



64 Years Later, Dead Undocumented Immigrants Are Still Nameless in the New York Times

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While reading an article in Tuesday's *New York Times*, something struck me as hauntingly familiar.

Under the headline "[14 Illegal Immigrants Are Killed When Pickup Truck Crashes in Texas](#)," the story, datelined Goliad, Texas, began: "Fourteen illegal immigrants were killed Sunday outside this rural South Texas town after the pickup truck they were riding in veered off a highway and struck two trees, the authorities said."

As I read the entire 620-word article, I realized that story failed to report the names of any of the victims. Throughout the article, they were identified only as "illegal immigrants."

Then I recognized that the *Times*' story was reminiscent of the paper's coverage of a similar event 64 years ago that inspired one of Woody Guthrie's most well-known protest songs, "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos," usually called simply "Deportee."

The article in Tuesday's *Times* repeatedly emphasized the victims' legal status. The second paragraph began:

"A total of 23 people, from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico and all in the country illegally, had been crammed into the cab and the bed of the pickup truck when the driver lost control around 6:30 pm Sunday."

The reporter, Manny Fernandez, noted that the dead included "Eleven men, one woman and two young girls" and that "Nine others who were injured remain in local hospitals, state and federal authorities said."

According to the *Times*, "State officials said none of the 14 victims in the Goliad accident had been identified."

The crash occurred on U.S. Highway 59, about 20 miles southwest of Goliad, which is 145 miles from the Mexican border.

The article noted that "a series of crashes involving vehicles filled with illegal immigrants have claimed numerous lives in recent months and years" in south Texas. "The smugglers of illegal immigrants often use the highways and roads to travel from the border" to Texas cities and towns. The story quoted a state trooper who said that in his 36 years in the area "this is one of the worst ones I've seen."

Rewind 64 years.

In 1948, while living in New York, folksinger Woody Guthrie was angered by newspaper and radio accounts of a plane crash near Los Gatos Canyon in Fresno County that killed 32 people, including 28 migrant farm workers who were being deported back Mexico. The *New York Times* story, for example, mentioned the names of the flight crew and the security guard, but simply referred to the other victims as "deportees."

The three-paragraph article in the January 29, 1948 *Times* (based on an Associated Press report), began:

"A chartered Immigration Service plane crashed and burned in western Fresno County this morning, killing twenty-eight Mexican deportees, the crew of three and an Immigration guard. Irving F. Wixon, director of the Federal Immigration Service at San Francisco, said that the Mexicans were being flown to the deportation center at El Centro, Calif., for return to their country. The group included Mexican nationals who entered the United States illegally, and others who stayed beyond duration of work contracts in California, he added. All were agricultural workers."

In the next paragraph, the paper reported:

"The crew was identified as Frank Atkinson, 32 years old, of Long Beach, the pilot; Mrs. Bobbie Atkinson, his wife, stewardess, 28; and Marion Ewing of Balboa, copilot, 33. Long Beach airport officials said that Mr. Atkinson, formerly of Rochester, N.Y., had logged more than 1,700 hours flying time as a wartime member of the Air Transport Command. The guard was identified as Frank E. Chaffin of Berkeley."

The final paragraph gave the details of the crash:

"The plane, which was chartered from Airline Transport Carriers of Burbank, was southbound from the Oakland airport, when it crashed in view of some 100 road camp workers. Foreman Frank V. Johnson said that it "appeared to explode and a wing fell off" before it plummeted to the ground. A number of those in the plane appeared to jump or fall before the aircraft hit the earth, he added. The wreckage was enveloped in flames when the fuel tanks ignited. Not until the fire died down were rescuers able to

get near the plane. By then, there was nothing to be done but to extricate the bodies. The scene of the crash is in the mountains about twenty miles west of Coalinga, seventy-five miles from here in the rough coastal area."

Guthrie had a long history of concern about migrant farmworkers, including those who, like him, had moved to California from Oklahoma (his native state), Texas, and Arkansas to find work during the Depression. Guthrie often visited migrant labor camps, wrote songs about their plight, and performed for farmworkers trying to unionize to improve their miserable conditions.

After reading the *Times* story about the incident, Guthrie wrote "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos" to express his outrage at the mistreatment of Mexican migrants. To protest their anonymity in the article, Guthrie gave the victims symbolic names.

The crops are all in and the peaches are rott'ning
The oranges are piled in their cresote dumps
They're flying you back to the Mexico border
To pay all your money to wade back again

My father's own father, he waded that river
They took all the money he made in his life
My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees
And they rode the truck till they took down and died

CHORUS

Good-bye to my Juan, good-bye Rosalita
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maris
You won't have a name when you ride the big air-plane
And all they will call you will be deportees.

Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted
Our work contract's out and we have to move on
Six hundred miles to that Mexican border
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.

We died in your hills, we died in your deserts
We died in your valleys and died on your plains
We died 'neath your trees and we died in your bushes
Both sides of the river, we died just the same.

CHORUS

The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon
A fireball of lightning, it shook all our hills
Who are all these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?
The radio says they are just deportees.

Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil
And be called by no name except deportees?

According to Joe Klein's biography, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, Guthrie never put the words to music. Instead, he chanted the words. Years later, Martin Hoffman, a school teacher, added the haunting melody. The song wasn't performed publicly for a decade after Guthrie wrote it. The song only became well-known after Guthrie's friend Pete Seeger began performing it in concerts. Since then, many other singers have recorded "Deportee," including [Bruce Springsteen](#), Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, [Dolly Parton](#), [Johnny Cash](#), [Willie Nelson](#), and [Johnny Rodriguez](#), Billy Bragg, the Kingston Trio, Judy Collins, [Arlo Guthrie](#), Sweet Honey in the Rick, and The Byrds.

The 28 Mexican passengers -- 27 men and one woman -- were buried in a mass grave at Holy Cross Cemetery in Fresno. Only 12 of them were ever identified.

The DC-3 airplane was operated by Airline Transport Carriers under a contract with the U.S. Immigration & Naturalization Service to fly Mexican farm workers, who had entered the country illegally or had overstayed their work permits, to border towns near Mexico. The pilot and crew flew the first leg of the journey -- from Burbank Airport to Oakland -- without any passengers. Twenty-eight passengers boarded the plane in Oakland (along with Chaffin, their INS guard) bound for Imperial County Airport. From there, they were going to be taken to the INS Deportation Center in El Centro, California.

More than two weeks after the crash, in its February 14, 1948 edition, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that Airline Transport Carriers has used the wrong aircraft on the flight that crashed near Coalinga. At a hearing before the Civil Aeronautics Board in Santa Monica, company officials admitted that the pilot was supposed to have used another DC-3 plane that was due to arrive in Burbank from Las Vegas. Instead, he took off from Burbank in a plane "of the same type which was waiting to be given its regular 100-hour checkup," according to the *Chronicle*. "This checkup already was seven hours overdue." A [history](#) of the incident noted that the plane, with 32 people aboard, was outfitted to carry just 26 passengers.

The 1948 plane crash in California, last Sunday's truck crash in Texas, and the reporting of each incident by the *New York Times*, are eerily similar. An [AP story](#) about Texas accident noted that "The victims -- men, women and children -- were carrying toothbrushes, toothpaste and changes of socks and underwear but no identification." America's current immigration laws, and

the way that immigrants are mistreated by government officials and abused by "coyotes" who escort them across the border, forces undocumented immigrants to be so fearful and invisible that they don't carry papers identifying who they are. To the larger society, and to the media, they are just "illegal immigrants." Woody Guthrie's words, written 64 years ago about the treatment of Mexican migrant workers -- "*They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves*" -- are, unfortunately, hardly outdated.

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