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Steve Lopez:

Points West

The Town That NAFTA Sent North

Pay a visit to this hilltop farm town with the pretty little church in the plaza, a state official had suggested, and I would discover something was missing.

Half the population.

Where'd they go? I asked.

Los Angeles, he said.

I figured he was exaggerating.

He wasn't.

"Si, un mitad," said the first person I met in San Juan's quiet, nearly evacuated central plaza.

Yes, one half.

The official population of San Juan, four hours south of Mexico City, is 6,000. But the only work here is in the cornfields, and locally grown corn is worth next to nothing. In the country that introduced corn to the world, campesinos can't compete with cheap U.S. imports.

So they go north, or they go hungry.

The San Juan mayor told me as much as 70% of the money in town is sent home by displaced sons in Los Angeles. I was also told that the church, a gleaming white beacon in a town that's rough around the edges, was lovingly restored with money sent back from L.A.

Unfortunately, the padre wasn't around the first time I knocked, so I began exploring the town, asking people if they had relatives in Los Angeles. Many said yes. Others said, "No, in Culver City," or, "No, in San Fernando."

"In the fields here, I made \$6 a day," said Misael Gomez, 23, who recently returned home from several months in Santa Monica, where he worked as a gardener. "In the United States, I made \$6 an hour."

Six bucks an hour was so attractive, he gladly paid \$250 for a plane ticket from Mexico City to Tijuana, and then worked eight months in Santa Monica to pay off a \$2,500 ransom to the coyote who led him across the border.

Gomez missed home, though. He returned after a year to be with his wife. Together, they were dismantling the little stand where they sell fresh-squeezed orange and carrot juice in the plaza near the church. Gomez showed me a box with the day's receipts.

Forty pesos, about \$4.

Not much, he sighed. But better than what he'd make in the sun-blasted cornfields these days.

The Mexican government deserves much of the blame for that. Farmers get no price supports and scant government aid. Bank credit is nonexistent, so farmers work the fields with primitive tools and no tractors.

But if Mexican ineptitude has staggered the campesinos, American policy has delivered the knockout punch. The U.S. government paid more than \$34 billion in subsidies to American corn growers between 1995 and 2002, according to the Environmental Working Group.

An estimated 1.3 million Mexican farm jobs have been lost since the beginning of free trade in 1994, according to a Carnegie Endowment report. They couldn't compete with American farmers propped up with U.S. tax dollars doled out by vote-chasing politicians.

Just beyond San Juan's town center, I found farmers with wives and children in tow, heading in from the cornfields on horse-drawn wagons after a day of hard labor.

Two sisters, Silvia, 7, and Anaseli, 6, had been kept out of school that day to help plow fields with 15-year-old big sister Barbarita - who had to quit school in the third grade. They were riding home with their father, Hipolito Casiano Atilano, and their mother, Manuela.

I asked the youngest sisters what they liked better, school or work?

"La escuela!" they shouted in unison.

If the girls don't help work the farm, said their father, the family won't eat. They used to eat some and sell some of what they grow on the seven acres they work as sharecroppers. But Casiano said the price of the maize that is used to make tortillas has dropped to 16 cents a kilo because of all the cheap foreign corn on the market, some of it genetically modified.

The situation is so bleak that Casiano's two sons, 17 and 24, headed north to work as gardeners in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. The boys used to send money back home, but even with 12-hour workdays in the United States, they have trouble paying their own bills.

There's suffering, said their mother, on both sides of the border.

Another farmer pulled up with his whole family aboard a creaky old wagon, and the same story was repeated. At 16 cents, Joaquin Urbina said, do you realize how many kilos of corn you have to sell to buy a pair of shoes?

Urbina said his eldest son, 28, is a gardener in L.A. I asked one of Urbina's daughters, a girl of about 12, what it's like growing up in a town where all the young men have disappeared.

"It's fine that they go," she said, "because they send money."

The story is as old as the world. It's the story of families torn apart in the name of survival, the poor crossing oceans, climbing fences, running for their lives. From San Juan Atenco, it's clear why millions head north, trading history and culture for food and opportunity.

Next week, many of those new Angelenos will head home to celebrate the feast of San Juan Bautista. Sometimes there's a long line of vehicles returning to town, one man told me, many of them with California plates.

When I got back up to the central plaza, an elderly gent named Edgardo was in the church bell tower, tugging at a rope. The chimes carried across the plaza, over the rooftops and into the cornfields under a metallic sky.

Edgardo took me into the church after climbing down, proud to show it off. Inside the ornate, impeccably maintained house of worship was a plaque honoring everyone who helped in the rebuilding between 1993 and 1998.

Special mention was given to those who sent money from Los Angeles, where half the town of San Juan Atenco sleeps.