

The Herald

American community in Mexico faces uncertain future

Children, grandchildren find greener pastures elsewhere

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CHAMAL, Tamaulipas — Grady Snell and his neighbors were working on a dead utility pole as the truck drove down the sun-soaked dirt road.

A mid-summer thunderstorm hit the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental the night before knocking out power to parts of the Chamal Valley.

Instead of waiting hours or days for officials to send help, Snell and his neighbors made use of a ladder truck to try and restore power themselves.

Like his American parents who arrived in the area in 1903, Snell and his neighbors are self sufficient and tied to this land where he and his parents make a living as ranchers and farmers.

“Here, you have to know how to do a little bit of everything,” Snell said.

More than 35 families from Oklahoma and Texas moved here at the turn of the 20th century and settled a ranching and farming community.

The small town counted several hundred residents before settlers fled the violence of the Mexican Revolution shortly after their arrival.

When the dust settled, Snell’s parents and others returned and have crafted a unique identity and culture.

Although Snell and his wife, Maria Thompson, lived in Louisiana for more than 30 years, the couple returned to their home and their lands in Chamal.

Today, no more than 20 members from less than a dozen of the original settler families remain in the area.

They say they’ll stay here and mind the land that has sustained generations of their family, even though their children and grandchildren followed their Mexican neighbors to find greener pastures in Ciudad Victoria, Monterrey, Texas and other parts of the United States.



Original settlers in 1904

The draw of city lights and convenient living is lost on most here. The promise of peace and a simpler way of life is what keeps them home in this foreign land.

Lindy and Lillian Taylor

Lindy and Lillian “Lily” Taylor were born in Chamal and married here but lived in the United States for several years before returning.

Their three children are scattered to cities in Mexico and the United States.

Their daughter, Virginia, is married to a man of mixed Mexican-Arab descent in Ciudad Mante.

The couple’s son Frank married a Mexican woman in Monterrey. Their other son, Lindy, married an American woman in San Antonio.

Although the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren visit on Thanksgiving and other holidays, the couple said they won’t force their children to adopt their lifestyle, not even to take care of the ranch and farmlands after their death.

“Our children will probably make their lives in the United States,” Lily Taylor said. “After we die, they won’t (live here).”

The couple said they often spend months away from their home in Chamal to visit family, but they faithfully return to the community their parents created in search of a self-sustaining way of life.

“Those of us from Chamal ... those who stayed love each other very much,” Lily Taylor said. “Even if they’re not family, we see each other as family. We take care of each other and love each other. I defend her, and she defends me, and that’s how everybody else is. If one of us is sick, we’ll go and help. This is the heritage our parents left us.”

Maggie Taylor

Lily’s younger sister, Maggie, was born in Chamal and grew up here but moved to Texas after marrying Lindy’s brother, Ashley, in 1955.

Maggie said she and Ashley were the last couple to be married in the non-denominational church built by the settlers in Chamal.

Although the church has been closed for decades, the white cement-block building still stands. When she was growing up, Maggie Taylor said it was used for Sunday morning services, baptisms, weddings and socials.

Although Maggie and Ashley’s two children James Samuel and Lenora Ellen were born in Texas, they were raised in Ciudad Victoria where they spoke English at home and Spanish in public, allowing them to become completely bilingual and bicultural.

The children now live in Texas, and Ashley died in April 2000, but Maggie said she decided to stay in Ciudad Victoria in order to be close to her friends as well as her family and childhood home in Chamal.



Chamal's Protestant church today

“I could be living in Austin. I have my children there, but I love Mexico because the people are so warm and friendly,” Maggie Taylor said. “You go up to any house here and tell someone that your car broke down and ask to use the telephone, and they’ll say, ‘Please come in,’ but in the United States, they’ll shut the door and call the police. My friends are my sisters.”

James Taylor

Ashley and Maggie Taylor’s son, James “Jimmy” Taylor, said growing up speaking two languages and in two cultures has benefited him and the other grandchildren of the Chamal settlers.

Jimmy worked for a former Nuevo Leon governor and the late U.S. Senator Lloyd Bentsen.

He lives in Austin where he is a founding partner in the ViaNovo consulting firm, a company that has clients on both sides of the border.

The 47-year-old said his family history has been a tremendous boost to his career.

“It has given me a lot of opportunity,” Jimmy said. “There is an unusual family history, a family with a history of taking risks and being successful, but there is also a sense of belonging to Mexico and to the United States. It allowed me to be completely bi-cultural.”

Although his family visited Chamal several times a year, Jimmy said he grew up in the city and was educated on both sides of the border enjoying the benefits of both societies.

But Jimmy recognizes that his two children who were born and grew up in Austin will have to work hard to keep that dual identity.

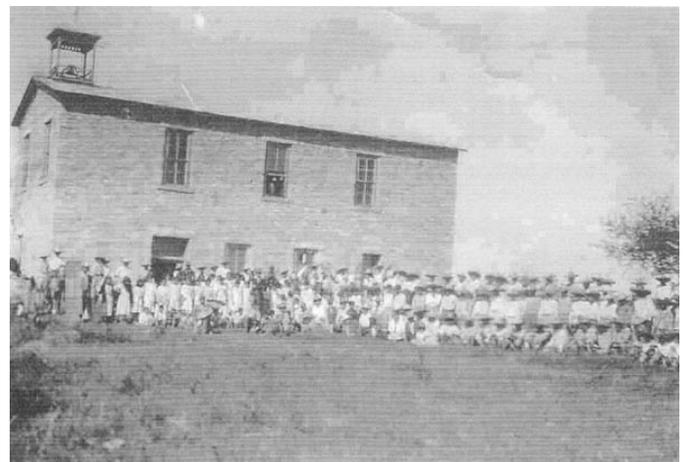
“They have a great interest in the language and Mexican culture, but they don’t have the fluency I did at their age,” he said.

Although Jimmy and his family visit Monterrey, Ciudad Victoria and Chamal on Thanksgiving and other holidays, he is not sure about returning to live on the land his parents were born.

“My generation certainly sees more opportunity here rather than there,” he said adding that many of his cousins who work as doctors and other professionals have recently bought land to retire in Chamal. “Now what you have is people buying land to retire rather than use for production. I think it’s a different kind of future.”

Mixed Heritage

Not all the descendants of the Chamal settlers are dual citizens of the United States and Mexico, a distinction that is sometimes made even among members of the same family.



Chamal's "American School" today and 70 years ago.

Both Maggie and Jimmy Taylor are dual citizens, but Maggie's sister, Lily Taylor, is a Mexican national.

Grady Snell is dual citizen, but his wife, Maria Thompson, had to become a naturalized American citizen in order to have dual citizenship.

Another woman, Dora Proctor-Medina, said her father was an American citizen, but she and her brothers and sisters are all Mexican nationals.

Although Proctor-Medina said she has no problems getting a visa to visit the United States, she said she wants to get a resident permit or become an American citizen to give a better life to her children.

"If only the United States were a little bit more like Mexico. ... Grady comes and goes from over there, and Mexico receives him as they should, and he has all the help Americans have," she said. "Why does the United States not give the same to all the descendents?"

Immigration issues aside, Proctor-Medina said life is better for her in Chamal, and she would prefer to stay here if given a choice.



Chamal descendant Grady Snell

"Living over there, I'm like anybody else," she said. "My neighbor will see me and say 'hi' and 'goodbye,' but he doesn't know anything about me, but here you feel you have the support of your friend, your brother, your father, your grandfather, while over there I say that you don't have the family to live with or help fight for you. Over there, you don't even know your neighbor."

American Consulate

Although there are an estimated 50,000 Americans living in northeastern Mexico, officials with the American Consulate in Matamoros said Chamal provides a small number of their cases but has a unique history.

The original settlers depended on the services of the now-closed American Consulate in Tampico.

During the Mexican Revolution, dozens of families from Chamal were evacuated by boat through Tampico where the American petroleum industry had established a strong presence.

Today, the residents of Chamal who have retained American nationality get passports and other documents in Matamoros.



Local mountain known as "El Chamal"

American Citizens Services Chief Mariju Bofill said Maggie Taylor volunteers as a "warden" for the consulate, distributing consular information and helping American citizens who request help in the Ciudad Victoria area.

During the consulate's Fourth of July celebration in Matamoros, Taylor received an award recognizing her service.

"As far as we know, they're the only American community that obtained land under Porfirio Diaz and have retained it," Bofill said of Chamal. "There may only be a few families, but it is their land."

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