

# Crossing Through the Night

By Susie Hicks

Halfway through the film “Mojados: Through the Night,” filmmaker Tommy Davis’s camera drops suddenly to the ground, and we see the open desert turned on its side between thorny blades of grass and cactus plants. He and four young men from Mexico have just crossed a highway in southern Texas; a helicopter is audible nearby, and everyone is running away from the road as fast as they can. They are weak from a day without clean water or food. The scene captures one of the many moments of terror that punctuate the long, frigid and often tedious winter journey through the desert, a journey with high stakes for the men who have left their families in Michoacán to cross the border and work in the United States.

Fear is as constant a companion for these migrants as the cameraman who trudges alongside them: fear of running out of water, of

freezing night temperatures and of the Border Patrol agents who could send them back to Mexico. What the documentary shows, however, is their remarkable resolve as they suffer through the desert. Toughness, commitment to their families and sense of humor somehow sustain the men the director refers to as Guapo, Viejo, el Tigre and el Oso.

The documentary — a product of two years work by Texas native Tommy Davis — covers a week in the lives of these four men as they travel to the U.S. from Cheran, a town in the mountains of central Mexico. The departure is painful. Guapo is worried that his youngest son will forget him. No one is sure how long their journey will be; their wives are stoic but with watery eyes. The men know only that they have to walk north by northeast for at least four days and that four highways and a river lie between them and their destination, a safe house in

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The Border Patrol stakes out a position.



Photo by Susie Hicks and Jason Cota.

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Photo by Susie Hicks and Jason Carco.

Border desert  
skyline.

southern Texas. They hope to outpace the cold front that is on its way, bringing freezing rain and wind.

As their raft begins to sink halfway across the Río Grande, some of the men begin to worry about the journey to come. Guapo, struggling to get off the sinking raft, lands in a cactus patch. On the first night, no one sleeps well; one man stays up through the night listening for Border Patrol agents.

The men joke with one another, but they will die without finding water soon. A muddy puddle brings hope; it is most likely contaminated by cows and bacteria, but the men fill their milk bottles and joke that this is “diet water – agua lite.” Later on, they will get down on their knees to drink gratefully from a murky pond. Their

tortillas are already moldy, and several of the men are getting anxious with only two days behind them and no food or good water. The fire will not light that evening in the cold, wet mud.

“Are you going to do this again?” Davis asks the men through his translator. “No,” says one man, who plans to spend two or three years in the U.S. But el Oso shakes his head, “Everyone changes their mind.” The parched men share a beer left over from the bus ride in Mexico. Cactus needles stick in their legs.

In a voiceover, a rancher is heard to say, “These people. . . if one of them gets sick, they leave ’em behind.” On the fourth day out, the tortillas and fresh water long gone, one of the men sings to keep their spirits up. As they

find a puddle at sunset and scoop up the muddy water, someone jokes, “It tastes just like KoolAid.”

A passing trucker denies the migrants food, but gives them a bit of water before telling them his boss is nearby and likely to call the Border Patrol on them. After another cold night, they finally reach the safe house. A brief rest and a meal of canned food and potato chips is all the respite they are granted. When Border Patrol trucks are spotted nearby, the men, and Davis, are told to leave on foot. It is the last time the filmmaker will see Guapo, Viejo and el Tigre. El Oso runs away and walks another three days into the U.S. The others are caught and immediately deported to Reynosa, Mexico.

Davis’s documentary cuts to a local news station documenting the February 25, 2003 freeze that killed three migrants south of the Highway 281 checkpoint. Davis later learned that Guapo and Viejo had hired a coyote and crossed successfully on February 23.

Tommy Davis, who answered questions after the screening of the documentary, said that he does not know if he would do it again. “I don’t think they should have to cross like that. . . I had driven that route [Highway 281] from the highway to my hometown and to think people are dying right out there even with so many eyes on them. . . I just took the viewpoint of crossing and trying to show what’s happening.” Davis, who carried his own food and 80 pounds worth of film and batteries, managed to bring us along with him.

Tommy Davis is the director of the documentary “Mojados: Through the Night.” He spoke at CLAS on October 5, 2005.

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The Río Grande.



Photo by Susie Hicks and Jason Cato