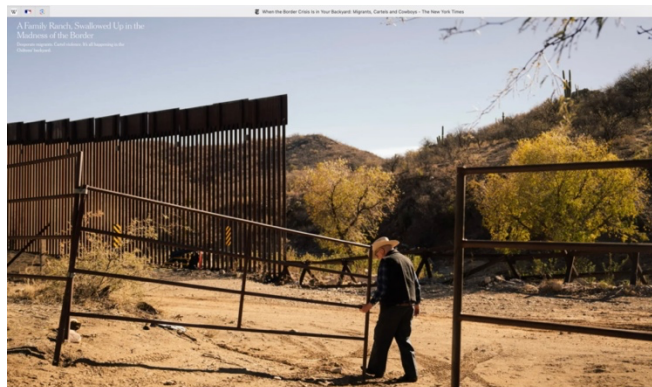




Erin Schaff/The New York Times



By [Eli Saslow](#)

Photographs by [Erin Schaff](#)

Eli Saslow and Erin Schaff spent several days on the Chiltons' ranch in Arivaca, Ariz., in January.

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Jim Chilton, 84, had named the dirt roads and pastures on his land in honor of four generations of family cattle ranchers, but now he prepared to drive across his ranch on the U.S. border unsure of what he might find. He packed a handgun in case he encountered more smugglers working with the Sinaloa cartel and bottles of water for the migrants he'd recently seen lost and dehydrated in the Sonoran Desert.

“Do you have your satellite phone?” asked his wife, Sue Chilton, 81. There was no cell service on most of the ranch and no other homes for several miles.

“I’ll take it with me, but assume no news is good news,” Jim said.

His plan for the day was to survey three remote water tanks and locate a few lost cows — simple tasks in a place where everything had become increasingly complicated during the last several months. Jim laid out a map of southern Arizona on the hood of his truck and showed Sue the route he planned to take across their cattle grazing land, an area three times the size of Manhattan located on the outskirts of Arivaca, Ariz. He traced his finger over a desolate mountain range, across six canyons, and down to the five and a half miles of their ranch that ran along the U.S.-Mexico border in what had become one of the busiest corridors for a record wave of undocumented immigration.

“You’re sure you have everything you need?” Sue asked.

Jim searched the bed of his truck for his first-aid kit and double-checked his supplies. “I’m as prepared as I could be,” he said.

“I guess it depends on what version of the border you see today,” Sue said. Lately, she had been telling friends that understanding the current border crisis reminded her of an old folk tale about a group of blind men encountering an elephant. One man touched the trunk and thought it was a snake. One touched a leg and thought it was a tree. One touched the tail and believed it was a rope.

The Chiltons had spent the past several years trying to unravel the mysteries of their own backyard and grasping at partial truths as the situation worsened on their ranch. They discovered drugs and at least 150 smuggling trails on their grazing land, so they put up security cameras and offered to arm all five of their working cowboys. Those cowboys started to see groups of migrants stranded near the border, so the Chiltons installed water fountains in the desert to help keep people alive. Their security cameras recorded hundreds of men walking by each month in camouflage, so they testified before Congress and campaigned alongside Donald Trump for a wall, hoping it might slow the procession of people onto their ranch.

But now more undocumented immigrants were crossing the southern border than ever before, including a record 302,000 in the month of December alone. Each night, the crisis brought more danger and desperation onto their ranch,

and Jim and Sue were still trying to get their minds around the whole elephant: It was a humanitarian disaster. It was a drug crisis. It was a national security emergency. It was a cartel war and an American political battle all playing out during a presidential election year within the remote confines of their ranch.



Jim added drinking fountains to his water tanks to help migrants walking across his property.



Jim driving onto the border wall road along his ranch. There are many gaps in the wall.

“I’ll be back in five or six hours,” Jim said. He waved to Sue and turned onto a dirt road headed south.

The road turned into a rutted trail, and the trail disappeared through rocky canyons. Their house was only nine miles from the Mexican border, but the winding traverse over the Atascosa Mountains sometimes took more than two hours by car. The land that made up their ranch had always been wild and contested — fought over by the Pima and the Apache, colonized by Spain, won by Mexico and then purchased by the United States in 1854. Jim drove past abandoned silver mines and an old hippie commune where dozens of college students had lived off the grid until the late 1980s, when Jim and his family expanded their ranching operation and acquired grazing rights down to the border.

The map locates Chilton Ranch, on the outskirts of Arivaca, Arizona, near the U.S.-Mexico border.



By The New York Times

Now he spotted dozens of empty water bottles and discarded sweatshirts marking the latest evidence of migration. The Chiltons had always had some immigrants traveling through the property, but recently Border Patrol agents estimated that as many as 250 people each day were arriving on the remote corners of the ranch after being led across the border by paid guides working on behalf of the Sinaloa cartel.



Jim descended into Chimney Canyon, where a few years earlier a Border Patrol agent came upon a group of drug smugglers and was shot five times. Jim continued driving over a hillside where he remembered hearing a child from Honduras screaming for help, and then he'd followed that boy over to his mother, who was dying of complications from diabetes.

He stopped to check a water tank in the shadow of the 32-foot-tall steel border wall that Trump built as president. One of Jim's cowboys had been checking the same tank a few years back when smugglers jumped him and allegedly threatened to come after his family unless he started transporting drugs. The smugglers stuffed 44 pounds of methamphetamine into the cowboy's spare tire, and he made drug runs until the Border Patrol arrested him.

"Just when you think you've seen everything, this place still shocks you," Jim said. He turned onto a rugged road that paralleled the border wall and drove for a few more miles, until he saw a campfire burning in the distance. "Nobody should be out here," he said. He was on the most remote corner of one of the most remote ranches in America, but as he drove closer, he counted more than 45 people sitting near the fire. Children shouted in French. A woman prayed in Arabic.

"What in the world is going on?" Jim wondered.



The Chiltons have grazing rights for 50,000 acres.



Jim driving around his property, past the section of the border wall on his land.

**Brian Best, 64, recognized** Jim Chilton's truck and walked away from the campfire to flag him down. Brian was a volunteer aid worker from Tucson, and lately he'd been spending two days each week on the border road as the first and sometimes only American to greet undocumented immigrants, who were crossing in historic numbers.

### **More on U.S. Immigration**

- **A Legal Showdown:** The Biden administration is suing Texas over [a new state law](#) that would empower state and local police officers to arrest migrants who cross from Mexico without authorization. [Here's what to know.](#)
- **Child Safety:** An independent government watchdog found [serious lapses](#) at the Department of Health and Human Services in its protection of children who migrate to the United States on their own.
- **Detention Capacity:** U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is considering a plan to [reduce its detention capacity significantly](#) after Republicans in Congress blocked a bill that would have provided the agency with more than \$7 billion.
- **Illegal Border Crossings:** The number of people who illegally entered the United States from Mexico [has dropped by 50%](#); U.S. Customs and Border Protection said it had encountered migrants between ports of entry 124,220 times in January, down from more than 249,000 in December.

The ongoing migrant wave reminded Brian of the rivers that once carved canyons through the Sonoran Desert: It was a force so constant and

determined that it created its own path. The border wall was now compromised every few miles by rope ladders, small tunnels, gaps awaiting construction, and new pathways cut every few nights by smugglers. One of them was a 3-by-3-foot hole that led to a patch of saguaro cactuses and mesquite trees on the Chilton Ranch.

Brian had watched cartel guides lead more than 170 people through that opening in the last few hours, including dozens of women and children who said they planned to seek asylum in the United States. They were fleeing civil war in Sudan, caste discrimination in India, starvation in rural Guinea and organized crime in Albania.

“It’s surreal, right?” Brian said to Jim, as the rancher pulled over and rolled down his window.

“It’s like a mini-United Nations in the middle of nowhere,” Jim said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Neither had I until last month,” Brian said. “Now I’m almost getting used to it.”

Brian had been traveling to the border for several years as part of a volunteer group called Tucson Samaritans, and for most of that time their work had been quiet and predictable. They left water, clothing, first-aid kits and food alongside hundreds of covert migrant trails through the desert and planted honorary crosses in the spots where people died of dehydration. Brian rarely encountered undocumented immigrants on those trips because fewer were crossing. Those he did see were mostly working-age men from Mexico and Central America who hiked remote trails at night to evade the Border Patrol.

During the coronavirus pandemic, President Trump invoked a public health rule called Title 42 that allowed agents to turn away migrants at the border, including many who were seeking asylum because they feared returning to their home countries. Over three years, the United States used Title 42 to turn back people more than 2.8 million times. But the Biden administration allowed Title 42 to expire last May, and border policy defaulted to the previous standard, which allows most asylum seekers to stay in America while their cases play out in the backlogged court system. Soon after, Brian started running into large groups of migrants near the border wall who often included women and children from all over the world.





Brian Best giving clementines to migrants from Sudan and Guinea while they wait for the Border Patrol.



A cross marking the spot where a migrant died on the Chiltons' ranch.



Instead of hiking farther north into the desert, these people were idling near the wall and waiting to be apprehended so they could legally apply for asylum. They asked Brian for directions to the nearest Border Patrol station not only in Spanish, but in Mandarin, Pashto, Urdu and Hindi. Almost half had come from West Africa or Asia. By late December, the Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol was encountering almost 20,000 migrants in a single week, a 300 percent increase over the last year and nearly 10 times as many encounters as in the average week in 2021.

John Modlin, the head Border Patrol agent in Tucson, had called on “all available personnel” to respond to the crisis, even if that meant pulling agents away from training exercises, temporarily closing checkpoints and reducing some inland patrols. It had been several months since Jim last saw agents on the vast interior of his ranch. Modlin had testified in Congress about “large areas of the border being left vulnerable while our agents are responding, rescuing and apprehending migrants.”

Even with the additional resources, the Border Patrol still could not process migrants fast enough to keep pace with what Modlin called an “unprecedented flow.” It took at least two hours for each Border Patrol van to drive onto the Chiltons’ ranch and pick up a group of people, who were then usually fingerprinted at a border facility and released into the United States with a preliminary court date that was at least a year away. Meanwhile, more and more migrants kept arriving on the ranch, and the resulting backlog meant that dozens of people were sometimes left waiting there overnight with no water, food, cell service or warm clothing.

Brian handed out granola bars as he watched a mother and her 4-year-old draw smiley faces with sticks in the dirt. He handed out fruit and added wood to the campfire as a group of men from Guinea removed their socks to warm their feet. The men said they had pooled their life savings to fly from Istanbul to Bogotá to Nicaragua. They had spent 12 nights sleeping in the Mexican desert before crossing the border with the help of cartel guides, who they said stole what little money they had left before pointing them through the fence.

“Someone is coming to get us soon?” one of the men asked Brian in English. He replied that he hoped so, but he could not be sure. He had driven a few immigrants to the Border Patrol station himself during medical emergencies, but it was legally risky to transport undocumented immigrants along the

border, and he had only three seats in his car for the dozens of people stranded along the wall.

“This place breaks your heart every day,” Brian told Jim. “They’re exhausted. They’re sick. They’re confused. They’re cold, and they just have to wait. How can this be our system?”

“You’re doing God’s work,” Jim said. “If I had been born in one of these places, I might be sleeping out here, too.”

The sun dipped toward the horizon, and the temperature dropped below 40 degrees. On the Mexican side of the wall, Jim could see scouts for the cartel perched on hilltops and another group of migrants getting ready to cross. Sue was still waiting at the house, and he was already running an hour late. He shook Brian’s hand and put the truck into gear.

“I wish I knew the solution,” Jim said, and then drove back toward the other side of his ranch.



Migrants who just crossed into the United States resting in the shadow of the border wall.



A photo found on the Mexico side of the border wall.

**Jim was still processing** what he had seen a few days later, when he invited Lowell Robinson up to the house for coffee. Robinson, 56, was the lead cowboy on the Chilton Ranch. He had spent most of his life in a house a few hundred yards north of the border, studying it from his own back porch.

“All those people were stranded out there,” Jim told him, recounting his recent trip to the wall. “Maybe it would help if we took in more legal immigrants every year. Two million? Three? I don’t know, but it keeps troubling me.”

“We have three mandates from the Creator: to take care of widows, orphans and the sojourner,” Lowell said. “If we can’t do that, what good are we?”

“So, you knew it was happening like this?”

“It’s one of the reasons I’m working here,” Lowell said.





Lowell Robinson, left, is the lead cowboy at the Chilton Ranch.



Ranch cowboys herding cattle. The Chilton Ranch is three times the size of Manhattan.



For five decades, Lowell and his family had owned a neighboring cattle ranch, which Lowell managed alongside his father and his own sons. Their cattle grazed on 18,000 acres pressed against the border, which Lowell initially considered a gift of geography. He learned to speak fluent Spanish. He drove through his backyard to the beaches in Mexico. He swapped cattle and equipment back and forth with ranchers across the international line until the last decade, when the Sinaloa cartel took over sections of the Mexican border and suddenly Lowell's neighbor was what the F.B.I. considered one of the largest and most dangerous criminal organizations in the world.

In the past few years, Lowell had watched as the cartel expanded from drug trafficking into human migration so it could profit from rising instability around the world and shifting immigration policies in the United States. The combined [earnings from human smuggling](#) for all cartels rose to more than \$13 billion in 2021, from \$500 million in 2018, according to a Homeland Security Department investigation. "Now nobody crosses without paying the cartels," Modlin, the Border Patrol agent, told Congress in a hearing last year. "The cartels determine when people cross, how many, all of that. It's all controlled by them."

Lowell sometimes sat on his back porch with binoculars and saw scouts with rifles staring back toward his house. Some of his Mexican neighbors told him they were fleeing their ranches because the cartel was seizing their land. The smugglers cut fences, lit fires and broke open water lines on Lowell's property, causing more than \$25,000 in damage each year.

And then there were the hundreds of immigrants who started arriving directly at his house, as the number of migrant encounters on the U.S. border set a record in 2021, and another in 2022, and another in 2023. Some were women who had been assaulted and came to seek asylum at Lowell's home, mistaking it for a Border Patrol station. Others were children who said their parents were dead. Lowell and his wife cut up trays of apples and oranges and waited with them until the Border Patrol arrived.

"Ranching is hard enough without another disaster thrown on top of it," he told Jim.

"It's a hard life," Jim said. "The margins get thinner every year."

“It was stress on top of stress,” Lowell said. “We were just waiting for that next big disaster. It ate me up. It turned me into an ornery cuss.”

His wife of 36 years eventually left him and went to join her parents in California. His daughter, a veterinarian, moved to Texas. His sons quit ranching and started a welding business, and then it was just Lowell left on the property where he had spent his whole life, with little choice but to sell. On the day the real estate agent showed the property last year, several immigrants crossed onto the ranch. Lowell found himself hoping the prospective buyers might walk away, but the deal went through, and now he was taking care of someone else’s cows.

“It’s a whole legacy that disappeared out from under me,” Lowell said. “My whole family wanted out, and who can blame them?”

“A lot of our neighbors are moving,” Jim said.

“I don’t care anymore if I’m the boss,” Lowell said. “So long as I can get on a horse every day and play cowboy without having to worry about this whole immigration crisis — honest to God, it’s a relief.”

“I’m starting to understand that,” Jim said.



“Ranching is hard enough without another disaster thrown on top of it,” Lowell told Jim.



Lowell looking for the Chiltons' cattle.

**Jim and Sue had thought** about selling. They had considered moving closer to friends in Tucson or grandchildren in Los Angeles, but Jim had been ranching since his father gave him a saddle at 5, and he had kept getting back on a horse even after he was bucked off and broke four ribs in his late 70s. “Cowboys are born, not made,” read a plaque in their home, and even though Jim had spent much of his professional life as a banker, he believed part of his inheritance was a stubborn commitment to their lifestyle and their land. He sued the environmentalists who came after his grazing rights, culled the herd to survive historic droughts, and shot and stuffed the mountain lion that attacked his calves.

For years he thought he could overcome their border problems, too, if only the right people listened. He gave speeches at his church, took politicians on tours of his ranch and celebrated the construction of Trump’s wall. But parts of that wall remained unfinished and other parts were riddled with gaps, and now the Border Patrol was preoccupied with the record number of asylum seekers at the border.

Despite three decades of activism, he believed most of his ranch was less secure than ever. He had taken to monitoring the cameras he had hidden on five of the ranch's 150 smuggling trails, and now he opened his laptop and called Sue into the kitchen to review the motion-activated footage from the last several months.

"This is mostly from down by the corrals, in that nice little oasis," he said.

"With the deer grass and the beautiful Emory oaks," Sue said.

"It looks like we have at least an hour of images," Jim said, as he hit play.

Here came a group of 12 men in camouflage with carpet samples tied to the soles of their shoes to hide their tracks in the dirt so Border Patrol agents couldn't follow their path.

Here came a man that Jim believed was a cartel scout, because he was carrying a satellite phone, a solar panel, night-vision goggles and a rifle.



Climbing over the wall, from Mexico into Arizona.





Jim and Sue in their kitchen. Their house has been broken into three times.

Here was a teenager walking alone at 1 a.m. Here was a group of men sweating under the weight of large backpacks, which the Border Patrol said sometimes contained drugs like fentanyl or meth but usually were filled with water, food, clothing and sanitary supplies. Here was what appeared to be a rip crew, a local gang that stalked smuggling trails and stole from migrants or guides. Here was an elderly man who could not put any weight on his left leg. Here was someone who approached one of the cameras and turned the lens toward the sky less than 20 minutes after Jim first hid the camera in a tree, which made him realize he was being watched.

In total, the cameras had collected images of more than 1,000 people crossing on those five trails — a tiny sample of what the United Nations considers the largest global movement of displaced people since the 1950s, with millions fleeing gangs, economic collapse and political instability around the world.

“It’s a multi-ring circus, never mind just three,” Sue said.

“It’s hard to watch, given all the possibilities,” Jim said. Their house had been broken into three times. Once, all that was missing was food and apple cider. Another time, someone had stolen several guns.

Sue watched the parade march across the screen and closed the laptop. “I already think about it,” she said. “I dream about it. That’s enough.”

She got up from the kitchen table, and Jim followed her to their circular bedroom, perched on a hill overlooking the ranch. They had installed 18 windows with views in every direction so they could watch their herd migrate across the desert and storms roll in from Mexico. “The skyline is our fence line,” Jim liked to say, and for years they had found peace in their solitude. But now the sun was dropping over the mountains, and Jim looked into the dying light and wondered who might be out there, and which versions of a crisis were unfolding on the ranch.



Jim in his circular bedroom with 18 windows, where he can look out on parts of his ranch.



The Chiltons' home. "The skyline is our fence line," Jim said.

**Another night. Another few hundred** people arriving on the back corner of the Chiltons' ranch, and Fatma Ali stepped through a hole in the wall and sat on a rock to get her bearings. It was 36 degrees, colder than it had ever been back home in Chad. She saw a cow grazing in the distance. She saw a handwritten sign that said they were 22 kilometers from a Border Patrol station in Sasabe, Ariz., but their group of two dozen Africans had already been walking for many hours and could walk no more.

One of them had a high fever. One had twisted his ankle. One was a 2-year-old who hadn't eaten all day. And one was a pregnant woman from Sudan named Rania Mohamed, who clutched her stomach, lay down on an abandoned wooden pallet and slipped in and out of consciousness for a few hours until a Border Patrol van came over the hill.

"She's dizzy because we walked so much," Fatma told two Border Patrol agents. "She's sick and exhausted. She's pregnant and feeling lots of pain."

"What kind of pain?" an agent asked. "Is it sharp? Or is it pressure?"

“She says pressure,” Fatma said. “Lots of pressure.”

“How far along is she?”

“Nine months.”



Rania Mohamed waiting for the Border Patrol.



A Border Patrol medic trying to determine if Rania was in labor.



The agents huddled to discuss their options while Fatma held Rania's hand and prayed with her in Arabic. The nearest hospital was at least two hours away on a bumpy gravel road that the agents feared could bring on full labor, if it wasn't already underway. One of the agents called the Fire Department, but their trucks could not make it all the way down the mountainous border road. Another agent scouted nearby landing areas for a helicopter.

"God will protect us," Fatma told Rania, in Arabic, which was a version of what Fatma had been repeating to herself for the last three months, ever since her relatives pooled their savings so one member of the family could flee the abuses and abject poverty of their life in rural Chad. Fatma had been chosen to go because she, too, was pregnant, and because she had taught herself to speak English as a child by watching American cartoons. She boarded a flight to Istanbul and another to Bogotá, where she met with cartel-affiliated guides who had come to act as global travel agents. She suffered a miscarriage somewhere between Nicaragua and Honduras. She was robbed in Mexico. After 52 days of travel, she had arrived in the United States with neither a destination nor a plan. The only people she knew in America were the half dozen friends she had made on the migrant trail, one of whom was now lying on her back and writhing in pain on the Chiltons' ranch.

"Hey, keep your eyes open," an agent told Rania. He turned to Fatma to help translate. "We want her to stay conscious, OK? When was the last time she had something to eat?"

"The day before yesterday," Fatma said. "We ate some fried chicken."

"Does she think she's in labor?"

"She's not sure," Fatma said. She explained that Rania was anemic and that all three of her previous pregnancies had ended in C-sections.

"OK. We need to move," the agent said. He loaded Fatma, Rania and the 2-year-old into the van and told the rest of their group to wait on the road until more agents could come get them. These were the triage decisions the Border Patrol now made every night: whom to transport to safety, and whom to leave in the desert until the next shift.

The van started off down the rugged road toward civilization, passing other migrants along the way. Some were climbing over the wall with a rope ladder.

Others were pressed around campfires. Dozens of them rushed toward the van to ask for rides, reaching for the windows and crying out for help. They said they were also sick. They were also exhausted. They were also cold and lost and confused. But the van kept moving until the headlights disappeared over a hill, leaving the ranch in the dark.



Migrants around a campfire on a far corner of the Chilton Ranch.

*Erin Schaff contributed reporting.*

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/18/us/border-migrant-crisis-arizona.html>