

The maquiladoras and the stores give away skids and cardboard boxes, useful for walls and roofs. All you have to buy are the nails. Those who can will buy plastic sheeting to drape their houses — or sheets of ridged plastic that repel the rain. The series of squatter shantytowns, which in Acuña are known as Cardboard City, begins a few steps beyond the Model Industrial Park. ...

One fine day, about six months ago, Zapopan Contreras and his family decided to make a fresh start. Manuel, Zapopan's son, closed his mechanic's shop in Monclova. A friend lent him a pickup, which they loaded up with their belongings, and the whole family climbed on for the trip to Acuña.

As soon as they arrived, they heard about some lots that were available in the Puerta de Alcalá, and they parked the pickup in one. ...

The early days were hard. "We were out here, exposed to the elements. It even rained on us," shudders Zapopan. By now the family has a one-room cardboard shack, where Zapopan, his son, his daughter-in-law, and the youngest child all sleep. The other four children — two of them orphans whose mother, Zapopan's daughter, died of cancer — sleep in the pickup and in a decrepit station wagon that Manuel is fixing up.

"Why did you come?"

"Because there's no work in Monclova. My husband kept having to sell his tools cheap so that we could get milk for the children." For Elba Guadalupe Martínez, Zapopan's daughter-in-law, it hurts to talk about it.

"And how's it going for you here?"

"We're getting by, at least as far as eating. The rest — well, we put down some money on these tubs and we're paying twenty pesos a week."

She refers to three galvanized tubs that the family fills by the bucket, carrying the water from the neighborhood's communal spigot so that they can bathe. ...

Manuel has already found work as a mechanic. He wants to save up some money for his family before venturing across the Rio Bravo [the Rio Grande]. Seven years ago he crossed illegally and he wants to try it again. The goal of so many: the maquilas as a trampoline to the American Dream. ...

-Arturo Cano, "The Cardboard Door" (December 15, 1996) excerpt