

MEXICANS VIEW L.I. DOCUMENTARY; 'Farmingville' not just a movie

BY LETTA TAYLER. LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT
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MEXICO CITY - When the screen showed the fumbblings of male day laborers in Farmingville as they heated tacos that they were used to their wives preparing back home in Mexico, the audience chuckled delightedly.

But when the camera zoomed in on two Mexican workers almost beaten to death by white supremacists, or on Farmingville residents denouncing immigrants as "invaders," viewers gasped.

In screenings this week, Mexicans are reacting with fascination and outrage to "Farmingville," an award-winning documentary about how that Suffolk County community became a national battleground over the nearly 5 million undocumented Mexicans in the United States.

The film is being shown four times in Mexico City and the central provincial city of Morelia. Its Hamptons-based directors, along with Mexican government officials, hope it will be screened in cinemas nationwide to underscore the difficulties Mexican laborers face on what people here call "el otro lado" - the other side.

"Mexicans who cross the border in search of work tend to romanticize what they'll find," said Carlos Sandoval of Amagansett, who is in Mexico promoting the film with his co-director, Catherine Tambini of Hampton Bays. "This is a reality check that we hope will diffuse tensions on both sides."

"Farmingville's" release comes amid Mexico's growing frustration over Washington's reluctance to legalize undocumented immigrants, many of whom perform jobs that U.S. citizens won't take. It is the second film to be shown on both sides of the border this year that focuses on the controversy over Mexican laborers in the United States.

The first film, "A Day Without Mexicans" - subtitled "The Gringos Are Going to Weep" - got laughs here for imagining California as paralyzed when it awakens one day to find no maids, gardeners, car washers or waiters.

There were fewer chortles at a screening of "Farmingville" here Monday night when migrants in the documentary described people pelting them with rocks and eggs, and even shooting them with pellets.

"It makes me angry that people in the United States are trying to kick us out of a place

they already took from us," said viewer Jose Luis Angeles, 23, a foreign affairs student at a Mexico City university. Angeles was referring to the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48, in which Mexico lost its territory north of the Rio Grande to the United States.

"Who would think you'd see that kind of prejudice in the 21st century?" asked Hugo Gutierrez, 33, a lawyer.

Still, many viewers said they didn't think the film, which won the Special Jury Prize for documentaries at this year's Sundance Film Festival, would increase anti-Americanism in Mexico. They noted that at the end of the documentary, which was filmed in 2001, Farmingville's resistance to the workers appears less volatile.

Some even said the movie could help Mexicans understand prejudices in their own country, where lighter-skinned citizens often look down on indigenous workers or undocumented laborers from Central America.

"There have been times I've reacted against people through fear or ignorance," said Isabel Vences, 53, a homemaker. "But until now, I didn't see it in myself."



'Farmingville': Immigration's true colors

By ELIZA BARCLAY
October 5, 2004 Tuesday

A film that addresses confrontations between a population of undocumented, male Mexican migrants and a U.S. community they entered premiered in Mexico this week, highlighting many themes in U.S.-Mexico relations that both sides have had trouble coming to terms with.

The documentary "Farmingville" profiles the reactions of long-term community residents in the low-key suburban town of Farmingville, N.Y., on Long Island, to the arrival in the late 1990s of more than 1,500 Mexican workers. The immigrants, who were principally illegal, flocked to Farmingville to take advantage of the area's robust landscaping, construction and restaurant industries.

But Farmingville, with a population of 15,000, had trouble adjusting to the appearance of a new and different social group. Many women in the community complained that they felt unsafe walking in their community and were threatened by the catcalling and other intimations of the Mexicans. Other community members said that the immigrants' illegal status made them criminals and they were contributing to crime, and that U.S. law enforcement officials should be acting immediately to have them deported.

After tensions in the community escalated to the point where two young Mexicans were severely beaten and nearly killed by two local men in 2000, the discourse between community groups became polarized. Some groups deeply resented the presence of the illegal aliens in the community, and others supported peaceful and practical solutions to the tensions.

The Farmingville community's struggle took on national proportions when the local anti-immigrant groups began to associate with radical West Coast anti-immigration factions, like American Patrol and the California Coalition for Immigration Reform -- groups to whom the word "racist" is often applied. High-profile anti-immigration leaders like Glenn Spencer and Barbara Coe went to Farmingville to co-host a conference in 2002, but the turnout was slim and eventually the community members who sided against the immigrants slipped away from the movement.

The film, which premiered in Mexico for the first time after making the rounds for months around the United States, poses interesting questions for Mexicans both in the

United States and at home in Mexico.

According to director Catherine Tambini, second generation Mexican-Americans in the United States who viewed the film often came up to her afterwards to thank her for revealing to them what their parents had gone through upon their arrival.

"Mexicans were also glad to see themselves on screen -- they aren't often the subject of documentaries," Tambini told United Press International.

Some Mexican audience members in Mexico, however, indignantly responded to the film.

"What can we do to help the gringos get over their ignorance of us?" one audience member asked the directors and foreign relations' government officials who attended the premier.

The film also helps to highlight how helpless many immigrants are in the face of verbal and physical harassment, manipulation by employers and the simple language barrier.

Some immigrants' rights groups have charged that the Mexican government, through its consulates, does not do enough outreach to its people in the United States, though the film showed the consul general of Mexico in New York, Arturo Sarukhan, making trips to Farmingville from New York City to address the tensions there in the community and help the Mexican citizens.

According to Carlos Gonzales Gutierrez, the executive director of the Institute for Mexicans in the Exterior, an arm of Mexico's Department of Foreign Relations, the film has helped his institute think outside the box in the ways it does outreach to the demographic portrayed in the film -- the young Mexican undocumented men who are in the United States to work and send money home to their families.

"These men have traditionally been hard for us to get to -- we only see them when they come to apply for their passport," Gonzales told UPI. "In the film, the men organize themselves through a weekly soccer match, and so we are going to try to use soccer as a unifying tool as well."

Most Mexicans and Americans have long accepted the fact that the huge waves of migration northward from remote Mexican pueblos and even the country's cities across the border have deeply altered the demographics, economics and cultures of both countries. Many American cities like Los Angeles and New York have grown accustomed to the outgrowth of Mexican and Mexican-American communities as they blend in with many other immigrant groups who have made their home in the United States.

"Farmingville" is an excellent reminder of how quickly tensions can flare in less diverse small towns around the issue of immigration in the United States, particularly that of Mexican men, and the cultural chasm that still exists despite America's image of open arms to all peoples.

"This can't continue to happen every time a new wave of people who are different in skin color or ethnicity enter a community," lamented Tambini, reminiscing about her own childhood in Oklahoma City where white people participating in "white flight" abandoned the downtown with the arrival of African-American migrants.

But there are several small American towns that have just experienced their versions of an "invasion" of undocumented workers from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Mexicans are far from finished in the quest for work there. With Mexico's economy unable to provide jobs for those out of work, the immigration trajectory will continue on, smooth and unfettered.

The New York Times

'Farmingville'

By DANA STEVENS

October 29, 2004

Opens today in Manhattan

Directed by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini

Not rated, 78 minutes

In the summer of 2000, amid growing tensions between longtime residents and illegal-immigrant day laborers in the Long Island town of Farmingville, two young Mexican men were lured to a job site by white supremacist youths and beaten nearly to death. Many documentaries might be content to begin and end with that grim story, but "Farmingville," a new one produced and directed by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini, goes much further, taking the attempted murders as a starting point for larger questions about hatred, tolerance and the future of labor and immigration law in this country.

In the late 1990's, some 1,500 workers from Mexico flooded Farmingville (population: 15,000), lured by the promise of work in the contracting, landscaping and service industries. Soon residents were complaining about overcrowded rental housing -- up to 30 men in one -- and the packs of men standing on street corners, waiting for work.

One disgruntled resident, Margaret Bianculli-Dyber, started a group to protest the immigrants' presence; other groups quickly sprang up to protect the workers' rights, including an informal union organized by the laborers. The film soberly documents how legitimate quality-of-life grievances like overcrowding and noise can degenerate into racially inflected intolerance.

As Ms. Bianculli-Dyber's efforts draw support from extremist hate groups nationwide, verbal and physical harassment of the workers escalates, and the residents argue bitterly with their local legislators and one another. Even the beating incident of 2000 fails to shock the community into a peaceful solution; rather, each side uses the horrific event as further evidence for its position.

Though it has the slight, informal feel of a made-for-television documentary shot on video, "Farmingville" is an unusually sensitive and sophisticated piece of investigative journalism (to gain their subjects' trust, Ms. Tambini and Mr. Sandoval lived and worked in Farmingville for nine months during the filming.)

In 78 minutes, the film manages to do justice to the experience of the newly arrived immigrants (who, in one of the film's few heartening moments, gather for a morale-boosting soccer game), to the complexities of federal immigration policy, and even to the often-disturbing views of the quality-of-life contingent.

There is occasionally some subtle irony in the filmmakers' choice of frame (as when Ms. Bianculli-Dyber is interviewed in front of her collection of grinning troll dolls) but they generally steer clear of editorializing about their subjects, no matter how extreme the views they voice. If everyone listened to one another with such patient even-handedness, films like "Farmingville" might not need to be made at all.