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Coming to America: Rural Mexicans Flock to New York

A New Tale of Two Places: Mixteca Emerging as a Part of New York HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS IN CITY HAIL FROM REMOTE REGION

By **TAMAR JACOBY** Special to the Sun

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 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 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."

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Juan Luna, also from Tulcingo and also now an entrepreneur in New York — his 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 dishwashing 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% and 30% 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 because modern communications make it easy, but more than many other immigrant groups, Mexicans 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 mirror 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 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 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

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money," the haunting melody went, "but I'm not happy. I miss my country. I want to die."

Still, for all the transnational backand-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 Mixtecan 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 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.



NEW HOME Mexican mothers Marie Carmen Lima, left, and her sister, Anna, and their daughters spend a relaxing Sunday at Ferry Point Park in the Bronx. **KONRAD FIEDLER**