



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

A fistful of dollars

I've seen this man before. He's Mexican, late-middle-aged, soft-spoken, and there is a guarded focus in his eyes that betrays the uncertainty of a life spent mostly standing over a trap door. His name is Armando.

A couple of years ago I saw him ride down the road on a bicycle, carrying a rake in one hand like a lance. He was riding door to door, looking for work, but that day he did not stop in at our place.

Yesterday, he pulled into our driveway at the wheel of a used car. A Pontiac. I was, as I usually am most mornings, in my office working. He was welcomed by our dogs, who eagerly abandoned their obsession with watching the chickens for the

prospect of a far more interesting visitor. I went down to meet him.

What Spanish I have acquired came to me first on the deserts of Nevada, where I often rode and worked with Mexicans, and learned to string together a sentence or two around the things of ranch life. The second baptism came in police work, where I learned key phrases such as "Show me your hands," and "Drop the knife," and "Why is there a bag of meth in your center console?" I said those things often enough that I will probably be muttering them, to the consternation of my nurses—who will likely be Hispanic—in the day-room of whatever raisin farm I eventually end up in.

But Armando is a working man, and after many mucho gustos we worked through the limits of our language troubles and I found some work that I needed done—work that he wanted to do because like all men, he needs money, and unlike too many of our fellow citizens, he's willing to work for it. And it is, after all, almost Christmas.

What stays with me in all of this, and it's something I've thought about before, is the tremendous admiration I have for Armando, and

others like him, who find themselves driven from their homes and suddenly many hundreds of miles away, deep inside an alien country and culture, without money, without facility in the language, and who nevertheless have the sand to get out—on a bicycle if necessary—get busy, and try to make an honest dollar.

It's driven by necessity, of course, that kind of pluck, and no small measure of courage, but there is also an overwhelming combination of humility and determination that we can all take a lesson from. It is a mindset and a vision of life that takes nothing for granted. Nothing, I daresay, in Armando's adult life has ever been given to him. Not one single thing.

Which is exactly the place where the abundance of our culture, this leviathan of entitlements and its attendant attitudes—has become our weakness. When people say that immigrants are willing to do work that Americans won't, they aren't making that up. It is probably no accident that not a single American citizen has ever come around to our little ranch with nothing but an old rake and a tarp, willing to do as much work as necessary in return for a modest day's wage.

On one of my old beats when I was a patrol officer was the city's labor line. Each morning a hundred or so people, mostly Mexicans but plenty of Central Americans too, would gather to sit on the rock wall and wait for contractors or private citizens to come by and offer work. It was also an open drug bazaar and later, when I become a narcotics detective, we would stage the occasional buy-bust operation to tamp down the brazen commerce in rock-cocaine and crystal meth. But these were nuisance operations—for us and for the dealers—because neither of us had any expectation that the trade would end over the quick spectacle of a few meaningless possession busts.

But there were men there who were not a part of that. These men were honestly looking for work, and worked honestly when they found it. They were very,

very poor people, often living 20 or 30 to a house in appalling circumstances. Later, as a detective, I would go into those places with some frequency. Bedrooms were sectioned off by hanging bedsheets, the lights never worked, there was often no legitimate plumbing, and the houses were filled with rats, cockroaches, mold, and filth.

Their lives as refugees and immigrants had filled them with incredible stories of hardship, desperation, and no small amount of legitimate, life-threatening danger. They had come to America seeking better lives, and the lives they were living in America were a window into how truly bad things must have been in the places they came from.

It was possible to see some of these men finally disappear from the labor line, which one hoped was

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