

Illegal Aliens Immigrants Migration from Mexico

South county beating to growing Latin pulse

By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

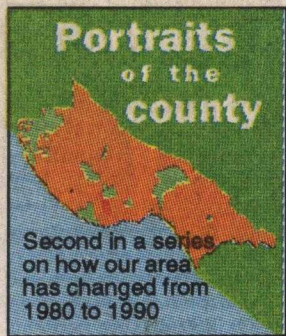
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WHEN THEY CAME to his village in Michoacan, Mexico, *los que* from Watsonville flashed lots of money, hired mariachi bands, wore fancy clothes and drove nice trucks.

Miguel Mejia was 25, engaged to be married, working with a government-run electric company and studying to be an accountant.

When *los que* talked of the riches of the Pajaro Valley, Mejia heard "adventure."

He says he learned later those flashy migrants got their money in the United States from dealing drugs, not working in the fields.

But by then, Mejia was smitten, not so much with the promise of money as with the promise of



life in the Watsonville area.

He arrived in 1985 as an illegal immigrant, planning to stay a year. He worked as a fresh-flower cutter, dodging the Immigration and Naturalization Service — *la migra* — on a daily basis. In Watsonville, he earned in an hour what he could earn in a day in Mexico. He was able to send money back to his mother.

The year stretched into two. He met and married a new girl in Watsonville; she also was from Michoacan.

The couple now has three young children; the oldest

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Change means new problems for Watsonville

By TERESA JIMENEZ
Sentinel staff writer

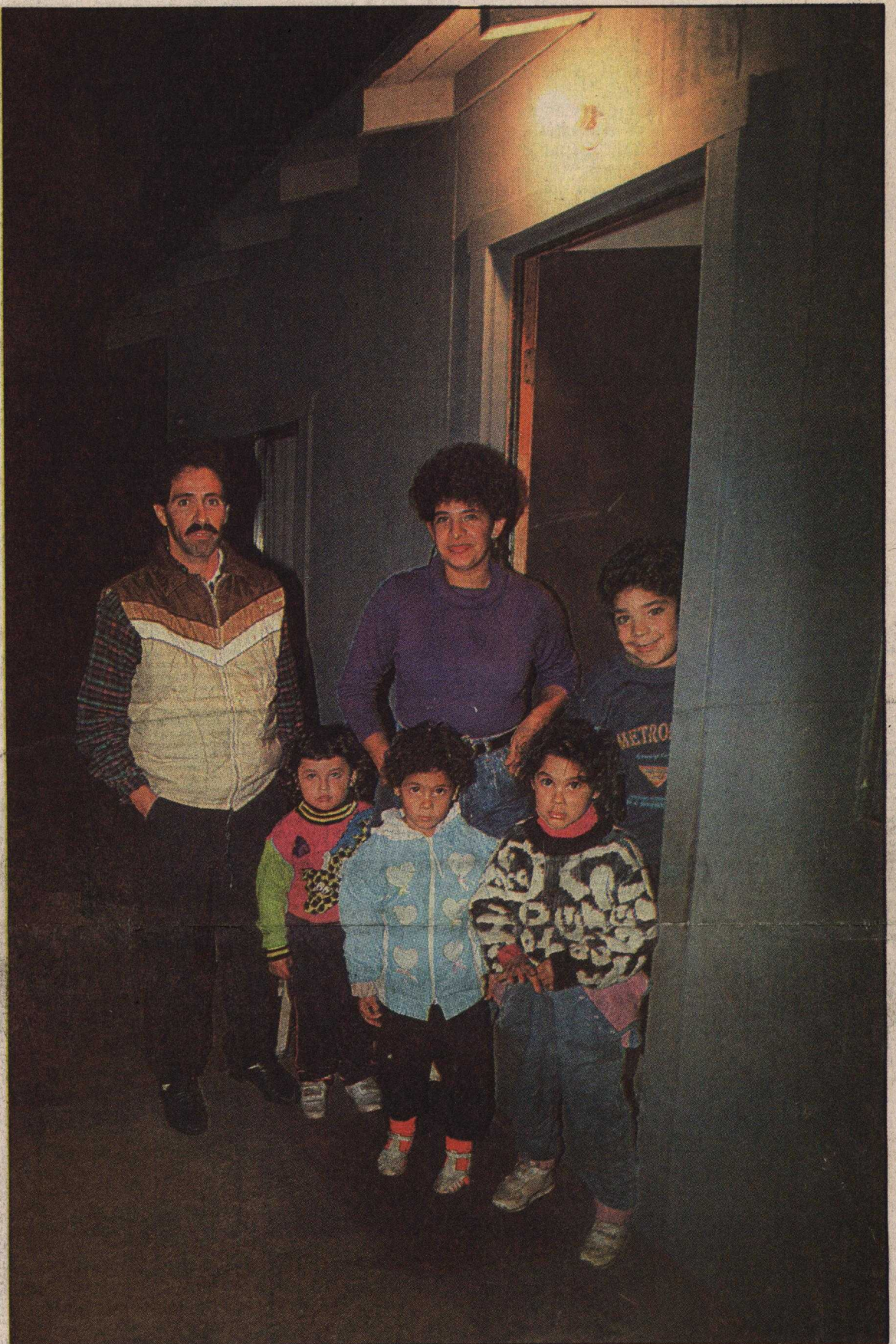
WATSONVILLE — It hasn't happened overnight, but one lifelong Watsonville resident can't help reflecting on how the agricultural town has become a city with a population much different than the one she knew.

"When I was in high school, there was not even one Hispanic," said 80-year-old Alzora Snyder, a Watsonville native who now lives in Aromas.

"The stores on Main Street that I knew have gone out to edges of town. Now they're all full of merchants catering to the Hispanic population."

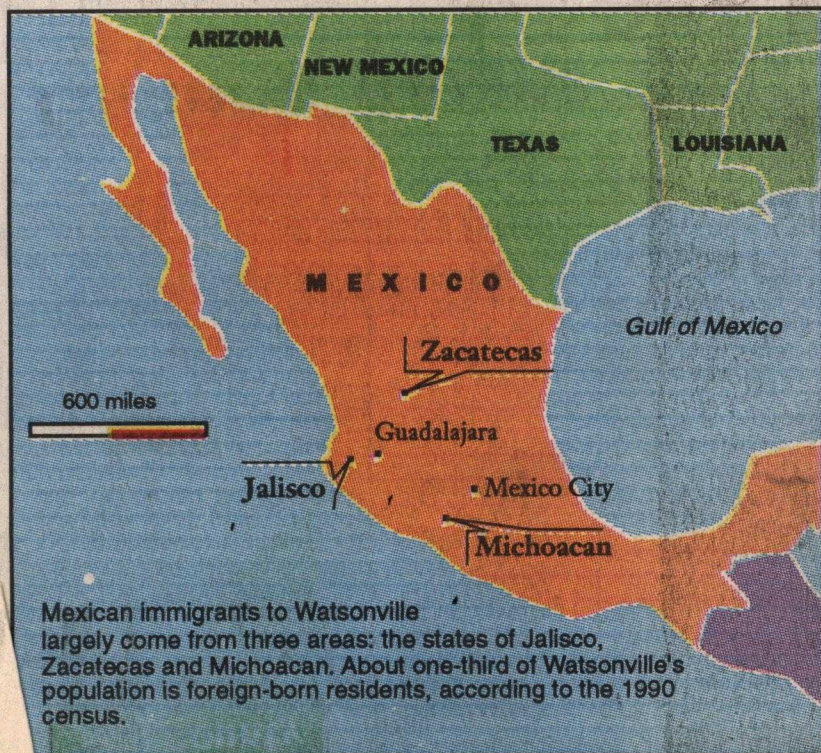
Though the people of Watsonville have changed, the historic downtown still looks the same, Snyder said.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Miguel Mejia, lured north in 1985 by tales of riches, resides with his family in Las Lomas.



Sentinel map

Surge of immigrants has fueled U.S. growth

By ROBIN MUSITELLI
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SANTA CRUZ — Immigrants surged into the United States between 1985 and 1990, and now account for one-fourth of the nation's 20 million foreign-born residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Foreign-born persons, about 5.6 million nationwide, comprise almost 8 percent of the country's population. That's the highest proportion in the past four decades, according to Susan Lapham, bureau analyst.

Among other characteristics of the nation's foreign-born residents:

- More than one in five of the immigrants was born in Mexico. The second largest population immigrated from the Philippines.

- Six out of 10 of the nation's foreign-born population were not citizens in 1990. Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guate-

mala had the highest proportions of non-citizens, at more than 83 percent each. More three-quarters of persons born in Mexico were not U.S. citizens in 1990.

- California was home to a third of the foreign-born population. California's foreign-born population grew from 14 percent in 1960 to 33 percent in 1990.

Based on the influx of immigrants and new babies, the Census Bureau has revised its U.S. population estimates.

Instead of projecting a population of 268 million for the year 2000 and 300 million by 2050, the government now estimates that the population will reach 275 million in 2000 and 383 million in 2050.

In revising its estimates, the census bureau dumped earlier assumptions that birth rates for whites, blacks and Hispanics would be about the same. The bureau now says higher fertility rates for blacks and Hispanic women will fuel the population growth.

Changes create problems

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"My father-in-law lived in the country and on the weekends he would meet his cronies in the plaza. Now it's the Mexican men who are doing the same thing," Snyder said.

Another change is the number of cars packing the city's streets.

"When I come up Main Street and try to go over Pajaro bridge, I have to wait for two lights," Snyder said.

Today, the city is facing a Catch-22: There is a demand for more housing, but a decrease in the tax base that pays administrators trying to improve housing and the economic situation.

The city must see that its residents have jobs, but the educational level of the community is below the county and state average.

The city's problems reflect the way Watsonville has grown and changed over a decade, as illustrated in the 1990 census.

With a 30.4 percent increase in population within the city's limits, Watsonville also has one of the highest percentage of housing construction in the county: 26.5 percent of the city's housing was built during the 1980s.

The new construction has also created a high vacancy rate of about 6 percent, meaning there are six available apartments in every 100. When the census count was taken in 1990, the city's vacancy rate was 1.7.

"The overcrowding has to do with low wages, not that there isn't enough housing. It has to do with people affording housing," said city Planning Director Maureen Owens. "Low-income housing would be for people who are already here. It would make the situation better."

Although the costs of buying or renting a home in Watsonville are among the lowest in the county, many people can't afford housing here, according to census data. More than half the city's households rent their homes.

"The \$20,000-a-year people used to be the ones that could buy homes. Not anymore," Mayor Oscar Rios

said. "There aren't enough jobs. They can't make enough in the canneries and the rest are Mickey Mouse jobs — in restaurants, service industry."

At the same time, the makeup of the city's population has changed to a largely Latino community made up of families speaking mostly Spanish.

The county's overall household size was 2.66 people, compared with Watsonville's average of 3.24. And though the households in Watsonville are larger than the rest of the county, household incomes are some of the lowest in the county. Many of those earning less are Latino.

According to census data, the per capita income, or average income for every person including children, for whites in Watsonville is \$13,124. For Latinos, that figure is \$6,544.

Watsonville has the highest number of children under 18 living in poverty in the county, with 21.6 percent. The county average is 11.9 percent.

Not only that, but 31.3 percent of the city's population is under 18, and 77 percent of those are Latino.

Officials in Watsonville want to meet the needs of the low-income people who make up the majority of the community, but they also want a tax base of people who can provide money for city services.

Meeting both desires is of particular concern during recessionary times, when the city is struggling to provide basic community needs. And census data show such concern is valid.

In 1990, only 50 households out of the 9,437 had an income of \$150,000 or more — less than a half of one percent of total households.

At the other end of the spectrum, the city has the largest percentage of people earning \$29,000 or less, with 30.5 percent of households.

Though education could lead the way to higher incomes in Watsonville, the population there is one of the least educated in the county.

Watsonville ranked second lowest of communities in the county of people 25 or older with at least a high school degree, with a little more than half the residents. Only Freedom, which neighbors Watsonville, ranked lower.