NATIONAL

Understanding Migrants Through The Things They Carried

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Heard on Tell Me More

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Archaeologists usually uncover every day objects that give us a peek into the lives of people long gone. But one man is turning his attention to the things left behind by people who try to cross the border between Mexico and the United States. Guest host Celeste Headlee speaks with Jason De Leon, head of the Undocumented Migration Project.

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CELESTE HEADLEE, HOST:

This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Celeste Headlee. Michel Martin is away. Coming up, preachers serve as spiritual guides for their flocks, but what happens when

a preacher loses his own faith? We'll talk with one man who knows what that's like in just a few minutes. But first, anthropologists and archaeologists, of course, study the way that groups live throughout history.

That's exactly what Jason De Leon is doing, although he's not looking at ancient Egypt or some other long-lost civilization. He heads the Undocumented Migration Project. And that project looks at some of the things immigrants crossing the border between Mexico and the United States leave behind. And he's trying to find out what that can teach us. Jason De Leon joins us now. Welcome.

JASON DE LEON: Thanks, Celeste.

HEADLEE: So how did you first get the idea to even study this?

LEON: In a former life, I was a very traditional archaeologist and during the course of fieldwork in Mexico and in Latin America I met a lot of migrants, or people who were former migrants who had lived in the United States for different periods of time. I'd gotten really interested in their stories and what it was like to cross the border undocumented. And I started thinking about different projects that revolved around immigration.

And one night over dinner, I was having a little bit of a meal with a friend and she said to me, you know, I used to do archaeological surveys in Southern Arizona looking for ancient sites and I have occasionally come across things that undocumented border crossers have left. And she jokingly said to me, you know I think someone could do some kind of weird archaeological project focused on the things that immigrants leave behind. A week later, I bought a ticket and was standing in Arizona about a month later, looking at a giant pile of migrant belongings, and I realized that I could use my former skills in archaeology to understand this clandestine social process.

HEADLEE: What are some of the artifacts that people leave behind?

LEON: We currently have over 10,000 cataloged items and we've looked at, I would say, probably closer to about 35,000 items. And it's a full range of things. All the things you would need to survive the desert: food, water, extra clothes, first aid equipment, as well as a lot of personal things - love letters, rosaries, Bibles, photographs of family, diaries.

HEADLEE: Crossing the border seems like such an exceptional event. What do later generations learn from these artifacts that you've collected?

LEON: Well, you know, we've been migrating for the entire history of our species and we've been leaving stuff behind throughout the process. So looking at the material traces of immigration today is quite similar to if I were studying ancient Sahara crossings or the westward expansion in the 18th and 19th century in the United States.

Looking at it today, though, we see with immigration policy, the way that it's been evolving over the last 10 years, is migrants are responding to immigration changes in a lot of different ways. As it's gotten more dangerous, people have tried to get better at preventing physical injuries, maintaining hydration, and trying not to die along the way.

HEADLEE: And you have found this through the artifacts. I mean, what do the artifacts tell you about how people's approach to this border crossing has changed over the years?

LEON: When I first started this project, we found a lot of weird, kind of personal things. Things that you would think were strange to carry with you across this harsh desert, they make sense if you're leaving your home country, possibly forever. You want to bring some personal items, things that you cherish deeply. Over the course of the last five years, we've seen that people are less and less bringing these personal things and are more focused on just staying alive.

So the actual technology that migrants have adopted has evolved. You've got specialized water bottles now, specialized backpacks, fairly systematic first-aid kits that people will carry with them. And they've learned through the course of several years of these crossings, and people - some people doing multiple crossings will get smarter about what to bring and what to leave behind.

HEADLEE: How is that different than, say from a migration a thousand years ago, a few hundred years ago? What are we seeing in this particular area that's different from our ancestors?

LEON: I think that there are a lot of parallels between this migration, the great Irish migration in the 18th and 19th century. People who were leaving their homes for economic reasons or for social reasons and they're bringing a few things with them

that - to remind them of home, but then also trying to survive while en route. So I do think that there are a lot of similarities.

Where I would say that the differences start to pop up are that what migrants go through in the desert today, happening right now, is one of the most systematic routinized forms of violence I think that is occurring on domestic soil. People have ratcheted up their tolerance for pain and for suffering, and migrants are incredibly hardy coming through this environment.

And what I've seen just over the last five years is that the tolerance for pain and suffering and for death has really kicked up incredibly. So I think you've got this more rapidly evolving migration process and it's one that is more violent and traumatic than any American migration story we've ever seen, outside of the West African slave trade.

HEADLEE: What do you know from the artifacts left behind about the people themselves? The type of people that make it and those that survive and those that, very tragically, do not.

LEON: One of my jobs as an anthropologist is to paint a more nuanced picture of what migration looks like. And so we try to say that all types of people are coming - young, old, people from Mexico, from Latin America, from beyond. Most of them are coming for economic reasons.

HEADLEE: Give me an example of something specifically a child leaves behind.

LEON: Well, you find little worn-out shoes. You find tiny little clothes that are sweat-stained that suggest that a small person has worn these items and walked 50 or 60 miles across the desert. You will find, you know, things like worn-out sneakers, women's sneakers. Worn-out baby shoes, children's shoes, as well as men's shoes.

So the items themselves speak to different types of experiences, I think, when you sort of look at them up close. And what we try to do then is say, if we've got this large collection of artifacts, how can we pair them up with the narratives based on interviews that we do with migrants on the Mexican side of the border.

HEADLEE: You know, many people in the United States, their only encounters with immigration are through the political debate. And you obviously are getting a much more intimate portrait of it. I wonder, is there an archaeological record? Is the

sometimes very controversial debate over immigration reflected at all in the conversations you have and in the artifacts that you find?

LEON: Migrants are well aware of the immigration debate, and we've seen how shifts in immigration policy change the archaeological record. As border patrol focuses on particular corridors, they push migrants into more hostile terrain. And we've been able to follow the archaeology up into more mountainous regions and to places where you're seeing a higher fatality rate. One of the things that we are working on and trying to do is to capture good systematic data on this process, because one of the things that I worry about is, we have a highly romanticized vision of what the Irish immigration experience was like.

And with a hundred years of space between those events and being able to talk about this stuff, we forget about how awful it must have been to be Irish in the 18th and 19th century in places like Five Points, New York. I worry that in a hundred years we're going to look back, we're going to have Latinos who're becoming more politically powerful and who're becoming sort of this new movement of people in the United States who's having major impacts across the board in terms of politics - I worry that in a hundred years Latinos are going to be discriminatory against some other group, and you're going to hear this narrative that oh, my noble Mexican ancestors came here and worked really hard and pulled themselves up from the bootstraps, and these people from Southeast Asia or wherever else, you know, this new wave of immigrants, are going to be demonized. And so for us, it's to capture the reality of it as it's happening to say, look, it looked like this and we want historians to have good data to say it was violent, it was laden - full of suffering, and it was actually quite systematic.

HEADLEE: Jason De Leon is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan. He also directs the Undocumented Migration Project. He joined us from member station WUOM in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Thank you so much, Jason.

LEON: Thank you, Celeste.

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