

Publication:The New York Sun;**Date:**Sep 11, 2003;**Section:**Front page;**Page:**1

THE MEXICAN CONNECTION

HOW NEW YORK STANDS TO GAIN

By **TAMAR JACOBY** Special to the Sun

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. 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. 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

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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 as a disproportionate number do get sick. While Mexicans are between 10% and 15% of the Latino population in New York, they account for 30% 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 deriding 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 determination 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 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 to see his family. Five of his nine brothers and sisters are

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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 flowerfilled 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 Piaxtla 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. But if real development takes root, then American values of the kind the migrants have been bringing — punctuality, accountability, determination, and a can-do spirit — could prove the region's greatest asset. 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.