

Illegal Immigrant Takes Wrong Turn, Ends Up in Wisconsin

By Mike Royko

If you don't think that this is a great country, consider the adventures of Pablo Padron-Garcia.

On a recent hot day in a small Wisconsin town, the sheriff's office received an odd complaint. A stranger was knocking on doors, pleading for a drink of water. At least that's what the cautious residents thought he wanted. But they weren't sure because he spoke Spanish.

A deputy drove to the outskirts of Chippewa Falls and found a short, slender young man carrying a battered duffel bag and wearily shuffling along the road. "He was in pretty bad shape," recalls Mike Stangl, "because we had almost 100 degree temperatures.

"When I motioned for him to get in the car, he didn't try to run or anything like that. I don't think he could have. He just nodded and got in."

Stangl called in someone who spoke Spanish and they asked the man who he was and why he was knocking on doors on the edge of Chippewa Falls.

He said his name was Pablo Padron-Garcia, 22, and he was knocking on doors because he was terribly thirsty. They gave him some juice and asked again — why was he in Wisconsin and Chippewa Falls? He shrugged and gave them a remarkable explanation: he said he was lost.

Lost? They asked him where he was supposed to be. He said that he was supposed to be either in the state of Colorado or the state of Virginia.

Then what was he doing in the state of Wisconsin? He wasn't sure. And he explained his confusion.

Some days earlier, he had illegally crossed the border near San Antonio. He had intended to travel to Virginia or Colorado, where he has friends and hoped to find work. It appeared that he got on a train somewhere in Texas. But it wasn't clear where the train took him.

While he was looking for Virginia or Colorado, he became confused and went the wrong way or overshot his mark.

And that's how he ended up knocking on doors in Chippewa Falls with \$1 in his pocket and some cereal and canned food in his duffel bag.

There are many strange reasons why people go to Wisconsin. Some hope to shoot a goose and eat it. Others hope to sink a hook into the jaw of a big fish called the muskie and hang it on their rec room wall. Others enjoy the simple pleasure of eating bratwurst and cheese and washing it down with beer and shots of modestly priced brandy.

But this might be the first time that someone ended

up in Wisconsin because he thought he was in Colorado. John Denver would have trouble writing a song about that.

As strange as it sounded, Deputy Stangl believed it. He figured that nobody would make up such a story. So he tried to figure out what to do with Pablo Padron-Garcia.

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He couldn't arrest him because he hadn't broken any local laws, and he had no authority to hold illegal immigrants.

So he called the FBI. They told him that it was unlikely that federal immigration officials would go all the way to Chippewa Falls for one measly illegal immigrant.

"So I went to the Chippewa County Department of Social Service, and they referred me to the Chippewa County Economic Support Office," Stangl said. "He didn't qualify for aid.

"They told me to try the Salvation Army. But the Salvation Army said they were only equipped for emergencies. Meanwhile, this guy is quietly following me around to all these offices. There wasn't anybody who could do something for him because he wasn't a resident."

So the deputy turned him over to his interpreter, Dan Galvez, 40, who is also his brother-in-law. Galvez, the son of a Mexican immigrant, was sympathetic. Through his church, he got Pablo some more food for his tote bag. Then he took him home for a shower and a change of clothing. "I wanted to put him up, but my wife and I have five kids. There just aren't any facilities around here for the homeless." The next stop was the town's Greyhound terminal. Galvez bought him a ticket and put him on a bus and waved goodbye. Destination, Colorado or Virginia?

"No, I put him on a bus to Chicago, where he had a better chance of finding someone who could help him. I told him to ask the first Hispanic person he saw for help." Which wasn't a bad idea. In Chicago, the odds are about 50-50 that he'll either get helped or mugged. You can't beat even-money.

And all of this proves that this is a wonderful country. Where else on the planet could you walk across a border, get lost, wander for almost 2,000 miles without knowing a word of the local language, and end up getting a bag full of groceries, a fresh change of clothes, and a free bus ticket to a world-class city?

He's probably still in Chicago. So if a thin young guy with a duffel bag comes up to you on the street and asks if this is Colorado, he won't be kidding. Tell him yes and buy him a meal. He won't know the difference. ■