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TALE OF TWO PLACES

WEB OF TIES BINDS N.Y.C., MEXICO TOWN WAITING BY THE PHONES

By **TAMAR JACOBY** Special to the Sun

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 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 "paqueterías," 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, 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.

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The Internet connection is more of a two-way affair: there are now five cyber cafés 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 tulcingo.com 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 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% 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 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 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 as way of 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.

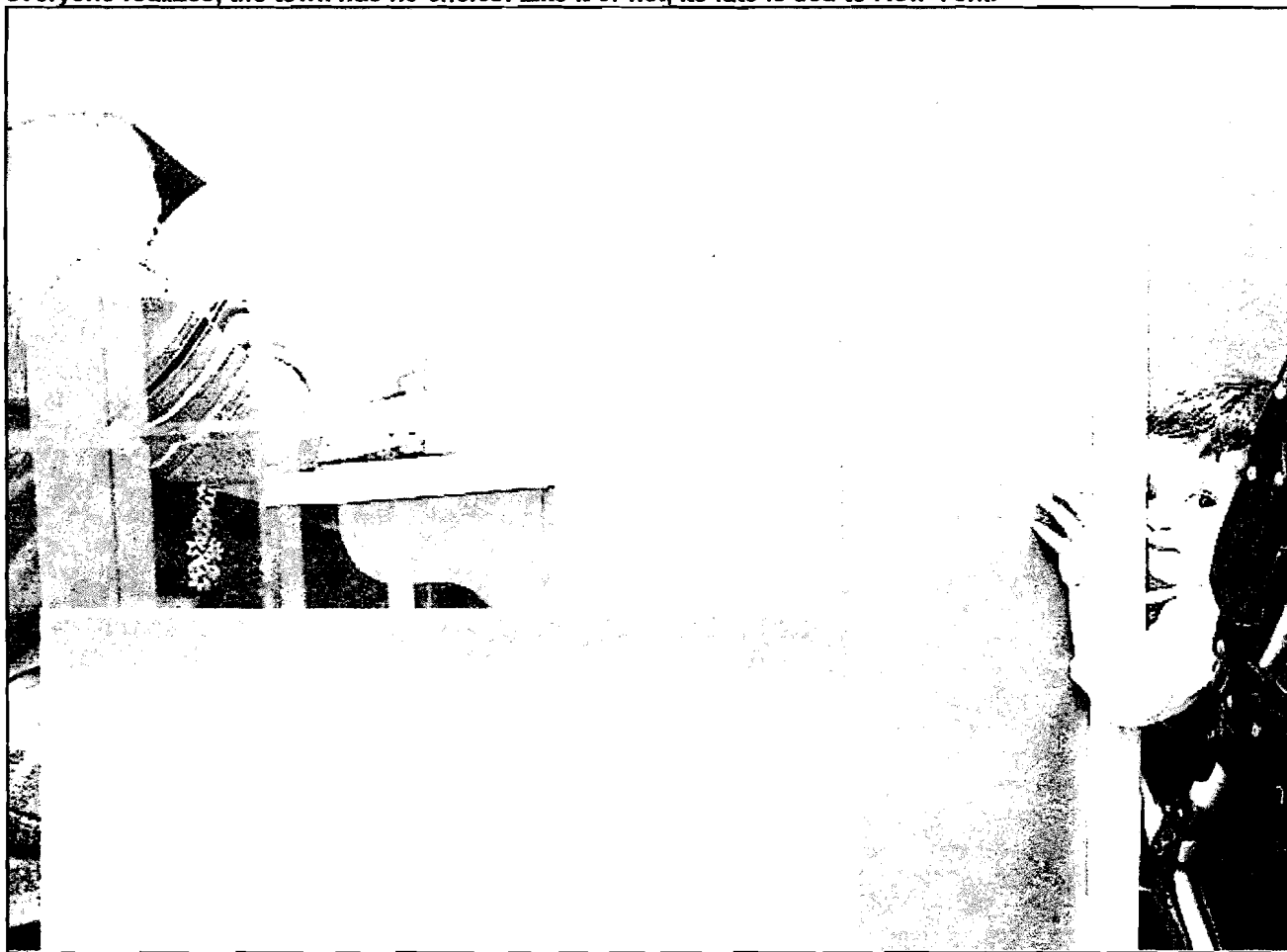
Ultimately the link that matters most is the money. That is why young men from towns like Tulcingo go to New York. The need to make money and send it home is the focus of their existence — the reason they'll do any job, no matter how hard or how humiliating, working typically between 100 and 120 hours 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 commercial hub with an almost boomtown feel. But the dependence on a distant economy also troubles many residents.

Townpeople 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%; Rafael Fernandez, who clears land for new roads and houses, suffered closer to a 50% 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 reflects 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.



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