



THE MEXICAN CONNECTION

Report From A Sending Village

◀ **BY TAMAR JACOBY**

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In August 2003, Tamar Jacoby, then a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, spent several weeks in Tulcingo del Valle, a small town in the Mexican state of Puebla that sends migrant workers to New York City. Her report on these migrants, their lives in New York and their families in Tulcingo appeared over the course of a week in the New York City daily, *The New York Sun* – four installments with accompanying photographs, each featured on the front page of the newspaper.

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RURAL MEXICANS FLOCK TO NEW YORK

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TULCINGO DEL VALLE, Mexico – The car snaked slowly down the mountainside, negotiating perilous switchback turns through a rough, dry, uninhabited landscape. A local government official and aides were returning from a visit to a mountain village. It was only half an hour after the lights went out in New York, but as soon as the car was within range of the nearest cell tower, the politicians' phones started ringing. "Have you heard about the blackout?" "Will the migrants in New York be okay?" There was even a call from someone who had already spoken to New York and could vouch that the power outage would have no special ill effects for the city's Mexicans.

This remote, rural region, known as the Mixteca, is home to roughly two thirds of the Mexicans in the New York metropolitan area. Altogether, that rapidly growing community already numbers three-quarters of a million people, according to Mexican diplomats in New York, making it the city's third largest Hispanic group, after Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. The scruffy, cactus-covered terrain here could hardly seem more foreign to most New Yorkers; the timeless, peasant way of life even more alien. But thanks to the burgeoning migration of recent decades, the connections run much deeper than most Americans know.

In many small towns here, every family has a brother or son or father in New York – to the point that in some places, there are few able-bodied men, only old

people and children. Most of the money that keeps the shops open is sent by workers in the New York area. Local youth wear the latest in American ghetto chic. When asked what they want to do when they grow up, even 5- and 6-year-olds talk about going to America.

Many of the streets are still unpaved, but there is a cluster of international phone booths in every town square. And villagers say they often hear gossip about their neighbors by way of a call from someone in New York.

Perhaps it is too much to say that the Mixteca is part of New York, but there can be no question about the economic interdependence of the two places. Just as the city depends on the labor of the migrants who hail from and sometimes retire here, so these towns

The remote rural region of Mixteca is home to two-thirds of the Mexicans in New York.

depend on the city – in effect, the Mixteca is part of New York's hinterland. As much as upstate or even far closer suburbs, the villages here are our bedroom communities.

Today, after some 25 years of migration, a visit prompts a host of questions. Is the relationship good



for these Mexican towns? Is it sustainable over a long haul? What will the influx of American values mean for the future of the Mixteca? And how will changes here eventually affect New York?

Arguimiro Lucero, who came illegally in 1975 and now owns a busy coffee shop on Third Avenue in Manhattan, was among the first to make it to New York from the village of Tulcingo, in the state of Puebla. (The Mixteca encompasses parts of three Mexican states – the poorest, driest and least arable parts of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Guerrero.) Though a few isolated individuals had come as far back as World War II, there were few other Mexican workers in the tri-state region of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey when Mr. Lucero arrived.

He got a job sweeping a factory; most of the handful of other Mixtecos he knew, all of them undocumented, were working in restaurants. From the beginning, they worked seven days a week, sometimes 12 or 15 or 18 hours a day. Virtually all men then, as many

Arguimiro Lucero came to the U.S. illegally in 1975 and now owns a coffee shop in Manhattan.

as 8 or 10 would share a small apartment, and all sent money home on a regular basis to support their families – sometimes as much as \$100 a week out of a \$200 salary. As Alex Garcia, another early arrival from Tulcingo, explains, “They never asked. But we had to. They have no way to make a life there, no way to earn.”

Juan Luna, also from Tulcingo and also now an entrepreneur in New York – the coffee shop is in Queens Plaza, and he owns a travel agency on Roosevelt Avenue in Queens – remembers being in Mexico in the early 1980s, seeing his brother and other villagers

come back from America for visits. “They had money,” he recalls, “and nice clothes. I was just finishing my degree and wanted to buy a house, but I knew I would never be able to afford one on what I was going to earn as a teacher.” So as soon as he finished school, he made the trip too – he and thousands of others like him.

Scholars talk about migration flows as being the product of both “push” and “pull” factors: in this case, the push of increasingly dry weather in the Mixteca and the Mexican economic crisis of 1982, combined with the pull of increasing New York demand for compliant, low-wage service workers. Meanwhile, each migrant who came made the trip easier for those who followed.

Not only was he sending back information about how it was done and helping relatives settle once they arrived; in many cases, he was also wiring money to pay the way for a brother or a cousin. And as a result, by the early 1980s, the trickle from southern Puebla had become a flood – in effect, a way of life and one that continues, largely unchanged, to this day.

The Mexican community in New York reflects this constant flow of unskilled newcomers. Unlike many immigrants who cluster together in the new country, Mexicans tend to gravitate to where the work is and, as a result, live scattered across the metro area – not only spotted here and there in the five boroughs of New York City, but also in places like Passaic, N.J.; Bridgeport, Conn., and Port Chester, in Westchester County, N.Y. Some three-quarters are male, 80 percent are under 40, about the same percentage has less than a ninth grade education, according to the Mexican consulate in New York. They work throughout the service sector but are concentrated in the food business, especially restaurants and delis.



Yet after 25 years, a middle class is also emerging, and once again Tulcingo native Arguimiro Lucero is among those at the front edge of the trend. After his stint as a factory janitor, Mr. Lucero landed a dish-washing job – the quintessential Mexican starting point – then worked his way up: busboy, cook, counterman, waiter, manager. In 1993, the Greek who owned the coffee shop where he had put in 14 years asked him to buy the business. Along the way, Mr. Lucero had learned English, earned a night school degree, started a family, bought two houses (one in New York, one in Tulcingo) and become an American citizen. Researchers estimate that between 20 percent and 30 percent of the Mexicans in New York fit a similar, upwardly mobile profile, and Mixtecos are among the fast growing entrepreneur groups in the city.

Still, poor or middle-class, they do not quickly forget Mexico. Perhaps it is because home is so nearby, or

maintain ties to the old country. Busboy and entrepreneur alike send money back to their families and the villages they come from – more than \$800,000 to the state of Puebla and nearly \$10 billion to Mexico in 2002, Mexican officials say. Mr. Lucero and other New Yorkers from Tulcingo have not only sponsored collections to spruce up churches and schoolyards; four years ago they donated the lion's share of the construction fund for a new hospital building. Scores of businesses straddle the two communities: travel agencies, money-transfer services, package-shipping couriers and the like. Mexican politicians now campaign in the tri-state area. The same grassroots religious group, Asociacion Tepeyac, organizes youth counseling here and social services in New York. There is even said to be a Tulcingo gang that operates in parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

Immigrant scholars make much of this – the term is “transnationalism” – and many claim it is the way of the future. An entire population will live between two countries, the communities here and there will mir-

Mixtecos succeed in New York but maintain ties to the old country.

ror each other, eventually the border may even fade away – so the current academic thinking goes. “They manage to maintain links despite the fact that they are 2,500 miles apart. Time and space don't define our social lives the way they once did,” says Barnard sociologist Robert C. Smith. Other experts emphasize



because modern communications make it easy, but more than many other immigrant groups, Mexicans

the circular nature of the Mexican migration: workers who spend eight months a year in the U.S., the



other four “at home” in Mexico – and eventually return to Mexico, either to start a business or retire. An avant-garde filmmaker working on a video installation about the ties between Tulcingo and New York went so far as to label it “a single town that happens to be in two countries.”

There is something to this view: just visit Ferry Point Park in the Bronx, where one of the local Mexican soccer leagues plays its weekly games on a vast, windswept field in the shadow of the Whitestone Bridge. You can watch Tulcingo play the nearby village of Piaxtla there just as at home in Puebla. The men lounging in hammocks, the food for sale at

comes with the same idea – to make money and go back. But then you see the difference between life here and there, and it changes you.” For him and his generation, the changes are only beginning to play out – and they will have consequences for both New York and Mexico.

‘I’ve lived more than half my life in the U.S., and it changes you.’

makeshift tables, even the way the little family knots sit together in orderly circles: except for the skyline in the distance, it all looks more like Mexico than New York. And many of the men playing or watching – most of them young, recent arrivals – still talk about eventually returning home. When a guitarist and accordion-player set up amplifiers and played after a recent game, their lyrics seemed to say it all: “I’m making money,” the haunting melody went, “but I’m not happy. I miss my country. I want to die.”

Still, for all the transnational back-and-forth and the similarities between the two communities, the full picture is more complicated. For while Mexicans like Arguimero Lucero certainly maintain ties to home – and a number of migrants do ultimately return – there is a large net flow toward the United States, and many of the Mixtecos in New York are becoming deeply American. “I’ve lived more than half my life in the U.S.,” says Mr. Lucero’s business partner Armando Penafort, also originally from Tulcingo. “Everyone



TALE OF TWO PLACES

September 9, 2003

TULCINGO DEL VALLE, Mexico – Some dozen old people and children are lined up at Penafort Travel, near the crossing of the two main streets in this remote Mexican hill town. There are six phone booths in the simple storefront, and on this Sunday morning, as every week, all of them are full. In each case, someone from the village who is working in America – most likely in the New York metropolitan area – is calling home.

The problem is that few homes here have telephones. And so, in each case, the migrant sent a message earlier in the week that he would be calling, and the travel agency dispatched a courier – sometimes across town, sometimes miles away to a still smaller village – to alert family members.

One old man who doesn't want to give his name is waiting to hear from his son, a 25-year-old day laborer in New Jersey. The father will pay a nominal fee – about a dollar – to use the booth; the son will foot the bill for the call. They can talk for as long as they like – the old man expects it to go on for a half an hour to an hour, as usual. It's hot in the open storefront, and there's no way of guessing how long the conversations already in progress in the six booths will take. But the old campesino waits patiently despite the heat and the flies and the line ahead of him: he hasn't seen his son, who has no papers and cannot travel easily, in the five years since the boy left home.

In itself a slender thread, their call is part of a thick web of ties now connecting New York to this part of Mexico, the poor, dry, mountainous southern third of the state of Puebla. After 25 years of nonstop migration, the south Puebla population now straddles the border with America. Indeed, according to Mario Riestra Venegas, the founding director of CONOFAM, a Mexican organization that helps migrants abroad, there are more Pueblan natives in the northeastern U.S. than there are at home: some 300,000 south of the frontier and 600,000 north of it – most of them in and around New York. And though separated by a long, hard 2500-mile trip, the two communities are in intimate, daily contact – a bond unprecedented in immigration history and sure to have long-term consequences for both countries.

The connections leap out at a visitor to Tulcingo, some three hours by winding, two-lane road from the state capital, also called Puebla. According to

Tulcingo is divided: 10,000 at home and 10,000 in New York.

the mayor, Sergio Barrera, Tulcingo is more or less evenly divided: 10,000 at home and 10,000 in the New York metropolitan area. And so perhaps it is not surprising that the streets here – albeit many of them unpaved – bear an eerie resemblance to the streets of New York in neighborhoods where significant numbers of Mexicans have settled: Corona,



Queens, for example, or parts of Fordham Road in the Bronx, or East 116th Street in Manhattan's Harlem neighborhood.

What's similar are the types of shops, some of them even branches of the same mom-and-pop concerns: travel businesses, money-transfer agencies, what Mexicans call "paqueterias," or international courier services. Tulcingo Travel, for example, has its main New York office on Roosevelt Avenue: a tiny, hard-to-find, second-floor cubbyhole overlooking the elevated no. 7 subway line. Here in Tulcingo, the business claims pride of place: on the main square, opposite the arched municipal building and cater-corner to the busy market hall.

And so it is with each of the transnational businesses – a deep and often personal connection, though usually an asymmetrical one. The package places, of which there are now five in Tulcingo, ship most of their cargo from Mexico to New York: nostalgia gifts of various kinds, videos of missed family events,

The streets – albeit unpaved – bear an eerie resemblance to those of New York.

but mainly food – mom's homemade candy or whatever is for sale in the market that day. The money-sending businesses – too many to count, even in this small town – work in the other direction: from family breadwinners in New York to wives and parents and children in Mexico.

The Internet connection is more of a two-way affair: there are now five cyber cafes in town, all branched to a local server. But in a village where some houses still do not have indoor plumbing, let alone a computer, this too is a somewhat lop-sided link – and the two-year-old web site surely gets more hits in

America. The brainchild of two New York-based migrants, Brooklyn College counselor Jesus Perez and his cousin Enrique Velez, the page features news stories from home, a variety of chat rooms and bulletin boards and, whenever something special is being built in town – projects invariably paid for in part by the New York community – photographs of the contractors' progress.

The weekly TV show shot in this region and aired in New York – "Hechos Nueva York," or "News for New York from Puebla" – is a seemingly straightforward, one-way broadcast that is actually surprisingly interactive. The idea was hatched in 1998, when the director of TV Azteca, based in the state capital, first realized that New York was the second biggest Pueblan city, surpassed only by his own. The transmission started as a Web site streaming video from local newscasts; then came a radio show, and in 1999, a half an hour of TV. But along the way, something strange happened: the Mexican audience in New York began to talk back.

Now, on a typical Sunday morning, when the show airs in the New York area, TV Azteca receives some 30 to 50 international phone calls, responding to its coverage and suggesting story ideas. When the news teams go to New York, as they do periodically for holidays and other events, camera crews – identifiable by their TV Azteca logos – are approached in the streets by viewers with similar feedback.

The suggestions are usually simple – like the one from the man in New York who called to say that his daughter back in a small town in Puebla was graduating from elementary school and asked that the station send a camera to document the celebration. It turned out to be one of the most popular spots the show had done, sparking a whole new genre of family-oriented coverage. As the show's handsome



decades of experience and good connections, very few southern Pueblans have gone missing en route in recent years. The young man from just outside Tulcingo who died with 17 others in May in the back of a truck in Victoria, Texas, was a tragic exception.

More often, though, the imbalance is about money – and inevitably that means that New York calls the shots. One of the clearest illustrations is local politics, which have been all but transformed by the migration.

Puebla governor Melquiades Morales Flores was among the first Mexican candidates to visit New York. He went in 1999 primarily to talk to Wall Street, but he also checked in with some of the more successful Pueblans, and suddenly the truth dawned on him. Migrants in New York cannot vote in Mexico, but their families can – and, as Mr. Morales

Homesick fathers in New York watch family celebrations on TV.

realized, the families defer to their more worldly breadwinners. “He who pays is boss, and the ones who pay are in New York” explains Rafael Moreno Valle, then an aide to Mr. Morales and now one of Puebla’s representatives in Mexico’s congress.

Just four years later, according to Carmelo Maceda, a Tulcingo native and community leader in New York, Mr. Morales’s insight has become a way of

newscaster, Juan Carlos Valeria, explains, “With that story, we satisfied not only one lonely Mexican father, but homesick fathers all over New York who are far from their families and the places they come from.” And certainly the show’s ratings bear him out: if only Pueblans were watching, “Hechos” could never earn the kind of Nielsen share it boasts in a good week – often more than half of the New York Hispanic audience.

In some cases, as in the travel business, the asymmetrical ties between the two communities are a product of immigration law. According to one Queens-based agent, Linda Delgado of Delgado Travel, 60 percent of the New York-Mexican plane tickets she sells are one-way passages: undocumented workers who fly home, then make their way back overland, once again crossing the border illegally. The price



for the return trip has gone up astronomically – from a few hundred dollars to perhaps \$3,000 today. But by now, that link too is a well-worn path: thanks to

life. “If a candidate can’t convince us, there’s no point in even going to campaign in those little villages. He won’t get the vote there unless he can



get to us and get our support in New York," Mr. Maceda says.

Ultimately the link that matters most is the money. That is why young men from towns like Tulcingo go to New York. The need to make money and send it home is the focus of their existence – the reason they'll do any job, no matter how hard or how humiliating, working typically between 100 and 120 hours a week. And it is the cash that they send back that is forever changing life in their villages.

By and large, Tulcingo is better off for this money: the very look and size of the town have been transformed – from a peasant village to a local commer-

Townsppeople say you can gauge the health of the U.S. economy by the traffic in village shops.

cial hub with an almost boomtown feel. But the dependence on a distant economy also troubles many residents.

Townsppeople say you can gauge the health of the U.S. economy by the traffic in village shops and even in the weekly market where women from outlying hamlets come to sell their homegrown produce. The impact was clearest after September 11, 2001. Lucy Garcia, whose family runs a little grocery on the main street, says business dropped by 30 percent; Rafael Fernandez, who clears land for new roads and houses, suffered closer to a 50 percent fall-off. But it is also felt from month to month.

The consumption patterns in town have changed beyond recognition. Once a peasant economy where subsistence farmers hardly bought a new frying pan from one generation to the next, the market now re-

flects the latest American trends – especially in youth fashion, toys and electronics.

But perhaps most striking – and potentially two-edged – is the way that local wages and rents have risen through the roof, inflated by the effects of competition with American wages and the river of money that streams in from New York. "We worry," says Lucy Garcia. "What will happen if the flow stops? What will happen if the youth stop going or the people there stop sending money?"

After 25 years, in fact, both migration and remittances may be tapering off slightly. But for now, the flow – and the boom – continues. Whether in the long run it is for good or ill is a question much debated in Tulcingo. But as everyone realizes, the town has no choice. Like it or not, its fate is tied to New York.



BILATERAL BOUNTY FOR U.S. AND MEXICO

September 9, 2003

TULCINGO DEL VALLE, Mexico – The two old men looked almost indistinguishable: the same work-worn jeans, the same slight build and brown, wrinkled faces. They even shared a name, and it turned out they were cousins: Roberto Torres Amigon and Javier Amigon Castillo. In fact, though both were born here in the state of Puebla, one had spent the last 35 years in Brooklyn, the other in the Mexican mountain village of Santa Ana.

What brought them together now was a joint project: the building of a stretch of road in Santa Ana. Responding to a village initiative, Javier Amigon and some 300 other New Yorkers had put together \$25,000 to contribute to the construction. Because he was on site, Mr. Torres oversaw the work, but both men understood – and proudly bragged to a stranger – that the accounting would be done American-style: through a bank and with full transparency, quite unlike the way things are often done in Mexico.

Striking as it seems, theirs is not an uncommon relationship in Mexico today. Not only do individual migrants send billions of dollars a year to their families, as often as not in weekly or biweekly installments of \$100 to \$200. But virtually every village also looks to a club or committee like Mr. Amigon's – a group of migrants in America who pay for social projects in the town. In some cases, it's a road; in others, a bridge or a sports field. In most places, that and the remittances sent by individuals are gradu-

ally transforming the old towns. Are the changes for good or ill? Do they add up to sustainable development – as opposed to merely raising incomes temporarily? And will they in the long run end the need for workers to make the trip in the first place?

When they first arrive in the United States, virtually all Mexican migrants send money home. The longer they stay, the less they wire, but at any given time, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, about half are transmitting some amount on a regular basis. Perhaps as many as three quarters are men sending to women: their wives, mothers, daughters, or other female relatives. The majority are under 40, most of them unskilled workers paying out of meager salaries from which U.S. taxes have already been deducted. The financial sacrifices are extraordinary – migrants talk about putting aside as much as \$200

Tulcingo receives \$150,000 a day in remittances – \$4.5 million a month.

out of a \$400 busboy's paycheck – and the cumulative results are nothing short of mind-boggling.

In 2002, Mexicans in the United States sent home a total of \$9.8 billion – more foreign exchange than their country made on its bustling tourist trade and second only to its oil revenues. In the state of Puebla



alone, the figure was \$800 million. And according to one estimate, by ABC News, this small town of Tulcingo receives \$150,000 a day – or \$4.5 million a month. In the first six months of the year, despite the U.S. recession, the overall flow increased 29 percent, according to Mexico’s central bank – leading to estimates that the 2003 total could exceed \$11 billion.

Both the U.S. and Mexican governments are eager to encourage this bounty. Banks are increasingly keen to get in on the business. And most analysts, in the private and public sectors alike, nurse the same hopeful assumption: that the payments will fuel economic development, eventually reducing the need for migration.

Most of this international interest and excitement has translated into efforts to lower sending costs. Traditionally, most migrants have relied on Western Union, giving the telegraph giant a virtual monopoly in the field and allowing it, in years past, to charge as much as \$25 on a \$100 remittance, including hidden fees. In New York, there has always been competition from small money-services businesses – travel agents and the like who claim they serve as much as 60 percent of the market. But it wasn’t until banks entered the business in recent years that Western Union was forced to cut its costs, now more like \$15 for any amount up to \$200. Citibank, in contrast, plans to charge \$7.95 a transaction, plus \$5 a month to maintain an account, when its program is up and running in New York at the end of the year.

The problem is that most Mexicans do not trust banks. And, if the migrants are undocumented, until recently they could not open accounts. So mostly, the two governments and immigration advocates have focused on remedying those problems: promoting the matricula identity cards issued by the Mexican

government and recognized by many banks, urging banks to improve their marketing among migrants and the like. Far less attention has been paid to the question of how remittances are spent – and whether reality bears out the assumption that they are fueling development.

Here in Tulcingo, the evidence is mixed. The money sent over 25 years has transformed the town from a nearly feudal village to a local market hub with a boomtown feel. According to David Bravo, who spent 20 years in New York and returned to open a pizzeria, the hamlet is roughly four times the size it was when he was growing up in the 1960s. Many more of the streets are paved, there are twice as many churches, a good number of the houses sport satellite dishes, and a contribution raised in New York made it possible for the municipality to erect a new hospital building.

The very wares in the stores are different: everything from stereos and washing machines to factory-made toys. And on any given morning, some 20 taxis – cars and vans – line up by the central square: villagers take them from one side of town to another, even though it’s hard to devise a trip of more than seven or eight blocks. Still, it’s far from clear that much or any of this new wealth would last if migration stopped and the flow of remittances ended.

By far the most conspicuous change is the new houses: dozens if not hundreds of them sprawling out over the landscape – most of them built by migrants or families that run businesses driven by migrants’ dollars. The houses come in every size and shape and architectural style. The traditional village house is a concrete box, something like a garage: never more than one story, with iron grillwork covering tiny windows. The new ones are generally two or three stories, often based on an American subur-



ban model – only more baroque. Tell-tale features include arches, gables, diagonals, columns, balustrades and plate-glass windows – not all together, but often in some fairly wild combinations.

The only catch: in Tulcingo and elsewhere in the region, perhaps as many as 40 percent of the new houses are empty, their owners far away in America. Many of the buildings are not finished: the large arched and gabled frames standing like ruins around the town. In some cases, a family lives on the first floor, while the second story gapes, half-built and uninhabited. But somehow the eeriest are the finished ones: opulent, flamboyant, gleaming – yet vacant, as often as not on an unpaved street where dogs and wild turkeys roam at will pecking at piles of rubbish.

At \$15,000 to \$40,000 apiece, each house is a big boost for the local economy. The construction business is booming. Huge Quonset huts selling bags of cement line the main road into town; loading and unloading supplies is one of the few jobs available to young men who stay in the village (Most families do the actual building themselves). And most townspeople are intensely proud of the houses. “They make me feel good,” says returned migrant Rafael Velasquez. “They make the town look good. When that person left, he had nothing. Now he can build a big house.”

But many migrants who build homes planning to come back to them in their old age find that their plans change over time: once they have children and grandchildren in New York, very few can envision spending much time here. And according to David Bravo, it is almost impossible to sell a house – anyone with enough money to build one wants to design his own.

Those who are enthusiastic about remittance-fuelled development hold out more hope for social projects like the Santa Ana road and the Tulcingo hospital. Arguimiro Lucero, a Tulcingo native who now owns a coffee shop in Manhattan, remembers how he and a handful of friends came together even in their first struggling years in New York to try to do something for the community. The first funds they gathered were for fellow workers: those who had had accidents or died in America – money to send the body home or help support the dead man’s family. Soon, though, they were collecting for hometown projects: trophies for the local soccer league, sports equipment, a fund for repairs to the church. And over time, the projects grew more ambitious, culminating in the hospital building, for which, Mr. Lucero says, New York migrants raised \$15,000.

Sometimes, the ideas originated in New York, more often in Mexico, growing out of the needs of the town. The core group of givers was never more than six to 10, but as the number of Pueblans in the New

U.S. wages build houses in Mixteca, but many are empty.

York area swelled, the original committee solicited among them, taking in \$10 or \$20 or \$50 from scores and sometimes hundreds of people. A Mexican program called “Three for One” recently began to match their gifts threefold, with federal, state, and local authorities each chipping in a quarter of the total expense for a “productive” project.

The efforts don’t always pan out as planned. According to Tulcingo mayor Sergio Barrera, the bureaucratic “Three for One” program sometimes fails to deliver. And he and others – Mr. Lucero included – worry that today’s young migrants are proving less socially responsible than their elders. Mr. Barrera says he is still waiting for the New York group to come through with the money it promised for a new baseball diamond. “The same ten people have been giving for 25 years,” he explains understandingly. “That’s a long time. They’re tired, and now they have lives of their own – families and children there.”

Still, the results are often impressive. The new Tulcingo hospital, with three full-time doctors, does about 1,700 consultations and 30 simple operations a month. According to Carmelo Maceda of Casa Puebla, a New York organization that helps



coordinate this kind of activity, the Tulcingo group is one of 43 hometown associations in the five boroughs of New York City.

Last year alone, they sponsored seven major projects in Puebla: a new sewer, a school renovation and a water purification unit, among them. And in some cases now, better-off individual migrants are coming forward to make contributions on their own. See Tulcingo's proudest new acquisition – a spiffy American school bus donated by Queens restaurant-owner Eduardo Pita.

The question for the long run is, what will all of this spending leave in its wake? Does it create jobs? Teach skills? Give the town the capacity to add economic value? Perhaps most important, as former World Bank economist David Ellerman asks, "is it building enterprises that do not live off remittances?" If not, much as the inflow improves the standard of living in a place like Tulcingo, it's hard to argue that it is spurring bona fide development.

Tulcingo certainly boasts more stores, and businesses are far more prosperous than they used to be. According to Mario Riestra Venegas, the founding coordinator of CONOFAM, a national organization that helps migrants abroad, 400 new small businesses were created in the southern Puebla in 2002 alone. Still, few if any of them require new skills, and most are family run, with few employees.

Two of the most successful New York Pueblans are investing in bigger enterprises: Felix Sanchez is opening a jalapeno cannery with 300 workers, and Jaime Lucero is building a textile plant that will eventually employ 7,000. The only problem: wages are so high and manpower so scarce in the southern part of the state that both projects are being built up north, far from the migrant-sending region.

In the long run, then, Tulcingo appears caught in a trap. Migrants come to the U.S. to work and make money, but when they send cash back, although it alleviates poverty, it so inflates wages and local rents that it all but prohibits future development.

Hopeful observers like Mr. Riestra argue that improving the town's quality of life is a critical first step. "The remittances stabilize these villages," he maintains. "They allow small businesses to grow and help the families who run them stay together – and also prevent the political upheaval that might have occurred had there been no migration. That's development, too – or at least the prerequisites for development."

Maybe so, but while the flow of migration may be tapering, few residents of Tulcingo expect it to end any time soon. "You can find work here now, but you can't earn enough to live," says returned migrant Rafael Rosindo, who owns a paper-goods store. "Apart from family businesses, there's nothing but low-wage construction jobs" – and it costs far more to get by now than it used to.

Meanwhile many townspeople aren't sure that even the quality of life is really improving: old-timers like David Bravo complain that the chase after dollars is eating away at traditional values and corrupting the town's youth. Can the remittances be better harnessed? Can incentives be used to channel development more effectively? The potential is certainly there – the money is flowing in. But the challenges are clear – in boom-town Tulcingo and among its friends, in Mexico and abroad.



HOW NEW YORK STANDS TO GAIN

September 11, 2003

TULCINGO DEL VALLE, Mexico – August 15 was the town feast in the nearby village of Piaxtla, and the adoration of the Virgin unfolded much as it has for decades, if not centuries. There was a mass in the old church, then a procession through the town. Brawny, sunburned men carried the holy statue on their shoulders. Old women in shawls and veils held awed children by the hand as the idol, preceded by altar boys and followed by a straggly brass band, was carried through the flower-strewn streets in the fading evening light.

But this year, as in other recent years, something was different. A substantial portion of the spectators were people who plainly did not work in the sun and weren't entirely familiar with the town's old customs. Some, mainly in their 20s, wore baggy, ghetto-style jeans and backward baseball caps. Others, more often in their late 30s and early 40s, looked something like middleclass Europeans: tastefully dressed, well-groomed, discreet, with stylish glasses and good watches. Most were men, but some were accompanied by their wives. And even a first-time visitor could distinguish them from townspeople – not just by their more expensive clothes, but also by their more open faces, the way they made eye contact and smiled confidently at a stranger. They were the village youth who had gone to the United States to work and were returning now for a nostalgia visit to the old town – and you could tell even by the way they carried themselves that they had somehow been transformed by their experience in America.

This remote, mountainous region of Mexico, known as the Mixteca Poblano, has been sending migrants to the United States – mostly the New York area – for 25 years. And today, unlike earlier in the century, under the government-sponsored Bracero program, the men don't just come to work in the fields and then go home, with little real exposure to American life. You see veterans of the Bracero program in towns like Piaxtla and Tulcingo, and there is nothing American about them – they are still Mexican campesinos who happened to spend a few months or years in the United States.

Today, the experience is different. Migrants work in cities as well as in the fields. Even the most marginal are exposed to American culture – albeit often ghetto culture. Some don't like America or can't make it there and eventually return home to live in Mexico.

Men who have succeeded in New York stand out in the crowd.

For others, the new life works – it suits them and sparks something inside of them – and before they know it, they are assimilating by leaps and bounds. But either way, if they stay any length of time, most of today's migrants find themselves deeply changed, sometimes in ways they hardly recognize – and the changes are sure to have long-term consequences for both this region and the United States.



People here in Tulcingo worry mostly about the ill-effects that are blowing their way from America: the drinking, gangs, and other underclass behavior that the youngest migrants bring back with them, whether on a yearly vacation or if, unsuccessful in America, when they return to try to make a life in the village. You see them in Tulcingo, hanging out around town, unmistakable not just by their ghetto clothes but also by their tougher demeanors. "Look at that!" says 52-year-old returned migrant David Bravo driving a visitor around the village. The object of his outrage: two 20-something youths in oversized football jerseys and backward caps chatting up a local girl on a street corner. "In Tulcingo!" Mr. Bravo exclaims indignantly. "And the kids here see it, and they want it too. They say, 'I want to go America and go crazy like that.'"

Just what habits the youth bring back and how bad they are is hard to say. Older people complain about such a wide range of things – everything from gangs and AIDS to disrespect and obscene language.

Returning youth bring back a range of habits.

Sometimes, the offense seems little more than a modern sensibility: a freedom to make one's own choices and live and dress the way one likes that doesn't sit easily with people raised by the code of a small village. Still, the gangs and heavy drinking are serious enough that the town occasionally resorts to a midnight curfew for young people. And though one sees no evidence of either drugs or weapons, church groups and other concerned adults insist that both exist, and they organize a host of activities – mostly sports, but also music lessons, movies, counseling – to keep the town's teens otherwise occupied.

An even more difficult issue, according to the most thoughtful elders, is the way more and more townspeople – and not just those who have been to America – now worship the dollar. Both here and in New York, conversations with the older generation invariably come around to what they see as the softness and selfishness of today's youth. Young people brought up with the bounty that now flows from the North don't know how to work, they don't stay the course in America, they don't send money back to their families. All they want is a good time. "We learned and brought home the good things in America," says returned migrant Rafael Rosindo, "they only learn the bad." Adults don't blame this entirely on America – they see that it is human. But it is a product of the town's new way of life. And now, terrifyingly, it is endangering that way of life by threatening to cut off the flow of remittances.

And then there is AIDS, surely the worst scourge. Most young migrants go to New York without wives, and invariably some resort to prostitutes. When they get sick, they don't always find out what it is that ails them, and, when they come home, they unwittingly spread the virus. And a disproportionate number do get sick. While Mexicans are between 10 percent and 15 percent of the Latino population in New York, they account for 30 percent of the Latino AIDS cases, says Gabriel Rincon, president of the Mixteca Organization, a Brooklyn-based group that provides health services for immigrants. Local doctors won't even try to estimate the number of AIDS cases in the village, but by all accounts it is significant.

Still, even those returned migrants who say they didn't like America and those who gripe loudest about the habits that others are bringing back are themselves plainly altered, often for the good. People who have been away see that things can be done differently, and they complain about the old ways, even derid-



nation to run an accountable government. "When I promise something," he maintains, "that's because I'm going to do it. Not like traditional Mexican politicians who think talk is enough."

As for those politicians still in the old mold, they are finding life much harder now, thanks to both returnees and migrants in America. According to Carmelo Maceda, a leader of the New York Tulcingo community, the no. 1 issue in his conversations with Mexican politicians campaigning in America is police corruption in Mexico. "If I did something wrong," Mr. Maceda says, "let them give me a ticket. I'll go to the precinct and pay the fine. But don't stop me on the road and take my dollars just because you want cash dollars. You can't get away with that. We learned that in America – and now we're insisting on it in Mexico." Puebla congressman Rafael Moreno Valle is himself a sort of returned migrant – educated at Boston University, then seasoned by a stint on Wall Street. He talks with the kind of candor heard only among returnees about the difference between ordinary Mexicans – "lazy, disrespectful of authority, throwing garbage in the street" – and migrants, who are punctual and hardworking. What causes the change? According to the congressman, people who are "willing to take that awful step" – to uproot their lives and leave their families – want

ing them as "Mexican" – the lack of cleanliness, the garbage in the streets, the indifference to punctuality, the corruption. More dramatic still, many have shed the fatalism they learned as children, realizing – often with a perceptible shock – that they can stand up to authority and push to change what they don't like.

David Bravo, who spent 20 years in New York and came back to Tulcingo to open a pizzeria, now spends most of his spare time trying to counteract what he sees as the pernicious U.S. influence. But the very way he does this has an American flavor: standing up and criticizing publicly, organizing others to take action, and all with a kind of can-do flair that seems quite foreign to Mexico.

The mayor of Tulcingo, Sergio Barrera, is also a returnee – and someone who talks openly about how he does things differently as a result of his years in America. Among the things he says he learned: the priority he gives to education, the transparency with which he handles the town's accounts, his determi-

***Returnees say no to police corruption –
'We learned that in America.'***

to succeed at any cost. And then they get caught up in the competitiveness of American society. "In America, you have to earn your keep," he says. "It's do or die. If you do well, you get rewarded. If you





do poorly, you get fired.” The migrants who don’t learn this – like the lazy youth the townspeople complain about – eventually come home. But others soon absorb the American ethos, and they become more demanding, both of themselves and those around them.

This explanation rings true, but hard work and ambition aren’t all that people pick up in America. Juan Flores, who left Piaxtla for New York in 1976, now comes back every five years or so for the feast and

Juan Flores hasn’t forgotten he’s Mexican, but he’s proud to be American.

to see his family. Five of his nine brothers and sisters are in New York, but his parents still live on the modest ranch where he grew up, their existence largely unchanged since their childhoods and probably their parents’ childhoods before them. So when Mr. Flores and five of his siblings came home for Saturday lunch one day last month, the contrasts between the two ways of life stood out in stark relief.

Mr. Flores is unequivocal: he’s an American now. “I carry a blue passport,” he beams, “and I’m happy over there.” He’s proud of his job as a cook at the Century Association, a private club in Midtown Manhattan. He owns two houses and drives an American SUV. All three of his children have made it to college. And unlike many migrants, who nurse dreams of returning for good even when they know it is unlikely, Mr. Flores doesn’t kid himself. “I might retire to Florida,” he says. “But come back here? No way.” When the next generation – his daughter and some cousins – show up, they make clear why. All-American teenagers, one of them with a stud in her tongue, they are plainly rooted in the United States

and are going to raise their children – including Mr. Flores’s grandchildren – there.

The difference America has made for Mr. Flores is on display as soon as he enters his parents’ house. His father is outside in the harsh, bright landscape, drinking with some other men by a pit where a goat is roasting. The women are inside in a flower filled courtyard preparing the meal and chattering among themselves. It’s the traditional Mexican separation of the sexes. But Mr. Flores will have none of it, or the roles that usually go with it, and he immediately goes to work pouring cold drinks for the women. “My wife and I share everything,” he explains. “I cook and help around the house. She can say whatever she wants to me – whatever she needs to say. And so can my children.” Asked if that was the way it was when he was growing up, he laughs and answers the easy part of the question. “My father doesn’t know how to turn on the stove.”

Mr. Flores is clearly an ambitious man: he talks a lot about who in his family has succeeded and who hasn’t. It’s a concept in itself utterly alien to his peasant father and one the younger man surely learned in New York. But the more he says, the clearer it is that what he really prizes in America is the freedom he found there. He likes being able to spend money when he wants to. He relishes the room to experiment in his lifestyle – just listen to him tell a stranger about how he drinks wine and cooks mostly continental at home.

Unlike his father, who, once he inherited the ranch, learned little new in all his adult life, Mr. Flores talks constantly about learning new things. And he feels free, day to day, to reinvent himself. He hasn’t forgotten he’s Mexican, and he likes that too – likes drinking with the men and shooting his father’s gun and passing the evening in the bleachers at the

Piactla bullring. But unlike his father, mostly he is picking and choosing, and the difference shows in the very way he carries himself – that easy, open American confidence that marked all the returning migrants at the feast.

What's the net result? Are the effects of the migration for good or for ill? If worried Mexicans are right about the younger generation, the game may soon be up for places like Tulcingo. If the youth are so spoiled by the flow of remittances that they don't want to work – if the American connection ultimately fizzles out in that way – then the boom will soon turn to bust. Creating an economic and legal climate where those kinds of people can flourish is a challenge for Mexico and, to some degree, its friends in America. But meanwhile, surely, New York only stands to gain if the best and brightest of the circular migration take root in America and mature into citizens like Arguimiro Lucero and Juan Flores.





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