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A Hometown Away From Home



Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

A recently purified water well in Atopoltitlan in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Gifts are often used for water projects.

By **TRIPTI LAHIRI**

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When Avenamar Cruz thinks of Atopoltitlan, the little town in the Mexican state of Puebla that he left 19 years ago, he remembers the celebrations most of all.

In April, at the annual feast of the Virgin of the Rosary, he would watch the riding of the bulls, cockfights and fireworks. When townspeople were married, the whole town would gather at the bride's house to dance and sing. And at Christmastime, the statues of Mary and Joseph would be moved from the church every night to visit a different house, where a party would be thrown, with a piñata and plenty of sweets for the children.

"The traditions of the town, the festivals, those are the things I really miss," Mr. Cruz said.

Now 36, he lives in the Bronx and works at the Hunts Point produce market. He may never return to live in Atopoltitlan. Even so, he continues to take an active part in the life of his town, helping to raise money for festivals, a basketball court, street lights in the town center and - most recently - a clean-water system.

Around the New York City region, Mexican immigrants like Mr. Cruz are getting together with others from their hometowns and

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Photo: On guard at the Mexican border, 1916

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chipping in as much as they can afford - \$50 here, \$100 there - to improve conditions in the poor rural towns they left behind. The projects range from sprucing up the town church to expensive public works.

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According to Manuel Orozco, a senior researcher at Georgetown University who has been studying hometown associations since 1996, such groups contribute up to \$60 million a year for public works in Mexico. That number, he emphasized, is over and above the money sent by people to their families.

In the New York region, water projects appear to be popular choices for hometown associations because many migrants come from the arid Mixteca region, which includes parts of Puebla.

"Here one gets used to turning on the tap and having water," Mr. Cruz said. "Over there, there's barely water to drink, let alone take a shower."

Mr. Cruz's group, Mexican-American Atopolteco (Atopolteco is an affectionate diminutive for the town's name), was started in January 2003, when a town official visited and convened a meeting in Passaic, N.J. At the meeting, Mr. Cruz and 10 others were chosen to head a committee to carry out projects in the town, and a similar committee was formed in Atopoltitlan.

While hometown associations have been common for decades in Los Angeles and Chicago, only in the last decade have these committees become more noticeable in the New York area. "I would calculate that there are about 20 or 30 groups, but this is not a completely reliable figure," said Consul Gaspar Orozco (no relation to Manuel Orozco), who is in charge of community affairs at the Mexican consulate.

Robert C. Smith, a professor at Barnard College, put the number of groups closer to 100 in the New York area. In his book, "Mexican New York: Transnational Worlds of New Immigrants," to be published at the end of this year, he documents the activities of a Brooklyn-based association that raised \$100,000 to bring water to its town. "The dedication these men show is utterly amazing," Professor Smith said.

Nicolás Sánchez, who is from San Miguel Comitlipa, in the state of Guerrero, says that he spends several hours a week coordinating with other committee members, raising money and consulting with people back home. So far, migrants here have paid for the town church to be painted in shades of white and blue, for an antenna so the City Council office can receive television signals and for school furniture and computers.

"I can do something for the place where I was born," said Mr. Sánchez, 32, whose mother still lives in the town. "It makes you feel good, like you have a purpose."

Yet the hometown groups sometimes find that they do not always see eye to eye with officials back home about how to spend their money.

"The migrants usually start with renovations or an aesthetic project," said Alex Rivera, a filmmaker whose 2003 documentary, "Grupo Unión," follows the activities of an association based in Newburgh, N.Y. "Then they start to do more and come into conflict with local authorities."



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Donations from countrymen in the New York region paid for repainting the church and improving the school in Atopoltitlan, Mexico.

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