

# Anxious Times on the Arizona Border

*Dangerous drug smugglers just keep coming. Words & photos by Leo W. Banks.*

To a city dweller accustomed to sun-screen and Starbucks, it sounds like such a difficult life. Going to work every morning in the hard, hard ranch country on the Arizona-Mexico border, keeping one eye out for the drug smugglers who've staked a claim to this ground, wondering if you're being watched by a scout atop Cartel Mountain looming just to the south in Mexico, riding with a pistol on your saddle, listening for the rapid-fire che-che-che of the Mojave rattlesnake. They're loaded with two kinds of venom, of the most poisonous variety. This land wouldn't have it any other way.

But for rancher Tom Kay—74 years old, still vigorous and friendly, though blunt and occasionally fiery on the subject of government policy—the borderlands are his idea of paradise.

On a recent morning, standing atop a hill in the shadow of Cartel Mountain, a visitor comments on the stark landscape, miles of scraggy hills rolling into sheer rock ridges, those ridges disappearing into deep canyons, and all of it as dry as the back side of the moon.

He responds with a puzzled look and says: "What do you mean? This is the best country there is. I can't imagine being anywhere else."

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These are anxious times for Tom and his wife, Dena, proprietors of the 13,000-acre Jarillas Ranch outside Arivaca, 70 miles southwest of Tucson. The low-level but never-ending border war, the one the Obama administration ignores or shamelessly spins depending on the day, has been

dealing them some big-time misery lately.

At ranch headquarters four crow miles from the line—a beautiful home that should serve as an oasis from the trouble—they've had eight illegal crossers approach the house over an eight-month stretch.

"We haven't had this many in the 14 years we've been here," Dena says. "It began in October last year when we had to put down our bullmastiff, Ruby. She always held them back."

Dena believes seven of the eight were drug smugglers. All were young men, most wearing dark or camouflage clothing and none asked for water.

Usually, one approaches the house while others in the mule train wait out of sight. But on one occasion, the handful that stayed back didn't bother hiding the huge marijuana backpacks they carried.

The conversation in these encounters is usually brief:

Smuggler: "Can you help me?"

Dena: "Yes, I'll call Border Patrol."

Smuggler: "No!"

Dena: "Get the hell out of here and yes, I'm calling them. Don't forget your big backpacks."

The Kays rarely leave the house without a sitter to forestall a break-in and prevent theft and harm to their animals. They keep a .22 rifle handy in the kitchen, and Dena says she carries a .38 if she'll be returning home when Tom isn't there. Tom does the same.

"We don't live in fear," says Dena. "But we've had to show guns to make them leave. They seem to believe we'll give them rides or otherwise help out."

Such caution is wise on a border where dangerous episodes keep occurring. The latest, also in October last year, was the knife-point kidnapping of an elderly couple living along a smuggling trail near Nogales. The suspect, arrested two months later in Los Angeles, was an illegal alien and multiple deportee with a long criminal record.

Overall, though, at least in regard to illegal alien crossings, the situation at the Jarillas and in most other areas along the Arizona border has changed dramatically for the better. A decade or so ago, the Kays would see pickup trucks traveling past their house on the Tres Bellotas Road, the vehicles rocking on their springs and stuffed with 50 to 60 illegal aliens.

The Tres Bellotas was a popular coyote highway, a largely unguarded 13-mile stretch of rib-busting dirt running from



*Before buying the Jarillas Ranch 14 years ago, Tom and Dena Kay (inset) owned a ranch in Colorado, at the base of Mesa Verde National Park.*

the international line to Arivaca, then Tucson, Phoenix, and wherever else in the country they chose to go.

The border in those days was as hard to cross as a crack in the sidewalk. "It was a flood, everything and everybody coming across," says Tom. "They just drove their trucks over the barbed-wire border fence."

A few illegals still cross the Jarillas, but the free-for-all is gone, thanks in part to the Normandy barriers the government installed along the line. They stopped drive-throughs and kept Tom's cattle from drifting into Mexico. Before the barriers, he'd have to ride south to retrieve his wayward stock.

But those Mexican missions became too dangerous and he stopped about five years ago. "I could get away from the *federales*, but those cartel guys don't mess around," he says. "They'll shoot your ass."

The traffic now consists almost entirely of drug smugglers and they're a canny bunch, hard to catch. They wear carpet shoes that don't leave a clear footprint and greatly complicate tracking efforts. They also wrap their marijuana loads, which are already covered in burlap, in a camouflage T-shirt. The shirt keeps small snatches of burlap from snagging on plants, denying Border Patrol trackers easy sign to follow.

Add to these innovations the use of mountaintop scouts, who watch law enforcement every hour of the day and night, and the bad guys have the edge in the daily cat-and-mouse conflict.

If the feds were successful in staunching the flow of drugs, the street supply would shrink and the price would soar. But after decades of the drug war, illicit narcotics are as cheap as ever, and Arizona is a key conduit.

In fiscal 2015, Customs and Border Protection reports that Arizona led border states in all drugs seized—928,858 pounds, the vast majority marijuana. California and New Mexico were way behind. Texas came close at 914,748 pounds. But Texas has 1,254 miles of border with Mexico, while Arizona has only 389.

Tom occasionally sees mule trains passing, usually eight or nine guys and a rifleman with an AK-47 guarding the load. He rides the other way, even if it means losing cattle or having to regather. "If it's my pistol against an AK-47," he says, "I'm the loser."

He also faces the maddening efforts of humanitarian groups that leave water, food and blankets along smuggler trails, which has



*The high hills and deep draws around Arivaca make it a popular crossing area for illegal aliens and drug smugglers.*

been happening along the border for years. Between 1998 and 2008 when Keith Graves managed the Nogales Ranger District of the Coronado National Forest, the forest denied permits to groups wanting to put out supplies. But they did it anyway. Graves believes it was counterproductive, in the summer especially, when he tested the temperature of water left in the sun at 160 degrees.

"If you need hydration and drink from one of these grab water bottles, it can make you worse and maybe kill you," says Graves. "I've seen a can of beans pop open from bak-

ing in the sun." He says he's found blankets infested with scorpions and tarantulas.

The practice goes on today, although, as Dena says, "They're helping drug smugglers now, not women and children." Border Patrol agents privately confirm that smugglers know the GPS coordinates for supply sites all along the border.

Another impact: In April, Tom found a five-year-old cow dead near the border. To investigate the cause, he cut open the stomach and found that the pregnant animal had eaten a plastic garbage bag that once held



*A hidden camera shot shows drug smugglers near Arivaca. Nothing moves across the line, people or drugs, until the cartel's plaza boss, who controls the traffic on the Mexican side, gets paid.*

trail supplies and it got tangled in its intestines. He says a premier cow like that could fetch \$2,200 at the sale barn. The worst of it, though, was the manner of death.

“If you write anything, write this,” he says. “It’ll open the eyes of all the do-gooders and animal lovers. Write about how that cow died because she couldn’t crap out what she’d eaten, feeling her stomach blowing up inside. What a miserable, horrible death.”



But the bigger problem, the one that brought Tom and his visitor to his lower Fresno pasture on a sunny spring day, is fire. Early on the morning of May 6, Tom and a helper were working about a quarter mile above the border when they saw smoke over the hills to the north.

“It wasn’t much at first,” Tom says. “I was horseback and went ahead and pushed some cows down into a canyon, and when I came back up and could see again, there was much more smoke. The fire had grown a lot and I called it in.”

Over four days, the Cumero Fire burned about 5,500 acres on the Jarillas and a neighboring ranch, destroying considerable feed before Forest Service firefighters contained it. They were nervous hours. The fire was in such rough country it was difficult to fight, and the initial assessment said it was headed directly to the Kays’ house.

“In your head you start making evacuation plans,” says Dena. “What am I going to save, how do I get the animals out? Basically, you have to make sure your fences are cut all over the place so your horses and cattle can get out.”



*Normandy vehicle barriers at the Mexican border on the Jarillas Ranch. Tom has about four-and-a-half miles of land abutting the border. “I’m so much for Trump you can’t believe,” he says. BELOW: The pedestrian fence at the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Tom believes a border wall would reduce his overhead at least 10 percent and could double the value of the ranch. “If I were to sell this place now, which I have no plans to do, it’d be very difficult because people are afraid to come down here.” INSET, BELOW: Sherman the rottweiler puppy will help with ranch security.*

Mercy intervened. Moisture moved in and the winds died. Was it a smuggler fire? Common sense allows no other conclusion. Illegal crossers set more fires than is commonly known, to cook, to stay warm in winter, and to signal for rescue when they’re injured. The Kays almost lost their house in 2011 when an illegal-alien rescue

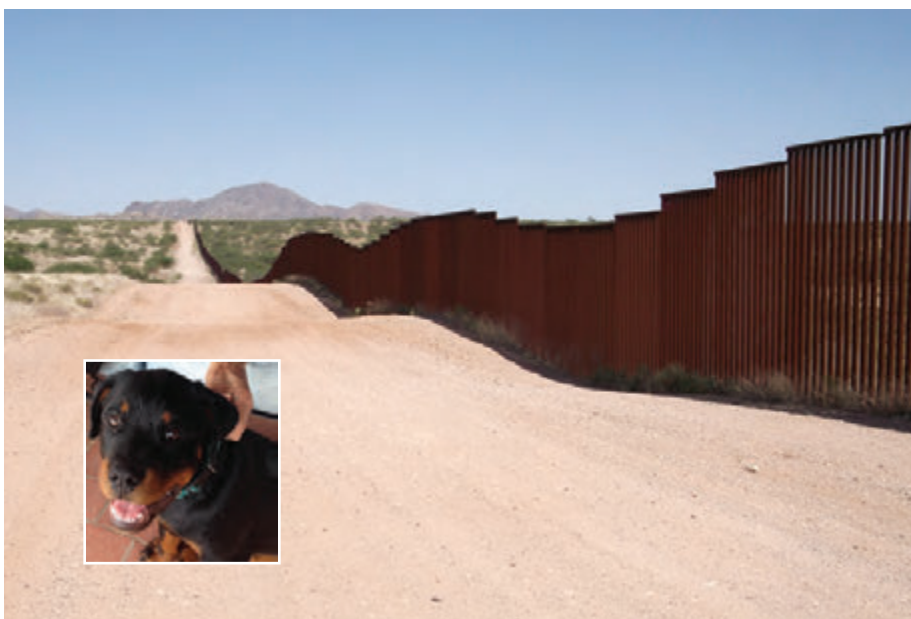
fire got out of control.

But crossers also set fires to draw Border Patrol to one area, while running a load through another. Tom suspects that the Cumero Fire was just that, a distraction fire set by smugglers. Without 100 percent proof, Forest Service and Border Patrol will only say it was human caused, which means that’s what the media report, keeping the public in the dark about a huge problem for borderlands’ ranchers.

This issue leaves Dena angry at the government’s unwillingness to state the obvious. “We’d been working that area for days and we know there were no hunters or campers,” she says. “I’m not naïve or stupid and it’s disappointing to keep hearing the company line. No one with a brain questions whether that fire was started by illegal crossers.”

The Kays also question the Border Patrol’s strategy of squeezing crossers to the east and west of the Jarillas, resulting in more traffic across the Kays’ range, which has few roads and deep canyons that Border Patrol camera towers cannot see into.

“It doesn’t make sense to send them onto us where they can’t see them and





*Rangeland burned by the Cumero Fire. "If we get a good summer monsoon, all that burned stuff will grow really good grass," says Tom. "If we don't, I'm going to be out of feed." BELOW: These vehicle barriers mark the U.S.-Mexico border at Fresnal Wash. Tom hasn't used his nearby pasture in two years because he fears a flood will wash away the barriers, which often happens, and his cattle will drift into Mexico. He plans to replace the barriers with floodgates that rise when the water runs and lower when it passes.*

where fires are so hard to put out," says Dena. "It endangers firefighters, burns up the countryside, kills wildlife, and could potentially devastate us."

Tom says the squeeze is especially noteworthy on the west end of his ranch, which abuts the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. All four-and-a-half miles of land the

refuge shares with Mexico is blocked by a 15-foot pedestrian fence, with a smooth dirt road underneath. Before its construction in 2008, refuge manager Sally Flatland says they were getting 2,000 to 4,000 illegals crossing every day, piles of trash, miles of illegal trails, and lots of criminal activity.

Along with a bad economy and con-

struction of Border Patrol camera towers, the fence stopped the worst of those problems. Flatland says foot traffic now numbers around 100 a day, although some illegals simply go around the fence, including to the east onto the Jarillas Ranch.

"The [Buenos Aires National Wildlife] refuge built a wall and they're happier than hell with it, but we can't have one?" Tom asks. "If we had a wall and a road and Border Patrol right on the border, rather than chasing them around after they get in, it'd stop all this stuff. By far, the biggest problem I face is the way our government handles things."

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As for the future, Dena wants the government to allow more legal entry to those who want to work and a loosening of restrictions on Border Patrol, allowing it to treat crossers and those who help them as criminals. She believes that would reduce damage to a beautiful land known for its diversity of birds, historic and archeological sites, and surprising greenery after the summer rains.

"Right now," she says, "it's being seriously compromised by fires and illegal traffic."

Meanwhile, she has taken a step to enhance her family's security in the form of a rottweiler puppy named Sherman, after the famously hard-nosed Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman. She studied the breed and believes the dog, when grown, will serve as an able replacement for the ever-vigilant Ruby.

For Tom, his immediate concern is repairing five miles of barbed-wire fence that has been damaged over the years by illegal crossers and was finally done in by the fire. The fence sits atop a ridge accessible only by horseback, which means packing in hundreds of posts and 20 to 30 rolls of barbed wire—another cost of doing business in Arizona's troubled borderlands.

But he wouldn't have it any other way.

"It might not look like it, but this is really good cattle country," Tom says. "It has lots of different kinds of browse so I don't need supplements, and my cows come off it fatter than on most other ranges in southern Arizona. And it's so rugged I get to work it horseback and I like the challenge of that. No, this land is right where I want to be." ■

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