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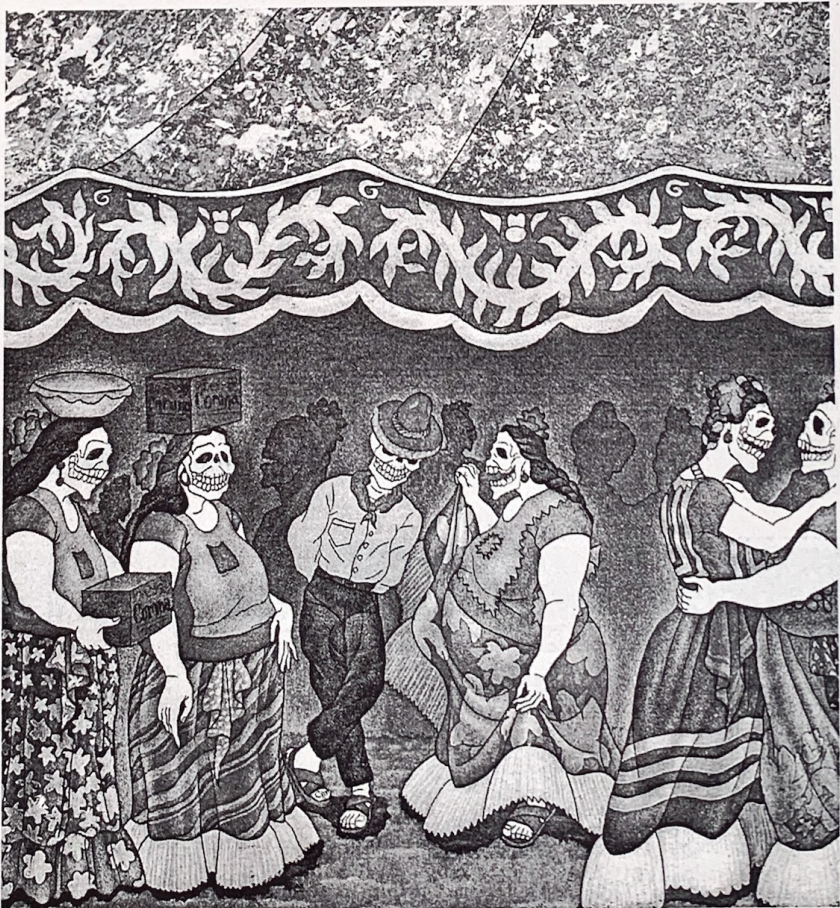
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DIA DE MUERTOS



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SPECIAL REPORT

The Women of Nopal

Their husbands gone to the United States, the women of Ayoquesco became entrepreneurs. With the Nopal Cactus, they have turned a rural pueblo into a thriving community.

By Rachael Shepherd
Photos Jerome Manet

Dipping my *tostada* into the delicious home-cooked bowl of *frijoles*, onion, and nopals mixture, I listen to the cheerful banter of the women. Seated on plastic chairs in the kitchen around a bucket and armed with razor sharp knives, the women are slashing off the thorns of nopal cactus pads. "Thank God for this opportunity we have been given," says Francisca Cruz Sánchez, arranging the now spineless pads along the thin adobe walls.

The women all live in Ayoquesco de Aldama, a small town, about an hour south of Oaxaca by bus. On a muggy Saturday last month, they took me into their homes for a taste of the green life and the green cactus. Despite the multiple hardships along the way, they smile proudly throughout the tour: after decades of unsupported work and agonizingly low market sales, they have successfully organized themselves into an all-women cooperative called *Mujeres Empacadoras de Nopal de Ayoquesco* (MENA) or Women of Ayoquesco who Sell Nopal.

The word nopal derives from *nopalli*, which is the name used by various indigenous groups. The cactus, whose pink, red, yellow and orange flowers of the prickly pear cactus found in the deserts throughout Mexico, is part and parcel of the Mexican tradition. It is depicted in one of the country's most famous icons: the royal golden eagle eating a rattlesnake on top of a nopal cactus. (According to an ancient legend, the Aztec people were told by Huitzilopochtli (their God) that to find their promised land, they were to find the place where an eagle landed on a nopal cactus while eating a snake. After wandering for hundreds of years, they found the eagle on a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. They named the place Tenochtitlan (meaning "Place of the Nopal Cactus"), and in 1325, they built what is now called Mexico City.)

Nopals have been a Mexican staple since time immemorial. Recorded as early as 11,000 years ago, it might have been one of the first foods of man in the Americas. Today, most restaurants serve it in a variety of recipes and it is frequently eaten in Mexican homes. It is a perfect non-meat dish to eat during the Roman Catholic observance of Lent.

"The nopal is very tasty and of great quality," says Francisca Cruz Sánchez,

MENA's president. "We don't use any chemicals, only goat and cow manure, so it is organic." Rich in calcium and fiber, nopal is incredibly healthy, and its proponents claim it protects against ulcers, lowers cholesterol, and stimulates circulation. Because nopal prevents the increase in glucose levels by decreasing the concentration of sugar in the blood, daily consumption is also recommended to treat and prevent diabetes. (Furthermore, its viscous juice can even be used to weatherproof your roof!)

Since learning to farm at the young age of eight, each MENA woman supports her family literally off the nopal, both as a food and as a source of income. Each of the orig-

inal eight members of MENA discovered a process that would revolutionize the city of Ayoquesco and the lives of its people. After her husband had traveled to the United States in search of remittances for their family and returned with only fifteen dollars, they decided to try again. Only this time, they crossed the border together. Despite the difficulties of living in a foreign country without speaking the language, Catalina found work in a factory and learned the process of bottling. The discovery would revolutionize the city of Ayoquesco and the lives of its people.

Catalina returned home and announced to her friends that their problems were solved: instead of relying uniquely on fresh nopals, with erratic harvests and sales, they could now package part of their production and export it. With most of their husbands working in the United States, the women brought together their courage and agreed on building a unified group to focus on the packaging of the nopal and export within the Oaxaca region and abroad. MENA was born.

That same year, Francisca traveled to the market in Zimatlan de Alvarez

and met a local, Daniel Zárate Martínez, who was eager to help. He introduced the women to María Gómez Vargas, who worked for the *Fundación para la Productividad en el Campo* (APOYO), or Foundation for the Development of the Countryside, a group dedicated to the economic development of rural areas. With a US\$5,000 grant from the Inter-American bank, she helped the women invest in and design their future. Since 2003, with the addition of several innovative irrigation systems in their fields, the women produce a 100% natural product. They are still working on the construction of their warehouse, where they will eventually work, instead of the small kitchen in Catalina's adobe house.

In just two years, these women established the reputation of Ayoquesco: just ask any Mexican about this town and he will reply "the town of the *Turtugas*," alluding to MENA's brand name. The two jars of green cactus are sold in two varieties: cut *nopalito* pieces served brine or marinated in



inal eight members of MENA harvests her own crop in her yard. Today, an individual field grows about 300 plants that are cut and harvested every fifteen days. The daily routine begins at dawn. They wake up to gather the fresh nopals and other vegetables to sell at the local markets around their village. A seemingly typical lifestyle for a Mexican family. But not for these women of Ayoquesco just a few years ago.

Then, the nopal market was a fierce one, rife with discrimination, doubts and financial difficulties. In 2000, at Oaxaca's Saturday *Abastos* market in, the largest in the area, the nopal was a rare commodity. Fearful of losing customers and money, the "regular" *Abastos* nopal sellers did not welcome the MENA women. "People tried to kick us out," remembers Sánchez. "The local vendors threw water at us and refused to help us. But we decided not to get upset." The poor weather conditions that year produced a low crop and exacerbated their plight. The women, who were selling solely fresh organic nopals, were down on their luck.

Then in 2001, Catalina Sánchez Jiménez,

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N E W S R E P O R T

Borderline

After having fallen into oblivion, the Mexican-American border is back on the top of President Bush's agenda. What does his proposal really mean?

By Andrew Block

“My 17 year-old cousin got lost in the desert when trying to cross the border and he died,” recalled the young Mrs. Cruz. “I have two sisters, 26 and 20 year-old, who are working illegally in Olympia, Washington. They send money to my family.”

Cruz, who declined to give her full name for fear of her sisters' deportation, hails from San Juan Quiahijé Cieneguilla, in Oaxaca's Sierra del Sur, a town where the majority of the 1,600 inhabitants speak Chatino rather than Spanish. “Most of my pueblo has left to the United States and now leaves in Atlanta,” she said. “Many do not come back because they are afraid they will not be able to cross the border again.”

Such fears and familial estrangement are well known among the 8 to 11 million undocumented immigrants from around the world who live in the United States today. Many who have permeated the country's borders now reside permanently in the United States, mixing old customs with those of their new home.

Mexico's migrants make up the vast majority of “illegal aliens,” with an estimated 4 million in the United States. They and the nearly 20 million people of Mexican descent living in the country are an active part in the molding of American life, coast to coast. Oaxaca's signature *Tlayudas* and *quesillo* are sold at stands and stocked in stores from Pasadena to Poughkeepsie. Scholarship programs, funded by replanted pueblos, send young Mexicans to American universities. And U.S. presidential candidates design policies to attract the Mexican vote.

Last month, President George W. Bush announced that the US immigration system was “broken” and due to repair. At a special ceremony held in the White House, the President outlined a proposal called the “temporary work program.” The still-vague plan would allow foreign workers to come to the United States under agreements with specific employers to fill jobs not wanted by U.S. citizens. After three years, each worker would be required either to return to his home country, apply for renewal of his permit, or request residence under another sta-



A father and son peer into the United States from Tijuana, Mexico

Photo Todd Bigelow

tus. Mr. Bush made it clear that he was not granting full-amnesty to those who had entered the country illegally. Furthermore, he underlined that: “Participants who do not remain employed, who do not follow the rules of the program or who break the law will not be eligible for continued participation and required to return to their home.”

Illegal immigrants looking for permanent residence would have to go to the end of the line, after documented immigrants who desire the same. The number of people in line, coupled with the small percentage of application approved annually, means the wait takes years. Therefore, many temporary workers would fear their number would be called after they have returned home.

Although the U.S. President suggested that permanent residence was the possible outcome for some temporary workers, he made it clear that the primary goal of the plan would be for “temporary workers” to return permanently to their home countries after their period of work in the United

States has expired. “There should be financial incentives for them to do so,” he stated.

The proposal – which is expected to take firmer form when sent to Congress – is the White House's first step in recognizing undocumented workers since early fall 2001, when Mexican President Vicente Fox pressed Mr. Bush for an amnesty bill. After the September 11 attacks however, the United States abandoned the talks, focusing on Homeland Security, rather than opening its borders.

In Mexico, politicians cheered climbing back onto the U.S. President's radar, but measured hope with caution. “It is a very interesting program. We are going to wait for details,” said Mr. Fox, who regarded the legal recognition of the undocumented Mexicans working in the United State as a focal point of his agenda.

More skeptical was Jorge Castañeda, the former Foreign Affairs Minister under Mr. Fox. “How many people are involved? How many people does this really affect, of the three to four million undocumented Mexicans in the United States?” Mr. Castañeda said. “If they have to come home, they won't enroll in the program. It won't work if you insist on that.”

Mario Ortiz Gabriel, a professor at Mexico's National Institute of Sociology in Oaxaca, specialized in the region emigration, sees concern over the issue of return as just a small problem compare to others the proposal would create. “There are immigrants that have lived in the United States for many years and made their home there. Their family is there, their classmates, their work, and their community,” he said. “It will be much easier for the new immigrant workers and those who just go to the United States with plans to return soon.”

“If [Bush] wants to help us, then he must give us an amnesty law,” said by email Gregorio Morales, a *Oaxaqueño* who crossed the border by foot three years ago to support his family. Morales is



At dusk, an illegal immigrant crosses the border into San Diego, California

Photo Todd Bigelow

now a student during the day – he graduated from high school last year – and a worker at night, and he is still illegal. “We don’t need visas: we have been here for a long time without visa. If fathers get temporary visas and then are forced to go back, what will happen to their kids who were born here?”

“Even if the bill does not get totally watered down, it still is not addressing the issue of how you integrate and incorporate the massive community of four to five million undocumented Mexicans,” said Lindsay Dailey of Sin Fronteras or Without Borders, a think tank on immigration to the United States with offices in Oaxaca. “You have people who arrived in the United States at five, graduated from high school, are now going to junior college, and have become part of the American society. And now their options are very limited.”



Photo Genaro Molina

A Oaxacan family of migrants eats at Guelaguetza a restaurant on west Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles

One of the expectations Mr. Bush mentioned in his proposal was that the legalization of the undocumented, and the regulation of their work environments and wages, would prevent the establishment of a permanent underclass.

Dailey sees such a hope as hypocrisy.

“The way the proposal is written puts the immigrants already in an inferior position to the U.S. [citizen]. First, they have a time limit and then they can only take jobs Americans don’t want... Many of the undocumented have high school and college degrees. But such a policy would limit them, telling them they can only be dishwashers. It would institutionalize racism and “classism” by keeping immigrants at a certain level.”

While Mexican immigration to the United States is more than a century old, only in the last 20 years has it flowed heavily from Oaxaca. A soon-to-be

before. “The more marginalized the community, the later the growth and the later the migration.”

Today, Oaxaqueños make up half the Mexican population in Los Angeles, with

estimated as high as 250,000. And the community is definitely starting to get organized. A bi-monthly Spanish newspaper, *El Oaxaqueño*, is for instance published in Los Angeles and sold there, as well as on the Zócalo in Oaxaca.

“Every year, we celebrate the *Guelaguetza* because the people here like our culture,” related-Morales. *La Guelaguetza* is a commitment

to sharing and the practice of contributing for the betterment of the community. It is celebrated in July in Oaxaca.

But preserving the culture abroad might not be enough. Galecia, on the other side of the border, is preoccupied by the potential extinction of her own pueblo’s culture. “There seems to be only old women and small children that mothers and fathers leave behind when they go north,” she said. “My 17 year-old brother wants to go, when he finishes high school. He sees that all the young people of the pueblo are leaving and he feels wants to earn a living too.”

published paper by Professor Ortiz, entitled “Indigenous migrants: the marginalized and exploited,” cites Oaxaca’s rural indigenous community as the primary source of the state’s immigration to the United States. The study shows that 16 different ethnicities – and 16 different dialects – are represented among *Oaxaqueño* immigrants.

“The poorest of the poor aren’t the ones who migrate, it is the ones who have a little bit and are on their way up,” explained Dailey, comparing the northern states of Mexico, which have a longer history of wealth and migration, to historically poor Oaxaca, which did not experience heavy emigration

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vinegar with carrots. A jar costs a mere fifteen pesos and a kilo of raw pads costs only twelve. There are now 45 Ayocusco families involved in the nopal business. “Our goal is to have our own packaging place and to get our nopals sold in supermarkets,” Francisca states enthusiastically. As a matter of fact, their product is already sold at places in Los Angeles and Salinas in California.

The MENA women have come far and the hardest part seems over. Whether walking the grounds of their local fields, attending a meeting with the Municipal President, or enjoying their nopal, all the women of MENA carry a spark of light that seems impossible to extinguish. There is no doubt that their product belongs to the future. They work passionately--for their community, each other, and, most of all, their nopal. To them, each day is a step forward. “Nopal is our business, our future,” concludes Catalina.

You can buy MENA’s nopal at the Pochote Organic Market (Friday and Saturday), M. Alcalá 801, between Gómez Farías and Humbolt.

For more information about nopal or MENA, please check *Oaxaca, Simple Flavors*, a beautiful book by Yolanda Cruz and Jérôme Manet. The book is on sale at the Café Los Cuiles, at Plaza La Bastida.

