

Note: This was my last story at The Herald but one of my favorites because it was an exclusive look into a little-known and tight-knit American community that has lived in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental in northeastern Mexico for more than four generations.

A Land of Promise

Americans settled fertile Mexican valley 100 years ago

BY SERGIO CHAPA
The Brownsville Herald

CHAMAL, Tamaulipas, Mexico — July 23, 2006 — The people and the land of this small ranching and farming community at the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental are tied together in a labor of love and memory that transcends the U.S-Mexico border.

American lawman George E. Blalock first saw the fertile, black soils of the Chamal Valley while on the trail of a group of horse thieves in 1902.

Blalock was enchanted and established a colony here after learning that 174,612 acres were for sale, 17 miles northwest of Ciudad Mante.

In those days, Mexican President Porfirio Diaz allowed foreigners to establish small communities, or colonias, in order to attract foreign investment and capital into Mexico.

After reaching a \$65,000 agreement with the International Mortgage Bank of Mexico to create “La Colonia Blalock,” or the “Blalock Colony,” both Blalock and his partner G.T. Ingram recruited 35 families from Texas and Oklahoma to settle there.

With the blessing of both the American and Mexican governments, the group left Mangum, Okla., by train on Feb. 20, 1903, passing through Laredo and arriving at Xicotencatl (pronounced Hee-ko-ten-kul), Tamaulipas, on March 3, 1903.

It was another four days until settlers reached their new home in the Chamal Valley at the other end of a 35-mile trek that took them over rolling hills and thick palm forests.

With them was all they owned in this world, packed into covered wagons with livestock in tow.

Records show that baby Jewel Snell was born along the Forlon River on March 10, 1903, becoming the first born to settlers in Mexico.

Many more followed. The growth was stunted by the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from 1910 to 1920, and forced the settlers to abandon this land and return to the United States.

Most stayed in el norte, but those who returned created a unique identity and a bi-national culture that has endured for generations of “Chamaleños,” or “Chamalenses,” as the people here call themselves.

“We are proud that our ancestors came here because we were also born with a Mexican heart,” Chamalense Maggie Taylor of Ciudad Victoria said of her Uncle Jewel and the others. “If they had stayed over there, we would have been Americans, but they chose to come to Mexico, and we have dual citizenship, and we love both.”

Old newspaper clippings and journal entries tell of a charmed life disrupted by war and economic unrest. The people who live here speak of this place fondly and remember the pioneers who made this rough patch of Mexican

land a place to call home.

On The Record

Records show that the American settlers in Chamal wasted no time in establishing a community and had no problems trading in their dollars for pesos and English for the native Spanish.

The settlers worked side-by-side with their Mexican neighbors. Many men took Mexican wives and the population grew to more than 500 in 1912, due to immigration and a high birth rate.

Settler Lewis W. Sweet published the first edition The Chamal Record, an English-language newspaper, on March 1, 1912.

The paper was printed on 8.5-by-11-inch paper, published twice a month with a subscription price of 1 peso or 50 American cents per year and distributed in the region and to relatives of settlers in the United States.

Sweet boasts in the Feb. 1, 1913, edition of the newspaper that Chamal had a public square lined with fruit and shade trees, a public well, four stores, two blacksmiths, a pharmacy, a butcher shop, a shoe store, two windmills, a tax office, a post office, a church, a two-story schoolhouse and a “seldom-used” cemetery.

The settlers, he wrote, raised cattle and other livestock but also grew corn, tomatoes and other crops.

The subtropical climate of the region allowed the settlers to have two or three growing seasons a year and to cultivate large orchards of bananas, mangoes, oranges, limes and other fruits.

“Only a few years ago there was a wilderness of palms where this orchard is now thriving,” Sweet wrote about lands belonging to settler William Robert Derr in the Oct. 1, 1912, edition of The Record. “You can scarcely find any trace at all of the palms there now, except around the edges where you find the palms as thick as ever.”

Escaping The Revolution

The Mexican Revolution began on Nov. 20, 1910, after Porfirio Diaz threw political opponent Francisco Madero in jail and declared himself the winner in Mexico’s presidential election.

But The Chamal Record and journals from the settlers show that the violence did not reach the area until as late as May 1913 during battles in nearby cities of Tampico and Panuco.

On Aug. 1, 1913, the now-closed American Consulate in Tampico ordered the settlers in Chamal to evacuate their homes to escape the violence.

Consulate records show that 148 Americans from 33 Chamal families were transported by train to Laredo and then onto destinations in Texas and the United States between August and September 1913.

The records show that settlers D.V., Lucy and Aleck Cameron went to Brownsville, but nothing more is known about the family.

Store owner William Evett Frasier wrote in his journal that his family fled to Cedar Hill near Dallas where they found financial hardship.

Frasier eventually brought his family to San Benito so they could be closer to Mexico and the home they left in Chamal.

“I foresaw that that we would be unable to survive the cold winter with but little bedding, scarcely any clothes and

a sorry house to live in and moved to San Benito, Texas; it being near the boundary line and a much warmer climate,” Frasier wrote in his journal. “There, we took up our abode in one of the cheapest houses we could find, which of course, was a little sorry one and proceeded to do any job that presented itself, that was honorable, big or little the pay.”

Frasier wrote that he worked in the fields and as a gardener and fisherman as well as inside a general store and a cotton gin adding he was, “living harder than I had since the Rebellion of the U.S.”

Under the advice of Consul J.H. Johnson with the American Consulate of Matamoros, Frasier and others returned to Chamal to survey the damage to their property in April 1915.

Frasier stayed and brought his family to Chamal in January 1916, but the settlers who came back had to evacuate their homes a second time as violence from the revolution flared up again in June 1916.

“We were right in the middle of armed men, practically surrounded,” Frasier wrote in a journal entry. “Some riding around over the valley daily; some horses disappearing by theft at times and by force at others.”

Railroads were not an option during this second evacuation, meaning that Frasier, his family and the others had to trek over the mountains on foot and pack animals to make it to Laredo.

The settlers hid in a mountain camp named “Lonesome Cove” and embarked on a perilous two-month exodus across the Sierra Madre Oriental where they made it to the Osorio Station and got the American Consulate in Nuevo Laredo to get them a train to back to Texas.

“... Right here, let me state that a more woebegone set has never crossed the border, going or coming, thanks those who crossed it on August 4, 1916,” Frasier wrote.

A Landmark Designation

The Mexican Revolution ended on May 7, 1920, but many settlers chose not to return to their lands after enduring such hardships.

Frasier’s great-grandson, Ken Titt, wrote on his Web site that his pioneer ancestor ended up in the Hill County of Texas after the second exodus but made it back to Mexico in 1921 with Blalock and some others.

Both Frasier and Blalock died shortly after returning to Chamal and are buried in the settlers’ cemetery. Titt and other descendents claim to share a history that makes them unique and has endured for five generations.

Maggie Taylor said other descendents have a family reunion each Thanksgiving to honor their settler heritage.

On Nov. 29, 2003, more than 700, including 400 Americans and 300 Mexicans, arrived in Chamal to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the colony.

The event was highlighted by the wife of then-Tamaulipas Gov. Tomas Yarrington dedicating the settlers’ two-story “Escuela Americana” or “American School” as a historic landmark.

“They had the courage to live in a foreign nation, a place that was completely foreign for them,” Maggie Taylor said. “They did it totally legally with the permission of the two governments. They came here not lacking anything. They brought everything to maintain their lifestyle. They brought all their belongings, and they fought to improve their lives.”

A New Life

After the Mexican Revolution, things changed here.

The land belonging to American settlers who did not return was sold to Mexican farmers and ranchers. The two communities lived side-by-side and intermarried with their children going to a Mexican school for a Spanish-language education.

Today, Kitchen tables reflect the blended cultures as corn tortillas were served as readily as buttermilk biscuits.

Lillian “Lily” Taylor characterizes her parents and the other settlers as humble people of modest means, not wealthy landowners living in large colonial haciendas.

She and the others who still live here grew up using horses, wood stoves and gas lamps but later upgraded to cars and electrical generators until utility services were installed at her family’s home in 1975.

“Our food was excellent,” Lillian Taylor said. “We canned our food ... our mangos, tomatoes and vegetables. I still can myself.”

Both Lillian and her sister, Maggie Taylor, speak English with a mixed Texas and Southern accent but converse in fluent Spanish with a clear Mexican accent.

Their cousin, Grady Snell, feels comfortable speaking both languages. His English is sprinkled with a Mexican accent, picked up at home where his American settler father and Mexican mother spoke Spanish.

“Our father forbid us to speak Spanish at home,” Maggie Taylor said of her family’s home life. “The only time we could speak Spanish at home was when we had a friend or guest over who did not speak English. Otherwise, we had to speak English.”

Maggie Taylor’s son, Jimmy, said he lives in Austin with his wife and children but that his mother and father imposed the rule on their children while growing up in Ciudad Victoria.

Even when it’s time to celebrate their American heritage, such as when American settlers of Chamal marked their first Fourth of July in 1903, it is understated. Even those with dual citizenship — United States and Mexico — do not make bold displays of American patriotism.

Chamalenses say they are proud of their heritage but none display American flags. They refrain, intending to placate their Mexican neighbors.

“When there is a festival or a parade, I only use a Mexican saddle for my horse,” Snell said.

The Chamalenses said they must equally defend the United States to the Mexican neighbors and defend Mexico to Americans in political discussions.

Although the Chamalenses are members of farming and ranching associations, they do not run for political office.

Dora Proctor-Medina said her late husband was the town’s only mayor.

Although the town decided to do away with municipal government, the descendents of the settlers never sought any other local or state office.

Proctor-Medina served her single-term as “primera dama” or “first lady” but said people in Chamal do not view each other in terms of nationality.

“Life is more peaceful and enjoyable here because economically all our material things are going to stay in this

world, so the most important thing for us is live together and enjoy each other, and that's what I want," she said.

Proctor-Medina said part of that unity is because everybody grew up growing their own food and making their own soap, clothes and any other daily necessity.

"We live perfectly well here because we're working the land that our parents had left us."

A 'Mexican' identity

Carlos Rugerio with the Historic Museum of Fort Casamata in Matamoros said Chamal is not the only community in Mexico to welcome and assimilate foreigners.

"This has been going on to some extent since the Spanish arrived in Mexico," Rugerio explained.

Although exact figures are not available, historians believe that dozens of communities like Chamal were founded by foreigners in Mexico under the rule of Porforio Diaz.

Although it is difficult for most foreigners to retain their language and culture after a few generations, Rugerio said that a religious group known as the Mennonites has only done so by remaining isolated from other segments of society.

In most other cases, Rugerio said the descendents of communities founded by foreigners retain some elements of their culture and history but are now overwhelmingly Mexican nationals and speak Spanish.

For example, Chipilo in Puebla is known for its Italian community while San Rafael in Veracruz has a historic French population.

Figures show that Americans make up 80 percent of the population of Ajijic, a small town along the shores of the Laguna de Chapala near Guadalajara after being settled in the 1950s.

In San Miguel de Allende, there are an estimated 10,000 Americans.

Although the Mexican Revolution's crusade against wealth and privilege was sometimes targeted against foreigners, Rugerio said that did not stop their children and grandchildren of those who stayed from doing well politically and economically.

Examples include Mexican President Vicente Fox and former Tamaulipas Gov. Tomas Yarrington, who are both Mexican but have last names derived of European ancestry.

The American community in Chamal is testament to this.

"There are a large number of foreign last names in Mexico," Rugerio said. "They are all well-integrated into Mexican society."

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