
Coyotaje, Corruption, and Border Enforcement in “Ambos Nogales” in the 1930s

ABSTRACT In the 1930s, agents from Mexico’s secret intelligence agency began to investigate reports of collusion between a Mexican *coyote* named Ramón Preciado, U.S. border agents, and U.S. government officials. Migrants and residents of Nogales, Sonora, accused the man of extorting migrants, sexually assaulting women, and reporting migrants to the Border Patrol. In turn, Border Patrol agents would deport those migrants who refused to pay bribes to Preciado. However, U.S. consular officials described him as a friend of the government, an advisor, and a trusted partner. This article uses this case to illustrate how corruption in migration agencies on both sides of the border allowed migrant smuggling to flourish as a profitable business in the twin border cities of Nogales, Sonora and Nogales, Arizona. Meanwhile, both U.S. officials and coyotes profited from the deportation of migrants, and the nascent Border Patrol used these inflated numbers to champion the success of its agents in guarding the border. **KEYWORDS** U.S. Border Patrol, corruption, migration, *coyotes*, deportation, Mexico, smuggling

In the summer of 1937, the Mexican Consul General based in San Francisco, Hector M. Escalona, wrote to the president of Mexico to report on the activities of a *coyote* operating in Nogales, Sonora, by the name of Ramón Preciado.¹ In his correspondence, Escalona described the “wicked exploitation of our poor Mexicans” by Preciado in partnership with U.S. migration authorities. He requested that the Mexican government coordinate efforts with U.S. officials to handle the issue, noting “How satisfactory it would be . . . to rip Preciado off the American side to be punished by our own

1. In the archival sources consulted here, Ramón Preciado’s services as a “coyote” extended beyond the common understanding of a person who physically helps one cross the border. As David Spener argues, the term can have multiple meanings, from someone who helps a client illicitly cross the border or as “a broker of a desired good or service,” including documents. David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 90–94.

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authorities.”² Despite years of complaints sent to American and Mexican officials in the 1930s and 1940s describing falsification of documents, collusion with authorities to deport migrants, sexual assault, and even murder, Preciado continued to operate in the border region while enjoying a sterling reputation among U.S. officials as an “immigrant advisor.”³

Preciado’s activities and partnerships reflect the complex transnational processes of *coyotaje*, revealing a system of corruption wherein coyotes and U.S. and Mexican border officials capitalized on and exploited Mexican migrants’ vulnerability as they attempted to cross through Nogales. This article begins with an overview of U.S. border enforcement policies in the early twentieth century, followed by a history of migrant smuggling in Ambos Nogales (Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora), paying particular attention to the cooperation between coyotes and corrupt border enforcement officials. Next, this article turns to an account of Preciado’s activities and his reciprocal relationship with U.S. border enforcement agents, as well as the futile efforts of the Mexican secret intelligence agency Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) to track down Preciado and dismantle his criminal operations. The final section focuses on his partnership with Thomas Powell, the American vice-consul in Nogales, Sonora, using complaints filed by Mexican migrants as evidence of the pair’s abuses of power.

WHO WAS RAMÓN PRECIADO?

Little is known of Ramón Preciado. His background and early life are unclear to historians; nor do we know what happened to him in later life, after the peak of his smuggling career. In the late 1930s, a few short years after the mass return migration of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans during the early Great Depression, he emerged as a powerful figure based in Nogales, Sonora, a border town with a population of just over 14,000 residents. Nogales, Arizona, had slightly less than half that population.⁴ In these small

2. Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN).

3. Carlos Cárdenas Federico to President Lázaro Cárdenas, August 14, 1940, File 575.1/65, AGN; Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN; Statement L.S. Armstrong, September 4, 1940, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA College Park).

4. David E. Lorey, *United States–Mexico Border Statistics since 1900* (Los Angeles: UCLA Statistical Abstract of Latin America Supplement Series, 1990), Tables 110 and 104.

twin border cities, a demand for workers in the U.S. Southwest created a market for human smuggling services. As anti-immigration advocates and elected officials called for more policing of the U.S.-Mexico border, these smuggling services became even more lucrative. While the Mexican government sought to constrain Preciado's economic and social dominance in the region, his connections with Border Patrol agents and officials in the U.S. Department of State made him a wealthy and seemingly untouchable man.

As a "coyote," Preciado charged migrants for his assistance in crossing the border and finding employment in the United States. Preciado often charged migrants a fee, depending on their financial circumstances, before they even crossed, but his exploitation extended beyond the initial border crossing. Preying on migrants who arrived in Sonora from other states in central Mexico, he promised them employment just across the border in Arizona. Once they began to work, they would have to pay a daily "contribution" to him from their wages for the duration of their time in the United States, regardless of where they lived or worked. He would then arrange work for them in fields or factories.⁵ As Mexican intelligence agents explained: "When someone for any reason could not pay this obligatory contribution, then he would denounce them to the American migration authorities to have them jailed and deported."⁶ Thus, Preciado established a system in which he operated like a labor contractor who had access to police power through the Border Patrol.⁷

This relationship had clear benefits for Preciado and the Border Patrol authorities with whom he worked. Preciado's case illustrates how changes in border enforcement policies and deportation shaped local economies and cities in Mexico. As immigration regulations changed, so did the services Preciado offered and the nature of his partnership with both American and Mexican officials. Moreover, U.S. immigration officials became active participants in such practices, enabling the nascent Border Patrol to claim success in its early years. As Escalona pointed out, this system resulted in the largest number of deportees traveling through Nogales versus other border-crossing points.⁸

5. Memorandum from Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN.

6. Pedro Molina Espinosa to IPS, August 11, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS), AGN, Mexico City.

7. Labor contractors often demanded a portion of migrants' wages, but Preciado was not officially employed by a U.S. company.

8. Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN.

Written complaints from migrants—found in Mexico City’s General Archive of the Nation and the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland—mention only Preciado and American consular officials by name, including U.S. Vice-Consul Thomas Powell, who was stationed in Nogales, Sonora. However, these accusations and reports from government investigators repeatedly reference his close relationships with Border Patrol agents in Arizona. Economic and social ties crossed borders in these interlinked towns, and his alliances with Americans went beyond business matters. During this time, Preciado and Powell even served as honorary pallbearers for the funeral of a longtime Border Patrol agent who was part of a well-known family in the region.⁹

While Mexican migrants repeatedly wrote to the government to denounce Preciado’s crimes, and Mexico’s intelligence agency launched multiple investigations into the matter, the U.S. government dismissed such concerns. Comparing declassified documents from both sides of the border illustrates how the voices of Mexican migrants are easily erased and silenced. Additionally, understanding how the threat of deportation functioned to extract profit from migrants in the Sonora/Arizona region offers more perspective into the early history of smuggling and border enforcement.

While the corruption embedded in migratory practices in Nogales predated Preciado, the involvement of U.S. border agents in this operation in the late 1930s marked a new level of sophistication in ensuring impunity and maximizing profit.¹⁰ The transnational tactic of monitoring migrants even after crossing the border to secure ongoing payment necessitated the involvement of U.S. officials, as did the reporting of migrants to the Border Patrol for deportation. Instead of only obtaining payment from the initial crossing, Preciado had found a way to continue to profit from migrants’ labor in the United States and—in some cases—from their removal to Mexico. These interactions and negotiations led to local economies based on corruption and the exploitation of migrants. Deportation became more than a mechanism of post-entry border enforcement—it also functioned as a source of profit for smugglers and authorities alike. While historians have documented the

9. “Well Known Resident Passes Away,” *Nogales International*, Nogales, Ariz., October 21, 1939, 1, 5.

10. Recent works that analyze corruption among Mexican migration agencies include Abraham Trejo Terreros, “Los Coyotes: migración y negocios en la Frontera Norte de México (1920–1964)” (PhD diss., El Colegio de Mexico, 2020); Pablo Yankelevich, *Los otros: Raza, normas y corrupción en la gestión de la extranjería en México 1900–1950* (Ciudad de Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2020).

problematic early history of the Border Patrol, this article articulates how corruption and strategic deportations affected Mexican migrants and how Mexican and U.S. officials failed to address their complaints, allowing such crimes to continue unchecked.¹¹

The story of Preciado and his collaborators illustrates how the narrative of successful, capable border enforcement was effectively manipulated through inflated numbers of deported migrants to allow the agency to claim success and continue to grow. Moreover, it demonstrates the limits of the Mexican government to intervene in situations of human smuggling and to hold accountable those who partnered with U.S. authorities. General Consul Escalona's letter led to a multi-year investigation by special intelligence officers from the Mexican government with few consequences. The Mexican government ultimately could do little to disrupt the entrenched corruption in its border regions, while the U.S. government dismissed claims by migrants. Much like today, migrants have little recourse against the binational system of border enforcement. Narratives of human smuggling in the 1930s focus on labor needs and how border-crossing benefited both employers and migrants. As this case study shows, however, coyotaje extended beyond the initial process of border crossing.¹² In partnering with the Border Patrol, Preciado and the agency could further extort migrants while also crafting the image of successful border enforcement.

The international trail of documents on these men ends in 1941, largely due to the subsequent introduction of the Bracero Program the following year that resulted in the mass migration of laborers to the United States. Additionally, during World War II the United States's border concerns shifted to fears of German infiltrators.¹³ However, this brief era of negotiated crossing and conspiracy shows how local officials profited from border enforcement policies while simultaneously undermining them. Agents relied on deporting migrants to demonstrate enforcement success while secretly partnering with the same coyote who had helped the migrants cross. The

11. Alexandra Minna Stern, "Nationalism on the Line: Masculinity, Race, and the Creation of the U.S. Border Patrol, 1910–1940," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, edited by Samuel Truett and Elliot Young (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 309; Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

12. Spener, *Clandestine Crossings*, xiii.

13. Henry T. Dwyer to Morris N. Hughes, American Consul in Mexico City, July 9, 1941, Nogales Classified Records, NARA, 1939–1941.

idea of a controlled border allowed border enforcement agents to claim success by working with a coyote who exploited migrants for profit.¹⁴

CORRUPTION AND MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN AMBOS NOGALES

The twin cities of Nogales, Sonora and Nogales, Arizona, known as “Ambos Nogales,” lie 60 miles south of Tucson and share an intertwined history, economy, and culture. In the early twentieth century, corruption and a lack of oversight opened opportunities for criminals to benefit from changes in U.S. border policies. Consequently, it became increasingly risky for migrants to cross without official papers, while entrenched systems of smuggling contraband goods also flourished.¹⁵ Nogales provided a convenient crossing point, as the Southern Pacific operated a railroad line that ran along the coast of Mexico and ended in the city. Once completed in 1927, the Ferrocarril Sud-Pacífico de México line connected Mexico City to the border, passing through Guadalajara and running along the country’s western coast to stop in port cities such as Mazatlán, Sinaloa and Guaymas, Sonora before ending in Nogales.¹⁶ Migrants without documents could travel north from central Mexico to Nogales, and from there cross into Arizona or head to California or Texas.

As employers and migrants became accustomed to the system of cross-border labor migration, migrants who hoped to work in the United States relied on coyotes to help them cross the border. Mexican workers were engaged in a recurring cycle of northern migration by the late 1920s, a pattern that arose, according to historian Patrick Ettinger, “[t]hanks in large part to the benign neglect of Immigration Service authorities in the preceding twenty years.”¹⁷ In the decades that followed, the benign neglect of U.S. authorities gave way to an intensified need to secure the border and prevent unauthorized entrance. Subsequent changes in immigration enforcement laws and practices made it more difficult to cross the border without the use of guides,

14. Peter Andreas explores the complexities and contradictions of border enforcement in *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

15. George T. Díaz, *Border Contraband: A History of Smuggling across the Rio Grande* (University of Texas Press, 2015), 5.

16. Daniel Lewis, *Iron Horse Imperialism: The Southern Pacific of Mexico, 1880–1951* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 3.

17. Patrick Ettinger, *Imaginary Lines: Border Enforcement and the Origins of Undocumented Immigration, 1882–1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 4.

and individuals familiar with the border region expanded their offerings of coyotaje.

After the 1924 Immigration Act and the creation of the Border Patrol, migration patterns shifted.¹⁸ Mexican officials now required more from migrants who wished to leave the country, including a passport and a tax. In comparison, coyotes offered a faster, and perhaps even cheaper, way across the border.¹⁹ More Mexican migrants became clients for coyotes, and their precarious status north of the border meant that they could easily be expelled back to Mexico. As historian Kelly Lytle Hernández details, the new passport and tax requirements allowed smuggling to become “a core enterprise in the small pueblos of Mexico’s northern borderlands.”²⁰ Meanwhile, complaints of extortion and “immoral” behavior plagued Mexico’s newly formed migration office.

Until 1933, Prohibition under the Volstead Act resulted in more policing of the border, as U.S. authorities attempted to stem the waves of Americans heading south to consume alcohol as well as the amount of liquor flowing north. Immigration policies contributed to the characterization of certain groups of migrants as illegal and deportable and concurrently the smuggling of both people and alcohol became professionalized in the 1920s and early 1930s.²¹ Consequently, historian Pablo Yankelevich explains, “Under the cover of this “industry” all kinds of corruption flourished, and among them an outstanding place was occupied by the abuses, extortions, and injustices committed by the immigration agencies.”²² Deportation policies and practices allowed officials and enterprising criminals to profit from migrants. In border regions, coyotes took advantage of recent immigration restrictions and anti-immigrant sentiment to drive growth in businesses that helped migrants cross without legal documents.

18. For more on the Immigration Act of 1924 see Mae M. Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigrant Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921–1965,” *Law and History Review* 21 (2003): 69–108.

19. Kelly Lytle Hernández, “Persecuted Like Criminals’: The Politics of Labor Emigration and Mexican Migration Controls in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34, no. 1 (spring 2009): 228.

20. *Ibid.*, 229.

21. Oscar J. Martínez, *Mexico’s Uneven Development: The Geographical and Historical Context of Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 264.

22. Pablo Yankelevich, “Corrupción y gestión migratoria en el México posrevolucionario,” *Revista de Indias* 225 (2012): 439.

In the mid-1920s, Mexico attempted to develop the Migration Service organization in response to the growth of unauthorized migration between the United States and Mexico and concerns regarding the smuggling of alcohol and narcotics. However, many problems plagued this office during the 1920s and 1930s, including a lack of resources, low pay, and poor conduct by officials. In one case that garnered widespread attention and critique of the agency, Yankelevich recounts how two migration agents stationed in Nogales boarded an Arizona-bound train packed full of American tourists, and “without any other cause than the complete state of drunkenness in which they found themselves, unsheathed their pistols with the intention of shooting them.” The local radio station then critiqued the Migration Service for hiring such “amoral individuals,” but such incidents were not unique during this period. More commonly, agents were accused of demanding bribes or “undue charges.”²³

Local politicians also became involved in alcohol and narcotics smuggling, receiving payoffs in exchange for letting business continue. One immigration inspector in Nogales noted the municipal president of the city received payments from those involved in illicit activities and protected them in turn.²⁴ In one case where a customs collector in Ciudad Juárez tried to investigate claims of payoffs to customs inspectors by smugglers, the Mexican general director of customs promptly removed him from his position. The smuggler who had reported these bribes faced a grislier fate after being captured in the United States, reportedly hanging himself in jail.²⁵ The Ministry of the Interior repeatedly promised new campaigns against coyotes and disreputable agents, but little changed.²⁶ For migrants attempting to cross the border, Preciado’s offerings thus provided an alternative to the infamous corruption of the Migration Service.

As border surveillance intensified in early twentieth century, so did the smuggling of migrants. Coyotes built on existing practices—they had begun to transport migrants across the border after the passage of Chinese exclusion laws in 1882 and thereafter.²⁷ After the United States restricted entrance to

23. Ibid, 438, 444–45, 449.

24. Ibid, 458.

25. “Customs Collector Removed in Juarez: Smuggler ‘Pay-Off’ Investigator Moved to Mexicali,” *Herald Post*, El Paso, Tex., December 13, 1933, 1.

26. Yankelevich, “Corrupción y gestión migratoria,” 450.

27. Julian Lim highlights how the smuggling of Chinese migrants through the border involved not just civilians, but also immigration authorities and other officials. Julian Lim, *Porous Borders*:

Chinese migrants, many viewed Mexico as a stepping-stone on the way north. They arrived by ship in Mexico's port cities, and while some stayed in northern Mexico, others headed north to cross the border into the United States.²⁸ Indeed, the Sonora/Arizona border became a popular crossing area for Chinese migrants, with Ambos Nogales providing an especially convenient and well-traversed point.²⁹ By the early twentieth century, writes historian Grace Peña Delgado, an "underground railroad" had emerged to take Chinese migrants across the border into Arizona.³⁰

The anti-Chinese regulations passed in Mexico in the early 1930s also led to the professionalization of coyotes as they partnered with local officials to improve their services. These various parties exerted enough influence to demand that the "Chinese entry business" happen only through Nogales, in order to prevent other competitors from undercutting their prices.³¹ Consequently, despite its small population, Nogales became a major hub of illicit border crossings. Preciado's activities and the impunity he and his collaborators enjoyed must be understood within this context of corruption entrenched in the migratory system in border cities. His business depended on the previously established system of paying bribes to government officials and other agents as well as on the understanding that with protection from powerful individuals, the Mexican federal government was effectively powerless to intervene despite the research done by investigators.

The case of one infamous Chinese smuggler provides a useful comparison. It reveals why Preciado's alliances with U.S. border officials were so important and how the racial context of the U.S. Southwest shaped views of Chinese and Mexican border-crossers. Alejandro Ung Son (also known as Ungson, Ng Son, Ung Sung, and Ung Ham) worked with Mexican police as

Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 114–15.

28. Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 75.

29. For more on the experiences of Chinese Mexicans and Chinese migrants in Sonora and northern Mexico, see also Julia Maria Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010); Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

30. Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 89, 94–96.

31. Yankelevich, "Corrupción y gestión migratoria," 457.

well as allegedly with the Chinese consul to smuggle Chinese migrants from Sonora to Arizona in the early 1930s.³² He had arrived in Mexico in 1883 from Hong Kong, married a Mexican woman named Guadalupe Duerte, and worked in both the shoe and mercantile businesses before his foray into smuggling.³³

A newspaper article written years after Ung Son's capture details the extent of his network. According to the reporter, Ung Son employed agents in southern Mexico to let him know which migrants would be arriving by train. Once they stopped in Nogales, his local accomplices met them at the station, took them to the Hotel Pacífico, and from there planned their crossing. Because he owned the Hotel Pacífico, Ung Son could minimize lodging expenses there, in order to offer what the reporter described as "cut-rate smuggling" prices. More importantly, Ung Son could time migrant crossings for when ships were due to leave for China and thus reduce the time migrants spent detained in the United States before their removal. As the reporter explained, "They preferred waiting in Mexico to a detention camp in this country."³⁴ Interestingly, both accusations against Ung Son and support for him resemble later descriptions of Preciado. While some viewed him positively and appreciated his help, other Chinese migrants described him as a "brutal villain." In a period of severe anti-Chinese sentiment, Ung Son was thought by some to have used his position to avoid also being expelled to China.³⁵

Unlike Preciado, Ung Son did not partner with Americans or track migrants after they had crossed the border. By the time of his capture, his successes allegedly cost the Border Patrol \$400,000—each Chinese migrant subsequently caught was reportedly tried and deported at a cost of \$400. In turn, Border Patrol agents held Ung Son personally responsible for "their continued cuts in pay, leave, and personnel."³⁶ When his Mexican accomplice, a Nogales policeman by the name of Arcaido Garcia, was captured, Ung Son agreed to testify in Arizona with the promise he would then be allowed

32. Mary Kidder Rak, *Border Patrol* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), 138.

33. W. B. Ragsdale, "Ung Ham's Business Was Good; He Smuggled Aliens into U.S. for Free Passage to China Until . . .," *Galveston Daily News*, Galveston, Tex., May 1, 1938, 10.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans*, 95. The activities of Ungson/Ung Son are also discussed in Lim, *Porous Borders*, 194–95.

36. J.F. Weadock, "Patrol Wins in Battle of Wits with Smuggler," *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson, Ariz.), December 9, 1932, 1.

to return to Sonora.³⁷ He returned, but from then on, border patrolmen tracked his activities. In 1932, agents hiding in an area known to be a popular crossing point for Chinese migrants captured him after he crossed a reported forty feet into U.S. territory.³⁸ Despite the care he took to never cross the fence that presumably marked the border, they were able to detain him by reportedly moving the fence. As the article summarized, “Ung Ham had forgotten that the fence could be divorced from the border line.”³⁹ Less than a month later, he pleaded guilty to smuggling aliens into the country and was sentenced to two years in jail.⁴⁰

During these early years of the Border Patrol, stories such as the capture of Ung Son served multiple purposes. Such accounts heralded the Border Patrol’s activities in cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Nogales, places described by one newspaper as “festered spots in the body politics, hotbeds of revolutions, of smuggling, of all kinds of crime.”⁴¹ Journalist and novelist Oren Arnold published many widely reprinted series on the border that compared the actions of the agency to those of righteous cowboys in the Wild West. In these stories, agents engaged in “constant warfare” against smugglers. As Arnold wrote, “From Brownsville to Del Rio to El Paso to Nogales to Tijuana, the border patrol and the customs officers have labored long and hard of late, have kept guns loose in their holsters for instant action. Foreigners have tried to smuggle in everything from diseased lemons to diseased Chinese.” In such narratives, valiant Border Patrol agents could rely on intrepid Mexican officials to guard the border against smugglers of narcotics and Chinese migrants, emphasizing how anti-Chinese racism motivated much of the urgency to surveil the border.⁴²

In these stories, mimicked by other writers at the time, Border Patrol agents had to work to outsmart smugglers who dug tunnels underground from one Nogales to the other, flew migrants across the border, or

37. “Alleged Smuggler Held,” *El Paso Herald Post*, El Paso, Tex., August 30, 1932, 2.

38. *The Border Vidette*, Nogales, Ariz., December 31, 1932, 5.

39. Ragsdale, “Ung Ham’s Business Was Good.”

40. *Daily Herald*, Big Spring, Tex., January 23, 1933, 3; “Sonora Chinaman Is Sent to Valley Jail,” *El Paso Times*, February 2, 1933, 3.

41. Oren Arnold, “Guardians of the Law along the Rio Grande,” *Daily Chronicle*, Centralia, Wash., September 12, 1936, 8

42. *Ibid.*; “When Six Guns Blaze along the Rio Grande,” *Daily Chronicle*, Centralia, Wash., September 19, 1936, 9.

transported them in donkey carts.⁴³ Tales of the agents' apparent skill and determination to apprehend "smuggled Chinamen and other aliens" as well as the "boot-legger and dope smuggler" served as justification for the resources the Border Patrol received—such as a fleet of twenty-eight new Star automobiles—to complete their work.⁴⁴ In contrast, Mexican migrants were rarely mentioned despite the mass repatriations conducted during the early 1930s in response to economic pressures and ongoing anti-Mexican prejudice. Ung Son's activities and eventual capture thus offer a useful comparison to understand how racial dynamics mattered and why U.S. officials would agree to partner with Preciado but would resort to physically moving the border fence to stop Ung Son.

Mexicans occupied a distinct space in the racial politics of the U.S. Southwest, as whites viewed them less negatively than Black Americans or Asian Americans, largely because they were viewed as temporary.⁴⁵ As anti-Mexican sentiment increased, so did the reliance on deportable labor. Mexican migrants could be easily removed from the United States due to Mexico's proximity and migrants' non-citizen status, making them convenient workers.⁴⁶ As historian Natalia Molina argues, "what was at stake was not the purported maintenance of U.S. racial purity but the need to manage labor."⁴⁷ The Mexican migrants that Preciado helped to cross were not desirable as permanent immigrants, but they were *deportable*.

A TRANSNATIONAL MAFIA

By the time Escalona wrote to President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1937, Preciado had become a well-known figure in the region. According to complaints, Preciado had committed a wave of assaults, extortions, and other nefarious crimes in the 1930s, most notably murder. The memorandum from Escalona described the carefully crafted strategy of his "mafia," which was "perfectly

43. Oren Arnold, "Checking the Vicious Racket of the Alien Smugglers," part of "2000 Miles of Trouble" series, *Arizona Independent Republic*, Phoenix, Ariz., September 15, 1935, 55.

44. "28 Stars Used by Border Patrol Service," *Nogales International*, Nogales, Ariz., July 22, 1927, 5, Arizona Memory Project, accessed at: <https://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/digital/collection/Nogalesintl/id/4366>

45. Lytle Hernández, *Migra!*, 30–32.

46. Mark Reisler, "Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant During the 1920s," *Pacific Historical Review* 45, no. 2 (May 1976): 252.

47. Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 22.

organized, in such a way that any precaution that is taken will not be out of place and the blow that is given must be harsh and if possible be able to trick the leader Preciado, to judge him in Mexican territory for both criminal exploitation, as for the murder he committed in Mexico City.”⁴⁸ This correspondence prompted further investigation by the Mexican government, but also suggests that Mexican migrants in the United States had attempted to reach out to consular officials to report such crimes. Over the next few years, report after report was produced, each one detailing Preciado’s ongoing criminal activities in Nogales; but the intervention demanded by Escalona and the aggrieved migrants never came to fruition.

In the 1920s, the Mexican government established a secret intelligence agency known as *Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales* (Political and Social Investigations or IPS), which sent inspectors across the country to report on issues such as general political and economic climate concerns, organized crime, and corruption.⁴⁹ In August of 1937—one month after Escalona’s memo to the president—IPS inspectors arrived in Sonora and began to investigate the allegations. Their mission took them from Nogales to other surrounding cities as they researched the claims of illegal border crossings and exploitation of migrants. Later that year, they began to send a series of reports to Mexico City detailing their findings on Preciado and his crime ring. The first report echoed Escalona’s description of how the system worked. When hopeful migrants arrived in Nogales and could not legally cross the border to work, Preciado used his connections with border agents to help them cross without authorization. If they did not keep paying his required fee, he would report them to the Border Patrol.

Gathering information from informants to detain migrants was valued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the agency even noted in an annual report that the border patrolman “cultivates friends and develops sources of information.”⁵⁰ U.S. authorities benefited professionally

48. Escalona to Cárdenas, 22 July 1937.

49. For more on the agency and its history, see Sergio Aguayo, *La Charola: Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México* (Editorial Ink: 2017); and Tanalis Padilla and Louise Walker, eds., “Dossier: Spy Reports: Content, Methodology, and Historiography in Mexico’s Secret Police Archive,” a special issue of *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19 (2013). Another important work that details the history of Political and Social Investigations (IPS) and its involvement in Mexican politics is Aaron W. Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938–1954* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

50. *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labor* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 37.

as Preciado's strategy of reporting non-paying undocumented migrants helped them raise the numbers of detained and deported migrants for whom they could take credit. One report from IPS stated: "This action by the American authorities is an agreement between them and the aforementioned Preciado, since it has come to be known that these authorities have a stake in the business interests of Preciado."⁵¹ Preciado could not have operated or achieved such financial success without his ties to U.S. authorities; and in turn, they relied on him to inform them of migrants' whereabouts and legal statuses. The reliance of U.S. border officials on a Mexican coyote to detain and deport migrants in U.S. territory highlights how ill-equipped they were to handle the overwhelming task of guarding the vast border region.

Preciado's partnership with U.S. officials extended beyond individual Border Patrol officers. Preciado also reached out to and maintained close relationships with employees from other U.S. government offices and, according to Mexican investigators, "would hold splendid parties for them in his private house."⁵² In particular, the U.S. Vice-Consul stationed in Nogales, Sonora, the head of the Border Patrol in Nogales, Arizona, and numerous other representatives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service were noted to have attended such lavish gatherings. In Sonora, such associations led some to derisively describe Preciado as a "servant of American authorities."⁵³ Nonetheless, Mexican officials continued to partner with him in this arrangement, reflecting how migration officials on both sides of the border actively participated in the extortion of border-crossers.

Preciado's crimes extended beyond the financial demands he placed on migrants. Women who were deported after being detained in the United States often arrived in Nogales, Sonora, without a place to stay or any form of income. Preciado preyed on such women in vulnerable situations, luring them into sexual relationships as well as "trafficking them in diverse ways."⁵⁴ In other cases when the women were still in the United States, he turned

51. Pedro Molina Espinosa to IPS, August 11, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

52. Memorandum from Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN.

53. Report from Inspector V-52, September 8, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

54. Memorandum from Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN.

them over to U.S. authorities, after which they would be detained in jails across Southern Arizona.⁵⁵

In the 1920s and 1930s, cities just south of the border provided a wealth of opportunities for Americans interested in illegal activities. Prohibition had turned Tijuana into a haven for U.S. tourists interested in the city's casinos where alcohol still flowed. President Lázaro Cárdenas dealt the gambling industry a blow when he shut down casinos, but prostitution in the U.S.-Mexico border region continued to flourish for decades as U.S. immigration officials turned a blind eye.⁵⁶ As Deirdre Moloney argues, "the presence of prostitutes 'serving' predominantly male, migrant mining camps" was less worrisome to U.S. authorities than the prospect of Mexican families settling in the area.⁵⁷ Women who crossed the border could find themselves forced into prostitution, then abandoned by family members once they returned to Mexico.⁵⁸ Additionally, they faced the possibility of sexual assault even before crossing the border. In the 1920s, one Mexican inspector described how coyotes sexually assaulted women and robbed others.⁵⁹ Preciado's actions thus reflect a longer history of exploitation and violence against women at border-crossing points that continues today.⁶⁰ In the Preciado case, however, U.S. border policies and bilateral cooperation to deport migrants placed women in vulnerable situations even after they returned to Mexico.

Over a thousand miles away in Mexico City, officials struggled with how to address the ongoing crimes. Preciado had reportedly assassinated the son of a Nogales judge only a year or two earlier, yet never faced repercussions. (This was not his first accusation of murder—Arizona newspapers reveal that decades earlier he was jailed for the murder of a Chinese American man in

55. Report from Inspector V-22, September 30, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

56. Kirk S. Bowman, "The U.S.-Mexican Border as Locator of Innovation and Vice," in *Borders and Border Politics in a Globalizing World*, ed. Paul Ganster and David E. Lorey (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 274–75.

57. Deirdre M. Moloney, "Women, Sexual Morality, and Economic Dependency in Early U.S. Deportation Policy," *Journal of Women's History* 18 (2006): 104–5.

58. Ann Gabbert, "Prostitution and Moral Reforms in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890–1920," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12 (2003): 592–93.

59. Lytle Hernández, *Migra!*, 91.

60. The recent case of Esteban Manzanares, a Border Patrol agent accused of kidnapping and raping a woman, her fifteen-year-old daughter, and a fourteen-year old friend after being detained for crossing the border illustrates the violence migrants face even today. Their case against the U.S. government was dismissed and they are appealing the decision. See: *M.D.G.C. and N.L.M.C. v. United States of America*, filed April 21, 2020.

Santa Cruz, Sonora, and then managed to escape the jail in Nogales, Sonora, and head north to the United States.⁶¹) The wealth and influence he had gained as a coyote profiting from U.S. border enforcement laws had made him an untouchable man in Northern Mexico. Yet, despite his unsavory reputation, he maintained a publicly respectable persona that accorded with social norms. He had served in the municipal police for six years and even won an award for good service. Moreover, he was reported to live a relatively modest public life while attentively taking care of his widowed mother and generally being a “good family man.”⁶² Such contradictions in perceptions of his personal and professional life reflect how easily his connections with American officials could supersede the reach of local and federal authorities.

Preciado’s impunity in both cities also influenced attitudes in Mexico as others sought to launch similar schemes. In reports detailing his activities, an IPS agent identified only as Inspector V-52 said that residents in Nogales, Sonora, had noted that “nothing happens to those who dedicate themselves to informing U.S. authorities and turning in their own compatriots as a way of life.” The protection enjoyed by smugglers who allied with U.S. officials highlights how border enforcement policies led to more professionalized smuggling. Indeed, even the previous chief-of-police in the city was reported to have participated in his own ring of migrant exploitation before transferring to another northern border town.⁶³ In Escalona’s original letter, he reported that a man known as “El Chueco” (The Crooked One) had partnered with a German accomplice to pursue similar strategies of illicit coyotaje as Preciado, also in Nogales.⁶⁴

Years later, in 1940, IPS launched another investigation into Preciado’s ongoing activities and business ventures based on defrauding migrants. In this latest enterprise, he informed migrants looking for passports and official documentation that he could obtain such items for them. He would then provide them with fraudulent documents which U.S. officials could easily identify as forgeries. Migrants would then be detained, imprisoned in the United States, and subsequently formally deported.⁶⁵ Again, Preciado faced

61. “News of the Territory,” *The Copper Era*, Clifton, Ariz., September 14, 1905, p. 1; “Desperate Criminals Escape,” *The Oasis*, Arizona, Ariz., September 5, 1905, p. 1.

62. Report from Inspector V-22, September 30, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Memorandum from Hector M. Escalona, General Consul of Mexico in San Francisco, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City, July 22, 1937, File 575.1/65, AGN.

65. File 15, Box 126, DGIPS, AGN.

no charges or punishment for his role in falsifying documents and defrauding migrants.

Even after extensive investigation, the Mexican government ultimately accomplished little in its attempts to control Preciado, despite gathering testimonies from officials on both sides of the border and the heavy sentences mandated by the Mexican government for human smugglers.⁶⁶ His status as an authority and his extensive connections rendered him much more powerful than the archetypal coyote whose activities remained underground, such as the shadowy figure of “El Chueco” who operated in the same city. Mexican officials explained that his sphere of influence limited their options. Many feared him, but local criminals and American authorities formed part of his transnational mafia. If he were to be officially charged, one inspector presumed, he would certainly flee to the United States and be welcomed by his gang of cronies.⁶⁷

PRECIADO AND POWELL: A CROSS-BORDER PARTNERSHIP

U.S. officials denied that Preciado had engaged in any wrongdoing, yet declassified documents from the U.S. Department of State reveal multiple accusations against him and investigations into his activities. These documents describe his reported collusion with Thomas Powell, the U.S. vice-consul in Nogales, Sonora. Powell had worked as an immigration clerk in Nogales since the early 1930s and had also been the assistant U.S. consul in Nogales in the late 1920s.⁶⁸ In 1940, letters written to American officials accused the two of various crimes that parallel the findings of Mexican authorities, including extortion and sexual exploitation. Luis Martínez of Nogales, Sonora, wrote a letter to the U.S. Department of Labor to detail the extent of the pair’s activities:

I respectfully inform you, at the request of various persons on the frontier, of the abuses committed by C. Thomas Powell, American vice-consul in Nogales, Sonora, and that he with a certain Ramon Preciado is deceiving and robbing the public, those persons who go to the Consulate to secure

66. On these penalties, see Lytle Hernández, *Migra!*, 96.

67. Report from Inspector V-22, September 30, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

68. “Department of State Appropriation Bill for 1932: Hearing before the Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations,” 71st Cong., 3rd Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930), 182; “Assistant Consul Gets No Word of Shooting,” *Santa Ana Daily Evening Register*, Santa Ana, Cal., February 2, 1928, 1.

their local passports to cross the border, all persons being refused except those Mr. Preciado wishes, he and Powell collecting hundreds of pesos. Preciado fools the people for some days, telling them that he is arranging things, and that he is going to speak with Mr. Powell, and as Mr. Powell is already in agreement that they collect a certain amount of money they pay it and then all is arranged.⁶⁹

This time, migrants who hoped to legally cross were once again exploited as they found themselves paying needless fees. Martínez described how the corruption so well documented in Sonora also extended across the border and requested that Powell be replaced by “a person who, unlike him, works according to the law and not according to pay.” The letter targeted Powell, perhaps understanding that while Preciado’s grip on the region could not be shaken, Powell could be removed by the U.S. government. The letter then concluded: “We hope you will lend your services and energies to this matter which is making the entire frontier region very much disoriented because the law is being violated and instead it should respected,” emphasizing the infamy of the pair in the area.⁷⁰

However, the U.S. consul in Nogales, Sonora, Lawrence S. Armstrong, replied to the charges and cleared the two of any suspicion or wrongdoing. As Consul Armstrong said, Powell enjoyed a “very good reputation” among both Mexicans and Americans, and both the collector of customs and the inspector in charge of the Immigration Service in Nogales spoke highly of him. As for Preciado, Armstrong also defended his involvement, describing him as “a Mexican [who] for the past ten years has been furnishing information to the American Immigration Service concerning aliens attempting to enter the United States illegally and concerning smugglers of aliens into the United States.” In addition to his role reporting on those who had crossed the border or other coyotes, he “also acts as an “immigrant advisor.” In his opinion, Preciado had likely incited some anger and frustration from Mexicans “owing to his activities as an informant and due to the fact that he is friendly to Americans.”⁷¹ The extent to which officials defended Preciado indicates how in developing a close relationship with U.S. authorities over the previous decade, he had gained the opportunity to further develop his position as

69. Luis Martinez to Chief of Labor Department, July 24, 1940, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

70. Ibid.

71. Statement L.S. Armstrong, September 4, 1940, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

a smuggler. Not only could he turn over those who crossed without authorization, he could and did denounce potential competitors in the area in his role as immigrant advisor.

After establishing Preciado's long-term relationship with the local authorities, the Consul then requested that the Labor Department provide him with the complainant's address so that he could be called in for an interview. Given Powell and Preciado's wide-reaching influence and apparent impunity, Martínez perhaps purposefully omitted his contact information to avoid such an encounter, and instead mentioned that he was writing on behalf of a number of other individuals who had experienced similar situations. However, Armstrong's explanation reveals how easily legitimate complaints could be dismissed as a smear campaign rooted in anti-American sentiments.

That same year, Preciado again became a subject of discussion among Mexican officials. An official from Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations wrote to President Cárdenas regarding the "innumerable abuses and frauds" being committed against Mexican nationals—and cited seven different letters that had previously been recorded against Preciado.⁷² By this time, the activities had garnered the attention of Carlos Cárdenas Federico, writing from the Nogales Customs Office. Cárdenas Federico claimed that Preciado received a salary from the U.S. government in return for denouncing Mexican migrants. As he wrote, "He has caused ruin and misery for thousands of Mexicans with his falsity and betrayal." He echoed the complaints of others who described how little could be done as the local police worked for Preciado. Beyond crimes related to migrant exploitations, he also accused Preciado of murdering a man accused of killing a U.S. customs guard in self-defense.⁷³ The letter reached the President's office, but nothing seemed to come of these serious accusations of crime, murder, and collusion with foreign authorities.

Business continued as usual, and another complaint against Powell and Preciado reached U.S. government officials the following year. This time, the complaint, from a man named Raymundo Gómez, reached the U.S. consul in Mexico City, who then forwarded it to Armstrong. In his letter, Gómez recounted the experience of his sister-in-law, Isabel Macías de Gómez. Her husband had lived in Los Angeles for years, and she had traveled to join him

72. Ernesto Hidalgo to Lázaro Cárdenas, October 1, 1940, Exp. 575.1/65, Archivo Lázaro Cárdenas, AGN, Mexico City.

73. Carlos Cárdenas Federico to Lázaro Cárdenas, August 14, 1940, Exp. 575.1/65, Archivo Lázaro Cárdenas, AGN, Mexico City.

in California after they were married in Aguascalientes. She attempted to cross the border at Nogales, with all required documents in hand. However, Powell and Preciado demanded “as a condition to facilitate passage to the border that she agree to have carnal intercourse with them, imposing shameful requirements and making her the victim [of] a thousand immoral attacks.” Rejecting these terms, Isabel Macías de Gómez was forced to wait more than a month at the border to enter the United States. Raymundo Gómez asked for an investigation and punishments for Powell and Preciado; in addition, he requested that officials call his brother and sister-in-law in order “for her to refer all the humiliations to which she was subjected and the immoral proposals of the vice-consul.”⁷⁴ The consul general conducted an investigation into the matter, but the U.S. secretary of state once again cleared Powell of any charges of wrongdoing.⁷⁵

Despite a history of complaints against Preciado and Powell, the U.S. consul in Mexico City waited four months after receiving the letter to take action—two months after U.S. officials had already determined that Powell had done no wrong.⁷⁶ His response to Armstrong illustrates why many complaints about border agents received little response or attention from the government. Instead of investigating the claims, he concluded:

I had thought to ignore this communication but having run across it again I thought it would be well to give Mr. Powell an opportunity to answer it. Unless you yourself think there is something to it before calling it to his attention, I would suggest that you do not even mention it in his efficiency report and I shall not bring it up again unless you write me further on the subject.⁷⁷

Powell at this point had acquired a record of accusations against him, and the deliberate omission of this accusation in his file represents yet one more instance of U.S. officials refusing to investigate complaints by Mexicans against U.S. government employees. Interestingly, no records indicate that U.S. officials ever contacted Raymundo Gómez, his brother, or Isabel Macías

74. Raymundo Gómez to U.S. Consul, Mexico City, February 22, 1941, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

75. Letter to Lawrence S. Armstrong, April 29, 1941, Box 23, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

76. Raymundo Gómez to U.S. Consul, Mexico City, February 22, 1941, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

77. Geo. P. Shaw to L.S. Armstrong, June 17, 1941, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936–1949.

de Gómez. Instead, they collaborated to ensure that the accusations would not affect Powell's career in the future.

The multiple accusations of sexual assault or of sexual harassment by Preciado and Powell reflect how border enforcement policies leave migrants vulnerable to violence from authorities. While some women complained of these abuses, other men and women almost certainly remained quiet, worried about the potential repercussions. This silence reflects purposeful attempts by U.S. authorities to overlook alleged transgressions by their own. Perhaps it was due to the deliberate concealment of wrongs, disbelief in accounts by Mexican women and men, or a combination of both. In any case, the prolonged careers of Preciado and Powell reflect a system in which migrants continued to be exploited while authorities enabled such behavior to continue.

THE BORDER PATROL AND THE BUSINESS OF DEPORTATION

These various cross-border schemes and accusations against officials reflect a longer history of the complex intersections between crime and border enforcement in the region. As historian Samuel Truett argues regarding border relations around the turn of the twentieth century, "the state itself condoned a degree of informality, even criminality, among its own agents as a pragmatic compromise in a region where its power to enforce the law remained tedious and uneven."⁷⁸ Indeed, despite the transition from informal Arizona Rangers and Texas Rangers to the Border Patrol, officers received little training and engaged in many disreputable activities. This case presents a perspective from the other side of the border on how Border Patrol officers "milked their neighborhood contacts to set up smuggling rings."⁷⁹ In this situation, however, analyzing how those involved deployed deportation as a strategy for profit illustrates a new facet of how such smuggling activities could affect border cities.

While Preciado's lengthy career as a coyote remained limited to the Sonora/Arizona borderlands, his activities and partnerships highlight the

78. Samuel Truett, "Transnational Warrior: Emilio Kosterlitzky and the Transformation of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1873-1928," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 251. Samuel Truett's exploration of the transnational career of Kosterlitzky offers one example of how Mexican officials could be then hired by U.S. agencies.

79. Stern, "Nationalism on the Line," 307.

complex history of deportation and corruption in the region. The intertwined nature of Ambos Nogales facilitated his business, as he could easily network with U.S. authorities while also keeping track of the migrants for whom he had arranged passage across the border. Throughout this era, reports in border cities increasingly focused on the numbers of deportees that arrived sick, starving, and destitute. Those who had paid coyotes the little money they had available after traveling from other states found themselves with few resources or funds after being detained and deported, leading to concerns among locals in the cities where they arrived.

The complicity and active participation of American agents benefited them in numerous ways. By the mid-1930s, the number of deported Chinese migrants had plummeted. While thousands had been deported in 1932 and 1933, only 405 were deported in 1934. As the INS requested continued funding in a period of national economic crisis, it had to defend its efficacy despite this decrease in deportation numbers. In subsequent appropriations hearings before the Labor Department to justify INS expenses, one representative alleged that there had been a “relaxation of the immigration policy by admitting immigrants who may become public charges,” while the committee chairman questioned the accomplishments of the agency as reflected in the decrease in overall deportations and the numbers of deported Chinese migrants.⁸⁰ In the report by the Commissioner of the INS, Daniel W. McCormack, he stressed the value of the Border Patrol, writing “There is no expenditure for immigration protection more valuable than the amounts invested in the development and operation of this arm of the Service.” When explaining the requests for raised salaries for inspectors and extra overtime pay, he also argued that more arms and ammunition were needed, as nineteen border inspectors had been killed in recent years by smugglers. Investing in the Border Patrol, he argued, would prove more economical to avoid the complicated process of detaining, trying, and deporting migrants who had established a residency in the country. Budgetary increases were also requested for other expenses, based on the goal of deporting or removing over 12,000 aliens in each of the next two years.

80. “Department of Labor Appropriation Bill for 1936, Hearing before the Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations in Charge of Departments of State, Justice, Commerce and Labor Appropriation Bill for 1936,” 74th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 14, 70, 82.

To substantiate the needs of the agency and its expenditures, the INS thus had to deport the promised number of migrants.⁸¹ The following year, however, they reported deporting significantly fewer than promised—just 9,135 people in 1935.⁸² While border enforcement also consisted of monitoring the United States's border with Canada as well as numerous seaports, the U.S.-Mexico border provided most of the deportations promised by the INS. From 1935 to 1939, the numbers of migrants deported to Mexico vastly exceeded those to all other countries, representing more than half of all deportations, a significant increase from previous years.⁸³ Understanding the budgetary concerns faced by the Border Patrol and the need to bolster numbers of deportations offers insight into why U.S. officials would partner with Preciado. The machinations by immigration authorities and coyotes in this region and period shed light on how unsanctioned cross-border migration during this period was about more than just meeting labor needs.

Analyzing the INS's budget requests also reveals how the use of "immigration advisors" such as Preciado and local informants marked another shift in strategies against smugglers. In the mid-1930s, the INS even began to include in the annual budget a line for "Rewards" that were to be given to locals who "might be able to give information that was not otherwise obtainable regarding surreptitious entries of aliens, or of aliens into the United States," and informants could earn anywhere from 50 cents to 150 dollars annually for their services.⁸⁴ In the case of the Nogales operations, however, the payments likely benefited the very smugglers whose activities the agency ostensibly aimed to obstruct.

81. Statement of Daniel W. MacCormack, Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization, January 8, 1935, in "Department of Labor Appropriation Bill for 1936, Hearing before the Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations in Charge of Departments of State, Justice, Commerce and Labor Appropriation Bill for 1936," 67, 69, 75–76, 78.

82. "Department of Labor Appropriation Bill for 1938," 112. Sixty-nine percent of these deportations were to Mexico and Canada (pp. 135–36).

83. Table VI: Aliens deported from the United States, years ended June 30, 1935 to 1939, by principal classes, countries, races, or peoples, and sex," *Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor, 1939*, 96. In all, 23,030 of a total 43,820 were deported to Mexico.

84. Department of Labor Appropriation Bill for 1938, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 75th Cong., 1st Sess, on the Department of Labor Appropriation Bill for 1938 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937), 137. Statements of Richardson Saunders, Assistant to the Secretary of Labor; Edward J. Shaughnessy, Acting Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization; Irving F. Wixon, Deputy Commissioner, Field Service; and W.H. Wager, Assistant to the Commissioner.

Intervention from the Mexican government did not end these illicit activities. Instead, the onset of the Bracero Program in 1942 provided more opportunities for migrants to cross the border, with or without contracts. The first month that braceros arrived in the United States, the U.S. Consulate reported that border cities such as Nogales and Tijuana quickly became overwhelmed with aspiring braceros coming from other parts of Sonora, Sinaloa, Nayarit, and Jalisco. The municipal president of the city asked mayors in other cities to dissuade migrants from heading north in search of work “since they cannot enter the United States and it is not possible for them to find employment in Nogales.”⁸⁵ Ironically, the very desire for Mexican labor that had allowed Preciado’s business to flourish also meant that his services would be rendered obsolete. During this brief period, between the mass repatriations of ethnic Mexicans from the U.S. and Chinese smuggling of the early 1930s and the Bracero Program that began in the early 1940s, Preciado cornered a profitable market. As immigration laws and economic circumstances continued to change, however, coyotes adapted in response to the unceasing demand for undocumented workers.

CONCLUSION

How unique were Preciado and Powell in the border region? The longer history of border enforcement suggests that others participated in similar plans of extorting migrants. What distinguishes this case, however, is how the landscape and history of the Nogales region allowed Preciado to track migrants after crossing the border and thus participate in their removal from the United States. The impunity they enjoyed despite migrants’ complaints also reflects the ongoing abuse and exploitation that migrants endured when crossing the border.

As border enforcement remains a contentious topic, intensified attempts to secure the U.S.-Mexico boundary, including billions of dollars allocated to fortify and erect a border wall, have served to make the smuggling of people and goods across the border an increasingly profitable and professionalized business. Meanwhile, a recent internal U.S. government document reports that criminal misconduct among Border Patrol officers has increased. During the fiscal year of 2018, 9 percent of Customs and Border Patrol employees

85. “Resumé of Conditions in Mexico during August, 1942,” Confidential Report dated September 19, 1942, Nogales Classified Records, 1942.

were disciplined for misconduct.”⁸⁶ Border enforcement systems and the fear of deportation leave migrants in a uniquely vulnerable position that exposes them to physical abuse, sexual assault, robbery, and extortion. Nevertheless, calls continue for more border enforcement, such as former President Donald Trump’s demand for five thousand new agents (an increase of 25 percent).⁸⁷ Even within the agency, one 2019 report revealed that almost half of CBP officials did not think misconduct by all officials was handled appropriately.⁸⁸ However, these present-day patterns of corruption echo the consequences of the United States’s attempts to police its southern border nearly a century ago.

During the 1930s, deportation and border enforcement policies provided opportunities for authorities and criminals to profit from the vulnerable status of Mexican migrants. As the actions of Preciado and Powell illustrate, the economics of deportation incentivized the exploitation of migrants for financial and professional gain, with virtually no risk of punishment by U.S. or Mexican officials. While the Great Depression resulted in unprecedented rates of return migration in the early 1930s, mass repatriation and deportation had not ended by the end of the decade. In 1939, one telegram mentioned that three thousand repatriates had arrived at the border in a week.⁸⁹ The ongoing waves of return migration to Mexico underline how commonplace the expulsion of Mexicans from the United States had become. Rather than an exceptional response to the economic crisis of the Great Depression, the coerced return of Mexican migrants formed an essential part of the labor migration pattern between the two countries. U.S. employers sought Mexican workers not only because they could pay them less and treat them poorly, but also because they could effectively dispose of them once no longer needed.

86. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Office of Human Resources Management, “U.S. Customs and Border Protection Discipline Analysis Report, Fiscal Year 2018,” 2, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6510092-Cbp-Discipline-Analysis-Report-fy18-Compressed.html>

87. White House Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements, July 25, 2017; Christine Stenglein and John Hudak, “Trump in 2018: What’s the Risk of an Overstaffed U.S.-Mexico border?,” Brookings, December 28, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2017/12/28/trump-in-2018-whats-the-risk-of-an-overstaffed-u-s-mexico-border/>

88. “They Treat You Like You Are Worthless: Internal DHS Reports of Abuses by US Border Officials,” Human Rights Watch, October 21, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/21/they-treat-you-you-are-worthless/internal-dhs-reports-abuses-us-border-officials>

89. Acta de la Sesión Pública Ordinaria celebrada por la H. XXXI Legislatura Constitucional del Estado, Periódico Oficial del Estado de Colima, March 18, 1939, 76–77, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.

During this period, deportation also emerged as a profitable business for authorities and smugglers on both sides of the border. Today, various industries prey on deportees in Mexico as well as on undocumented migrants in the United States. The business of border enforcement in the twenty-first century has contributed to the rise of privately owned detention centers in which migrants remain incarcerated for months and face uncertain futures.⁹⁰ Concurrently, the militarization of the border and targeting of deportees by drug cartels upon their return to Mexico offer more examples of the violence that border enforcement has produced. Tracing the early history of deportation practices and coyotaje reveals how early on, business interests linked officials from both sides of the border as they exploited migrants for profit.

These conflicting sources also raise questions into the ways we use national archives and government documents. How should we question and critique the sources authored by government agents in which they can craft a selective narrative that champions their own successes? Despite years of complaints by different individuals and concerted attempts to report violations of procedures, both governments failed to stop the actions of Preciado and his cronies. Preciado faced accusations of human smuggling, sex trafficking, sexual assault, and murder. Nonetheless, charges against him were easily dismissed and deemed to be nothing other than anti-American sentiment. Repeatedly, U.S. officials declined to investigate charges against him or his close associates. In turn, Mexican officials decided they could not pursue a person with such close ties to U.S. officials. The long history of silencing crimes against migrants embodies the myriad forms of border violence that continue even as the demand for border security intensifies today.

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90. Roxanne Lynne Doty and Elizabeth Shannon Wheatley, "Private Detention and the Immigration Industrial Complex," *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 4 (December 2013): 426–43.