

The Inspector Learns

A couple of years ago, one of the inspectors made a Saturday-night call at one of the largest cotton plantations in the El Paso sector. Naturally he made for the huts where the pickers lived—hovels without sanitation, without water, without windows. They had roofs, not that it made much difference in the rain. The inspector, a veteran, had gone in thinking that he'd seen about everything. He changed his mind. In almost all these huts, the biggest of them two-room affairs large enough for three or four persons each, he found as many as twenty-five Mexicans, from babies to grandparents. Almost all of the men and some of the women were drunk. Those who hadn't passed out were still drinking *sotol*, the cheapest form of mescal. If you've ever had mescal, you'll appreciate this all the more. Several of the children were dead. So were a few of their elders. The inspector called headquarters and the Border Patrol went to work.

Before they were through they had found that the operators of the plantation—Americans—had been importing labor from Mexico, paying smugglers (Amexes) a dollar a head for delivering the workers. They offered the Mexicans seventy-five cents a hundred pounds for picked cotton but managed to get a hundred and twenty-five pounds because their scales were fixed. The Mexicans, all of them wet, worked twelve hours a day and were required to live in the company's labor shacks, twenty to twenty-five in a room. For such housing the workers were charged twenty-five cents a day apiece. They had to buy their supplies at the company commissary where prices were from fifty to seventy-five per cent higher than outside stores. Those who had spirit enough to protest were told to shut up or be turned over to the Immigration officials and forever barred from returning to Texas. The owners of the plantation didn't quite dare place guards over the workers at nights and on Sunday to keep them on the place. But on Saturday night *sotol* was sold at fifty cents a bottle to all who had the half dollar. Thus Saturday night and Sunday found the Mexicans much too drunk to wander off. And the company profited again. Even the *sotol* came from the company's commissary. At the end of the season, almost all the Mexicans owed the company money.

But that broke up an old Rio Grande custom. As far as the Border Patrol knows, there is none of that going on in this enlightened year.

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By Walter Davenport