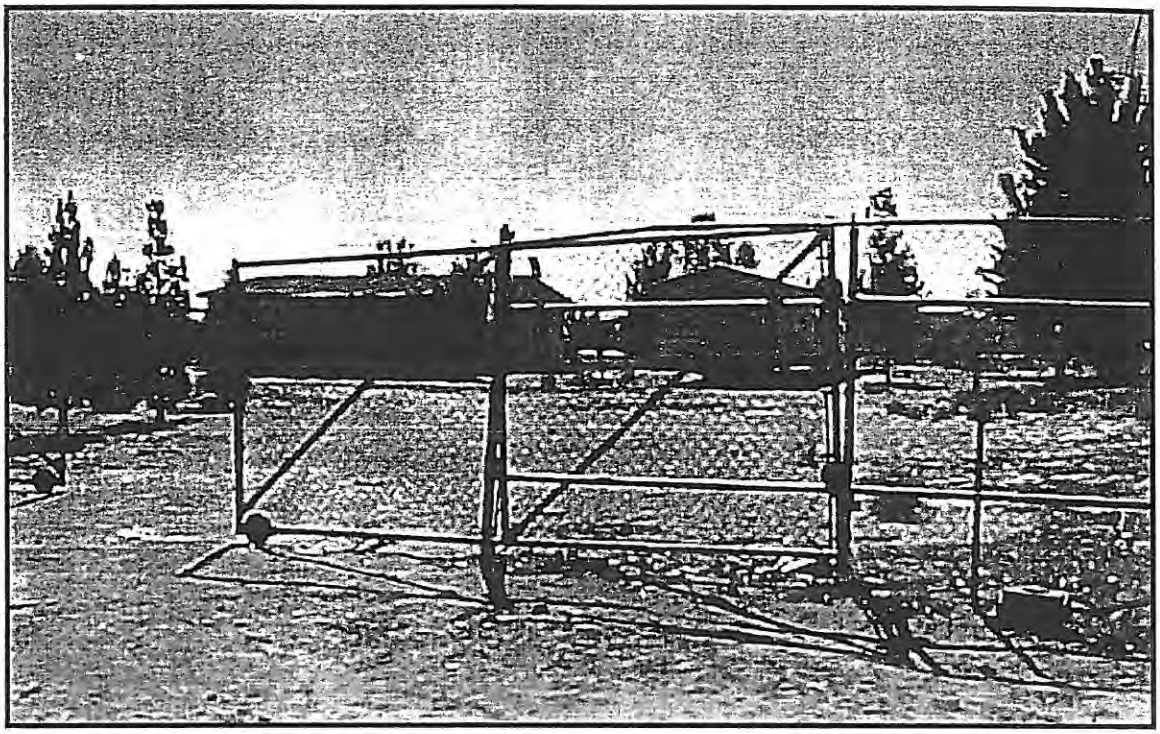
"We'll get them," a Mexican official promised, asking for a little time.

In Juarez, Mexican agents began watching Valdes' hangouts – and waited.

And waited.

U.S. investigators – determined to roll up Valdes' entire smuggling network – had plenty of work to do.

Migrants including Luciano Alcocer, just out of the hospital, helped investigators find the Chaparral, N.M., mobile home where smugglers had hidden them before loading them into the back



AP Photo • Courtesy of U.S Attorney's Office

**These mobile homes surrounded by fencing in Chaparral, N.M, were used by smugglers to hold illegal immigrants before transporting them deeper into the United States. Some 50 immigrants were picked up here in July 2002 and hauled in the back of an unventilated tractor-trailer to Dallas.**

of the truck. It was abandoned, but a raid at another of the ring's stash houses led to three arrests.

David Fry, special agent with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, followed the money trail.

Relatives of some of the migrants had wired thousands of dollars to the smugglers to pay for the trip, and records of the transactions turned up more names for the growing list of suspects.

But three months into the investigation, only six people – including the truck drivers, Troy Dock and Jason Sprague – were in custody.

Prosecutors had enough evidence to show Pat Valdes was a smuggler, but not enough to prove he organized the fatal trip. The truck drivers had fingered him, but considering their part in the ordeal, the government wasn't about to go easy on them in return for testimony.

"Murderers," prosecutors called them.

So, investigators needed some breaks. On Halloween night, they caught one.

Mexican police, their guns drawn, surrounded a vehicle in Juarez. Hours later, at 3 a.m., they rendezvoused with U.S. Border

Patrol agents on the Stanton Street Bridge joining Juarez with El Paso. Agents from both countries shook hands as the exchange was made.

The prisoner – potbellied, balding and unshaven – had his hands cuffed across the front of his Washington Redskins warmup jacket.

"Are you willing to give us a statement?" a Border Patrol agent asked him.

"You want a statement?" Pat Valdes said. "I'm innocent. That's the statement."

A month later, another break.

Mexican authorities picked up Roman Valdes in Juarez and turned him over as well. If he could be persuaded to deal, U.S. prosecutors thought, they could put his brother away for a long time.

It had nearly happened once before.

In 1999, Roman Valdes had approached the Border Patrol and offered information about his brother's smuggling operation. Pat didn't pay him enough, wouldn't give him responsibility, he complained. He was tired of being a lackey.

"I want to be done with it," he said then.

But for reasons that were never clear, he stopped cooperating and went back to work for his brother.

This time, it was different.

U.S. agents read Roman Valdes the charges against him. Was he ready to talk?

He hesitated briefly. Then his bitterness boiled over.

"All the things I've ever gotten in trouble for, it's always been with Pat," he said. "I was ... a peon, even though I'm his brother."

He asked the investigators: "What do you need to know?"

On April 14, 2003, Pat Valdes went on trial for conspiracy and alien smuggling in federal court in El Paso.

On day two, Roman Valdes took the stand, avoiding his brother's eyes as he gave clipped answers to Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Roepke's questions.

It was his job to recruit truck drivers for the smuggling ring – to "hook" them with liquor and prostitutes in the bars of Ciudad Juarez, Roman Valdes said.

"Who paid for the services of the prostitute?" Roepke asked.

"Pat," Roman Valdes said.

"How was the driver paid?"

By a "loader" who put migrants in the truck, Roman said.

"And where did the loader get the money from?"

"From Pat," he said.

"Who paid you?"

"Pat."

Jurors stole glances at Pat Valdes. He seemed stricken.

Roepke turned to the fatal trip.

That night, Roman said, his brother tracked him down in Juarez and said they had to disappear. The police might be looking for them.

Why? the prosecutor asked.

"He said that some of the people on the trailer died."

That tied Pat Valdes to the deaths. Now Roepke wanted the jurors to know what it was like to

L.M. Otero • AP

**Truckers Troy Dock, left, and Jason Sprague sit during an interview at the Grayson County jail in Sherman, Texas. Dock and Sprague drove a tractor-trailer carrying about 50 illegal immigrants from the Mexican border to Dallas in July 2002.**

be one of the estimated 10,000 migrants the ring had smuggled over the years.

The courtroom lights dimmed, and scenes captured by a state police video camera flashed on a screen: A trooper opening a tractor-trailer's cargo doors. Climbing inside. Shouting. Dragging a limp body out. Sloshing water over it. The body never moving.

The lights went up. Roepke called his next witness.

A tall, thin teenager strode to the stand.

Jurors stared as the realization dawned: Could this be the person they had just seen being pulled from the trailer?

Speaking softly, Edson Rojas, almost 17 now, told the story of his 12-hour ride in the truck's ventless freight compartment.

Everything seemed OK until the sun came up, he said through a translator. But then, "the trailer started heating up," and people began stripping off their clothes.

"Oxygen started to run out," he said. "We would urinate in the bottles of water that we had, and then we would drink our own urine."

"Why?" asked Roepke's co-counsel, Greg McDonald.

Rojas' voice broke. "Because we were thirsty and there was nothing to drink."

When the rig finally arrived at a truck stop in Dallas, he said, others pushed and shoved to get out the door. He tried to follow them, but he was too weak.

"Did you make it?" McDonald asked.

"No," the boy said.

From the prosecution table, Roepke studied the jurors. They were riveted.

He shouted for help, Rojas went on, but the cargo doors closed and the truck began moving again.

"What did you start to think?" McDonald asked.

Rojas shook with sobs. "That I was going to die."

The judge ordered a 10-minute recess. As the jurors filed out, most of them were crying, too.

The jury took only a few hours to reach a verdict.

At his sentencing last June 18, Pat Valdes apologized – not to the migrants, but to the prosecutors and investigators. Then he offered to help take down others in the smuggling business.

"If they ever need me," he said, "they can look me up."

U.S. District Judge Philip Martinez sentenced him to 27 years in prison.

Roman Valdes, who got a break for testifying, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to smuggle aliens and was sentenced to 7 1/2 years.

In all, 19 members of the smuggling ring were indicted in addition to the Valdes brothers. Twelve remain at large. One awaits a decision on her competency to stand trial. Six pleaded guilty to various charges.

Among them were the drivers, Dock and Sprague, who admitted to conspiracy to smuggle aliens, racketeering and interstate travel in aid of racketeering.

At the drivers' sentencing hearing last October, a dozen migrants who survived the trip spoke, reliving the 12-hour horror. Two men had died inside that sweltering trailer. If the trip had lasted 10 minutes longer, everyone might have perished, said Alcocer, the carpenter from Mexico City.

"You see the doors to death," he said.

Defense attorneys argued that the migrants who hired the smugglers bore some of the responsibility.

U.S. District Judge Leonard Davis wasn't buying it.

Some may believe illegal immigrants "don't enjoy the same dictates of humanity that others would," he said a month later when he imposed punishments. But, he added, "They should."

He sentenced Dock and Sprague to nearly 34 years in prison. According to prosecutors, the sentences are the longest ever meted out in a human smuggling case.

AP Photo • Courtesy U.S. Attorney's Office

**Crime scene investigators remove a body from the trailer where a group of illegal immigrants were found locked inside at a truck stop north of Dallas, Texas, July 27, 2002.**

## EPILOGUE

Today, Edson Rojas lives in Kansas with his father. The 11th-grader goes to school, plays soccer, and sees a counselor to help mend the scars from his journey to America.

"I get very nervous when I get into a car," he says. "I have a lot of nightmares."

Luciano Alcocer works as a furniture maker in Monroe, N.C. Lawyers are seeking visas to allow him and the other survivors to remain in the United States. If he is sent back, Alcocer says, he might try again to come to America. But it won't be by way of a smuggler.

"God gives people opportunities, but not many," he says. "I escaped. I do not want to try it again."

Still, illegal immigration _ and the business of human smuggling _ goes on. The number of detained illegals, the Border Patrol's best measure of illegal immigration, increased 25 percent in the six months ending March 31 after four years of decline.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Pat Valdes' criminal history comes from interviews with INS investigator David Fry, Border Patrol agent Rudy Valdez, other investigators, and prosecutors, as well as from interviews with and letters from Valdes. Details of the investigation come from those sources and from court records and trial testimony. Details of Roman Valdes' 1999 and 2002 interrogations and of Pat Valdes' 2002 arrest come from Border Patrol videotapes and interviews with agents. Scenes from Pat Valdes' trial are from trial transcripts and interviews with a juror, investigators, and prosecutors Tom Roepke and Greg McDonald. Details of the truck drivers' sentencing are from court transcripts, interviews with prosecutors, and the reporter's observations.