



# American Wetback

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*An Autobiography by the Barrio Azteca Texan Prison Gang Founder and Leader,  
Jose R. Rivera*



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## INTRODUCTION

*"If the only prayer you ever pray is Thank you that will be sufficient." --Sam Keen.*

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Self-hatred had led to the only conclusion to my life: murder by my own hand.

I was on a bad guilt trip for everything I had done in the name of evil. I was one of those devils Gandhi talked about. I didn't realize I was a good guy, but to the present is where I was headed.

This book was me. Now it's just a part of me. I'm 54 years old now: 34 years of practice, twenty years of experience.

Life is terminal.

Live like you were dying.

The heat burning through my sneakers was intense. The soles were thin and I was standing on a dark colored roof in the middle of August. It was 105 degrees and the humidity was some sick number that made me remember that in the not too distant past I had gone through this same exact thing but I had been forced to do it. I had been a slave to the great State of Texas. My feet were on fire and I could feel blisters starting to well up on the soles of my feet, which were much thinner than the soles of my sneakers.

A thought entered my mind.

"All I have to do is make a phone call and I could get some business (drugs) up here and make some good money."

I thought about it but my better angel got the best of me.

I had just left that life, a life filled with miracles and the will to survive. I had come this far on fumes. Clean from heroin and cocaine for about a month, I had the option of getting off that roof and walking back into the darkness of my past.

I manned up and kept shingling. The pain wasn't even that bad, I had felt worse than this a hundred times. I had a job and right now this was the most important thing in the world to me. I had a job. I was living in a homeless shelter, down but not out.

It's funny how one moment I was riding the crest of a crime wave coasting through El Paso, Texas and all of a sudden I'm standing on a hot roof, doing work that is incredibly hard and grateful to have learned this particular skill that would get me out of homelessness and start a new life altogether. Roofing had always fascinated me, how the roof was torn off and how it was papered and especially how the shingles were laid in a pattern that kept a home high and dry.

This was the hardest work I could find. Actually it found me. The calluses from prison field work had worn off and now my hands were badly blistered. It was a sort of self-punishment and an attempt at redemption by doing my own forced labor at the most menial job and hardest jobs.

Really the only jobs I could do were cash under the table.

I was wanted in Texas and I was beginning a new life that did not involve crime but true sincerity in becoming someone else, a decent person.

I was far from my goals and dreams of somehow fitting into society's definition of what was correct.

There wasn't any such thing as "correct".

Society was just as messed up as I was but somehow I learned the value of just fitting in and making myself invisible to law enforcement.

I was learning how to live and thrive in a whole new world, I had come from another planet, this was Venus I was definitely from Mars.

I had even lied my way into the homeless shelter. They would give people a thin mattress and a spot on the floor (which was always maxed out). I made up some bullshit story about being abandoned by some people from California I was traveling with and I needed help. I was given a bunk bed and a locker.

No one ever just got in unless they were in a drug treatment program.

I had landed in Omaha, Nebraska.

This was another skill that would serve me well. I was a really good liar and amateur con-man. I had been living on the edge of society all my life, one foot in one foot out.

Now I was in with both feet and not just at the bottom of the barrel, but underneath it.

I had become a street preacher and proselytized on Sunday mornings to street folk and gave them the good news about Jesus and sometimes saving them, (in my mind). They would come to Christ and we would be in the middle of the street on skid row praying.

Sometimes other homeless people passing by would widen the circle. Then at 12:00 noon the liquor stores would open up and I would go and start my drinking and walking around town.

Now I could preach better. How do you save drunks? You become the drunk. Or so I thought.

This was Omaha, Nebraska, the spot of my new life.

The second day that I was in the Sienna Francis house (years later I would be an assistant manager there), I was outside amongst the homeless folk loitering around reading my stolen Gideon's bible outside on a concrete bench that lined a sally port. The shelter was very crowded but there was always room for one more on the floor. Around nine, I went to put my bible in a locker I had been assigned, when this hippie looking type walked in looking for a day laborer. No-one was taking him up on his offer of employment.

Most homeless people are incapable of gainful employment due to either mental illness and/or drug or alcohol addiction).

I asked him what he was working on and he said "Roof tear off".

"How much does it pay", I asked him.

"Five fifty an hour".

I went with him and got into a big cube van where the boss was waiting.

Big guy. Strong and Italian. Called himself a "the Italian stallion". He could fix anything. He was a fucking MaGyver. The only thing was that he was a fucking pervert. I had been under the impression that anyone who had a job was not a criminal. This guy was a sex fiend. I had seen his kind in prison but I never thought that people like this were out on the streets. He had this thing for orgies and wife swapping and what not. He carried around a pink dildo in his van and picked up hookers everywhere we went on a job. He tried to get me to join him in his activities but I just couldn't do it. Me being a Christian forbade me from it. His helper (I'll call him Tim) was a raging alcoholic, poor guy drank a fifth of whiskey every morning just to get started. He reaked of cologne but he was a good carpenter. Nick (my boss) eventually got another woman to live with him and his wife. I was very naive when it came to this kind of thing. I stuck it out for about eighteen months, always fighting the temptation to join him in his sexual escapades, he even asked me once if I would do his wife while he just watched, I turned him down and told him to keep his twisted shit to himself.

I'm not judging the man. To each his own, as long as no one is harmed.

We worked about ten hours on that first day, and I wanted to keep going. I had tore off more roof than both of them. They had wanted to race me so I tore off that roof in a mad frenzy. I was a hard worker and it showed so he saw the value of hiring me full time so he didn't have to go looking for day laborers who were either high, drunk or sick and just wanted a couple of dollars to go get their poison and not show up the next day.

He hired me on the spot that afternoon when we stopped working

This job would be my ticket out of the bad side of Omaha.

The north side is where a lot of poverty exists, whereas the Southside is thriving. That's the Latino part of town. But there are also homeless on the Southside.

Poverty evens itself anywhere.

My life hadn't always been this way.

I wasn't from here and never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be doing what I am doing now.

My dreams only consisted of violent crimes, drugs, alcohol and more drugs, except when I was in prison doing time for armed robbery or burglary.

I was from Texas. Still am as a matter of fact. But now I claim Nebraska as the best state to get sober in. The drunkest state in the nation. I think that anyone can make it in Nebraska. You just have to try.

This has been my land of opportunity and if I can make it here, anyone can.





## The seedy underside

I had become a born again Christian and to my consternation it wasn't having a good effect on me. Just like all the other times I had been saved by everyone from the Pentecostals to Catholics to Baptists and some other religions that come real close to being cults.

I was still drinking a lot and getting into street fights. But in this part of town I fit right in, everybody looked like me and I looked like them. We all looked street. There was a pecking order on the bricks. There was always a couple of bullies who got their rocks off by using the local winos as punching dummies.

They only tried it once with me and decided it was in their best interest to go to another side of town. I had politely asked them to stop robbing a street person and they asked if I wanted to take his place. They got a little too close, a head butt and a solar plexus punch later and they were asking for forgiveness. They were just drunks like the rest of the flies but they got their kicks making it miserable for the defenceless.

I banished them from that area. Sergio. The one I had just rescued became my new best friend. He knew the streets and showed me around downtown and other parts of Omaha. After about two weeks I discharged Sergio from his duties.

I was a lone wolf.

I had been the head of the pack now I was alone, no one to help me or even talk to. Now the only company I kept were my demons and I was in the fight of my life. I never wanted to go back to prison again, so I tried praying them away. That didn't work but I didn't give up trying to become a better person. It took years but eventually I freed my mind. I realized I didn't have to live like this if I only took the first step of accepting that I was powerless and the only one who could help was a god that could and would heal me if I only admitted that my life had been a failure up to that point. I was still hurting but at least I wasn't on drugs and I had a job.

It was a good start.

I kind of liked being by myself and just doing my thing, which was to stay out of prison and ahead of the law for as long as I could. I knew they would catch up with me some day, but I wouldn't make it easy for them this time.

I would never commit a crime again besides driving drunk a lot.

I would get sober a few years later in that same homeless shelter. As of this writing, I have been sober twelve years.

I had moved out of the homeless shelter after two weeks.

I was only two blocks away in a roach motel that had just re-opened after it had caught fire from a lit cigarette in a sleeping bums' hand.

They had attempted to do a decent job of fixing it up. The owner slapped a paint job on the building, did some repairs on it, slapped up a bunch of no smoking signs and opened for business.

I was one of their first customers.

The other inhabitants of the hotel were like me, invisible with their own fucked up stories. The one thing we all had in common, besides drinking and drugs, was that we were all ex-convicts. Each one had a story to tell and I heard a few of them. I even cried with some of them.

But this is my story and it's a long winding road from there to here and beyond till I'm no more.

I wrote this book around the title. The title came first. I knew I had to write a book about it.

That's like buying a bathtub and building a house around it.

I was thinking about an article I read about jingoists and nativists and I was thinking to myself that they were all Wetbacks. We were here way before them and so therefore they were wetbacks. "Amerikan Wetbacks".

But this book isn't about them, even though racism is a part of the premise of this book. For racists it's not a matter of fairness or the ability to see where they are wrong in their beliefs. For the racist it's a matter of being afraid that somehow they are going to lose their position at the top of the food chain in the world order. This is inevitable. Their thoughts are that they must win this pseudo race war by evicting millions of people from here, from our homes. They are serious about it. Draconian anti-immigrant laws are passed to restore the social racial order.

The funny thing is that not everyone feels this way. I would like to tell how racism is bred and taken to the extreme by actual people that look like me. Racists come in all colors. They're not just white southern rednecks, a lot of who are friends of mine.

I was an unwilling racist, but a racist never the less.

I was in the combat zone of the black side of town but I wasn't sweating it. I had a lot of practice dealing with black folk and I could speak soul. I didn't have to prove anything to anyone or show how much I hated blacks. The main reason for hating them was gone. I didn't have to hate anymore because of someone's skin color. I was free from the peer pressure of others like me who kept up the propaganda that blacks were inferior and therefore worthy of our hatred for no cause other than I had been told this since I was little.

Now, I wasn't listening to anyone or trying to prove just how bad I was by hating blacks to their faces. (Remember Bull Connor in Alabama?).

These blacks weren't like the folk back in prison, these brothers and sisters were beaten down and no harm to anyone except themselves. The bricks were reserved for people like these who roamed the streets always looking for something that they could never find.

Release from their Demons.

Most of us had been saved numerous times, in halfway houses, jails, as kids who didn't know any better. None of this salvation ever took for any of us, even when we were at our most sincere in trying to live a good Christian life.

It just didn't exist. Not for people like us who never quite understood the concept of being saved. Being saved from what? The Devil?

My troubles weren't being administered from another plane or another dimension where an evil being was planning my life for me and I was powerless to do anything about it. This was bullshit.

I just had to find a way to not just get out of drug addiction or my gang but everything I had ever thought was true for me.

I had been living on a flat earth, I fell off the edge. That's what it felt like when my whole world came crashing down around me and I had gone from the top of the food chain to the glop that passes for a society that exists due to the indifference of those who have not lost everything.

Yet, I kept reading my Bible, trying to find the blueprint that would guide me. Everyone said the answer was in the Bible. So I kept looking. A few nuggets of wisdom would jump off the pages every now and then, maybe, an occasional epiphany.

Who am I kidding? What I thought was sudden knowledge, an epiphany, was actually just me expressing a deep desire for something better than what my life was actually doing at the moment.

This was July 1994 and I had burned all my bridges, or so I thought.

No one knew me here. In this new environment, this was a fresh start. I had done this before. I had gone to other states while I was on the run before but I had always committed crimes in those places, usually armed robbery, assault, auto theft.

This time was different though. The last thing on my mind was screwing up and getting caught and getting sent back to prison. I just didn't want to go back. Before, going back was like going to the corner store to buy bread. It was easy. Prison was the only real home I could identify with. I was somebody in there. Prison and the "Eyes of Texas" were my reason for existing. I had 13 years left on a 15 year prison sentence. This was a long time to run but I would run as long as I could.

I knew that I would get caught eventually. I would make a mistake and I would go back but this time I would not go back with the mental chains of incarceration. Those chains would come off and I would go back a free (in my mind) man. I had paid my dues to society and then some.

This is my story, maybe there is light after all and it's inside all of us, the Divine within.

## The child within

*“The only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts. And there is where all of our battles ought to be fought”. Mohandas K. Ganddhi.*

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It was summer on the Rio Bravo, (Rio Grande) and I was 8 or 9 years old at the time.

The border was my playground and it was the best place on earth for me and my little brother, Buck. We were on the American side playing cowboys and Indians. This was old Fort Bliss on Paisano Street and, of course, we were the cowboys.

We were crouching down looking across the river at two horses grazing along the riverbank. A mare and her colt. She had a hobble tied to her feet.

Back then the river always had water. We used to swim in it all the time, even though Asarco had already been polluting it for years.

We were kids and we didn't care.

I told Buck to wait there and I went upstream so the current could take me across and I could come ashore at the spot where I could catch the mare and cut her rope with a piece of glass. She was very tame. I slipped into the water like a gator. I was feeling a little scared but fear seemed to have the opposite effect on me. Instead of being afraid, fear would motivate me. I hopped on the mare and kicked her sides and she swam across the river, with the colt hesitating on the Mexican side. When we were across the colt jumped in and swam across to join its mother.

We were in border heaven. This was the ultimate playground, no rules, no adults, just fun. It was a game of cat and mouse.

The border patrol wasn't harassing people because they looked Mexican and it was hard for them to tell us apart. Besides why go all the way downtown to cross into Juarez when we could swim across and sometimes just walk across.

Our relatives would visit all the time. The mountains at the toe of the Rockies were full of Indians (in our minds) and we climbed them like mountain goats.

We had lived in the inner city and we were always getting evicted so we moved around a lot. My mom always took the lead in taking care of us. She did the best she could with what she was given and that wasn't a whole lot.

This was her "American dream": Hardship and a drunk, brutal husband.

My mom would tell us a story of how someone had cast a spell on our family when she was carrying me in her belly. I'm the second oldest of seven, five boys two girls.

My dad had been messing around with some woman and apparently had broken it off with her. Hell hath no fury.... She had hired a Hechicera (etch-ee-sera), a witch, to cast a spell on us. So, according to her, I was pretty much cursed from day one.

I wasn't, but that's what I believed. That's what I was told.

The story went that when my mom got home one day, two women hurriedly left the tenement where we lived. My dad was inside in a drunken sleep.

The witch had a clubbed foot and wore dark glasses, La Fenomena (The freak).

My mom knew who she was.



She whispered something to my mom as they passed her in the hallway. This lady is a real person. She hung out at the seedy bars downtown. My mom said she found salt sprinkled on the threshold of our door.

In our culture, this is considered very bad luck, and our Catholic culture is very superstitious. I'm sure my mom believed it and so she probably resigned herself to living the hell that was to be her life until the day she died.

See, the thing is, it isn't the curse itself, it's the power one gives the curse. The power of the word can make you sick or heal you. We do it all the time.

I grew up on the mean streets of the Southside, in El Paso, Texas, 500 yards from the Mexican border.

But for the grace of God, I was fortunate enough to be born on U.S. soil, dirt poor, but American.

My dad was a mean tequila swilling drunk.

My mom was a poor, but beautiful peasant woman, from the mountains of Chihuahua, Mexico. She had also been fortunate enough to have been born in the United States of America. It was a brutal life for my mom and the vicious cycle just kept spinning.

No brass ring or any ring for that matter, just a broken bottle with jagged points.

She had been taken back to Mexico as a baby, because of the rampant racism that existed in this country in the 1920s. Even now, it still shows its nasty mask of arrogance and cowardice.

Mexicans were being encouraged to go back to Mexico, not unlike today's atmosphere of sheer hatred towards my brothers and sisters from across the border. On U. S. soil, whites were discriminating against their own kind. Everyone should read John Steinbeck's, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Yet she came back to this country at the age of 25, where she met my dad and then gave birth to me in March 27th 1959.

From these humble beginnings I came into this world at 7 lbs. 5 ounces.

Who knew I would rise to become one of the top gang leaders in the Texas prison system and the city of El Paso, Texas. El Chuco, as it is known amongst the old timers.

My dad's family never crossed the border, (the border crossed them). They were from Van Horn, Texas. He had a brutal childhood. He was born in 1910, left home at 15, never to return. My mom told me he had been abused as a kid (chained up and horse whipped.), but back then they called it discipline.

I never learned much about him. He never really talked to me. He just dragged me along to wherever and kicked my ass when he was in a bad mood. That was pretty much all the time.

He was an ex-con, having served time in the prison in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the thirties or forties. He never talked about it. We found a picture of him in prison wearing the old pinstripe uniform they were issued back in the game.

He was found dead in a culvert in Anapra, New Mexico, but at least he died on U.S. soil. Cause of death: severe hypothermia, complicated by advanced cirrhosis of the liver. They found a large bottle of Tequila Sauza by his side (the rotgut of Tequilas).

He was found on December 31st, 1973. He died at age 63.

I was 14 and the years of constant beatings and torment had come to an end.

It was party time and I was now, totally out of control.

## Made in the USA

*Hecho en el U.S.A., 1959, (Made in the U.S.A 1959)*

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That's what my gang patch says on my rib cage.

I had to come back here to my beginning, to the point where I learned all about guilt and shame and that whatever happens, it's my fault. You're true self is inside of you, somewhere in a secret place. It is as young as you are old, go back and find that child, bring it back, love it and protect it.

If not for maximum security, I would still be in there. Everyone should spend at least a week in prison just once. Then we would not be so quick to cut back on so many programs that assist the very poor.

What happened? I can feed you a line about how I grew up in severe poverty, with an abusive alcoholic father, in the poorest and most crime ridden part of El Paso, Texas, El Segundo barrio (The Second ward). Juarez, Mexico, just a couple of hundred feet across the border. Heroin, prescription drugs, and glue-sniffing were readily available on both sides.

It would just sound like an excuse.

Maybe it isn't an excuse but a hard reality of life in this country where indifference is the law of the land. If it's not on the news it's not happening. There is an old saying amongst the poor: "Sal si puedes" (Get out if you can).

This is why the present situation on the border has exploded, literally. The level of violence is unfathomable to the average American citizen. We pretend it doesn't exist and therefore we are not permitted to care because the five o'clock news hasn't deemed it so.

These same people are the ones in this book. I grew up with them and they are no different than you and me. A lot of the population suffers from the problems that come with drug addiction. And there are those who profit from it, but you can't tell the difference because at any given time those that profit are replaced by those that just want something better and if it be through drugs and violence, so be it.

Someone has to do it and there are many who have very little to nothing at all. Every child is in danger of becoming an addict of one poison or another and almost everyone has been to prison or is headed to prison eventually. That is, if they make it to the age of 18.

Very few have been able to leave and lead reasonably successful lives, but it can be done.

There are the innocent who get caught up in this nightmare world of drugs, guns, and murder through no fault of their own and these are the people who matter the most to me. They need the most help. But the only way they will get it is from a society who does hold its moral values above its politics and hatred towards others because of the color of their skin.

The main industries are drug smuggling, prostitution, murder, rape and, of course, gang membership.

I started life out as another statistic, another mouth to feed, poster boy for why birth control should be practiced more widely in my culture.

Then again, I wouldn't be writing this book, hoping I can make a difference in some kids life.

I hope I'm not a one trick pony. This is my pedigree. It runs in the family: alcohol, drugs, crime, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and lots of violence.

I founded the Barrio Azteca prison gang on the Coffield unit in the Texas Dept. of Corrections on November 13th, 1985, on Y-wing, Row 1, Cell 15. Little did I know it would become the largest prison and street gang in Texas. It began partially as a racist gang and partially as a way to stop the Texas Syndicate, the most bloodthirsty gang of them all, and the Mexican Mafia from recruiting my homeboys.

El Paso and Juarez convicts were known for being stand up and so we were highly valued for recruitment by the other two major gangs in prison.

I had been asked to join these other gangs numerous times, and at the time I saw it as an honor. I never joined. I came close to joining the T.S. and the Mexican Mafia, even going so far as sending my name in to be investigated and considered for membership. I looked up to the T.S. and the Eme, but I withdrew my name and said no thanks. Our loyalties to both gangs were just about evenly divided.

I already had the respect of The T.S., the Eme (Mexican Mafia), the Mandingo Warriors and the Aryan Brotherhood and the blacks of course, who were the main reason that a lot of inmates joined the gangs. There was safety in numbers, especially if you were weak. A lot of people did join just for protection. Not everyone. Some were real killers and fighters who were well respected by everyone, including myself. I looked up to these people but I had my own reputation as a crazy Mexican who didn't give a fuck and I proved it constantly, although mine was all an act.

If awards were ever to be handed out for playing a gangster, I would win hands down. No I wasn't a gangster, but I did play one in prison. I learned a secret. If someone hears something about someone else, something that they think they can use to their advantage, they will believe anything.

I liked to fight and they saw me as a threat. I had an even bigger mouth and wasn't shy to speak my mind. I never let anyone know I was scared. And I talked like I was the toughest man that ever lived. I played the role and I believed it. I learned to manipulate rumors to my own advantage.

Prison is rumor driven, there is never fact to back up anything said in there so I used the rumor mill and made it grow my reputation which was based on rumors about me.

I guess this is a good place to start my story.

Thank you for coming along.