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## An echo of Mexico in Woodburn

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**SUMMARY:** A thriving Latino community has built a better life in Oregon and is raising a new generation that knows no other home

From across Oregon and beyond, people flock to this town 35 miles south of Portland.

Woodburn has become downright famous as home to Oregon's largest outlet mall. But if you're seeking a subtler treat, turn your car east at the Interstate 5 overpass and spend an afternoon in the other Woodburn.

It's the Woodburn where a sword-armed Virgin Mary stands next to the cash register in Francisca Chavez's Western-wear store.

Where Shrek, Minnie Mouse and Incredible Hulk pinatas and papier-mache gourds hang thick from the ceiling at Luis' Taqueria. Craving lunch or dinner? Order pozole, pork and hominy stew, or sopes, thick cornmeal cakes with meat or vegetable toppings.

Most of the signs are in Spanish, but don't let that intimidate you as you enter the color-splashed, six-block grid affectionately known as "Little Mexico," sandwiched between Front and First streets downtown. Here, Mexican immigrants mix with Russian Old Believers and Anglo retirees.

Woodburn's 10,000-plus Latinos make up more than 50 percent of the city's inhabitants, according to the most recent Census data. And while only about a third of Woodburn residents are foreign-born, the rapidly growing agricultural town has a transitory feel.

During harvest season, migrant workers come from Mexico and stay with well-established relatives or in migrant camps. But more of the farmworkers are choosing to settle in Woodburn.

Many have found work in one of the town's factories or surrounding nurseries. Some have launched their own businesses. They have started families, bought houses and sent their children to the local schools, where more than 71 percent of students are Latino.

Today, they call Woodburn their home.

### La Caseta

The hall with 23 phone booths in La Caseta Woodburn on Front Street is lonely, desolate -- even though it's one of the most frequented places in town.

Throughout the week, but especially on Saturdays and Sundays, dozens of people stand in lines to make phone calls to Mexico.

The booths (casetas in Spanish) offer little privacy. But they are the only connection to a family far away.

People laugh and cry in the booths, said La Caseta's manager, David Sato. Once, a man passed out with the receiver in his hand after learning his parents had died.

Many who use La Caseta are migrant workers, living in accommodations without a phone.

On a recent afternoon, Bernardo Gonzales calls a "La Caseta" center in his village in Mexico. The village calling center then sends a messenger to fetch his family, or makes an announcement over loudspeakers, summoning the family to come take the call.

Gonzales waits several minutes -- the time he knows it takes his family to travel from their house to the calling center -- then calls his village a second time. This time, his brother picks up.

Gonzales tells him he will wire him money, which can be done from La Caseta, to help the family in Mexico, where his mother has just died.

### Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas

On the edge of town, nursery fields stretch like airport runways, and massive, snowy-white greenhouses glisten in the sun. Many people from Woodburn and nearby Keizer and Salem work here year-round, tending saplings and azalea cuttings.

Work in the fields starts early. On a recent morning at Woodburn Nursery, a group of men, most of them related, ride on a tractor along the edge of a field installing planting pots. They will install 50,000 pots in each of five fields in the coming weeks.

At 9 a.m., the day is already hot. Dust is rising from under the machinery.

In a nearby greenhouse, a dozen women tend azalea cuttings, chatting agreeably as they work. The air is warm, humid, filled with the hum of water sprinklers. It smells of earth and sweat.

Most women here came from Mexico to the United States when they were young and have worked at this nursery from seven to 15 years. They say they are here to stay.

### Baptism

Lisa Mendoza, soon-to-be-wife of Alfredo Sanchez, her partner of four years, leans back in a chair listening to the sounds of Mexican soap operas playing on the television. Her chubby 9-month-old daughter, Angelica, crawls around the living room coffee table, playing with cousins Ruby and Estivel Martinez.

Spanish and English mingle freely in this toy-cluttered living room in Plymouth Manor apartments in Keizer, 13 miles from Woodburn. Although Mendoza is white and born in Salem, she rattles off instructions to the kids in Spanish and coos to her baby in English.

Mendoza picked up Spanish at work and from Sanchez's family. She also learned how to cook Mexican food, and now prefers enchiladas and pozole to American fare. But in March, as she prepared to go to Mexico for the first time to meet Sanchez's parents, she says she was terrified.

"I didn't know how they would receive me," she said. "But as soon as they saw me and the baby, they started crying."

In July, the Mexican family threw a big party to celebrate baby Angelica's baptism. Several hundred people crowded into Luis' Taqueria in downtown Woodburn to eat Mexican food, catch some good luck coins (Mexican tradition dictates that the baby's godfather throw coins for good luck), and dance to reggaeton music under the colorful glow of hanging pinatas.

### La Michoacana

The story of La Michoacana, a clothing store that sells Western wear, is the story of one woman's determination.

Back in Mexico, Francisca Chavez's husband was unemployed. When the couple immigrated to California, 22-year-old Chavez supported her family by cleaning people's homes.

She dreamed of running a store in Oregon, where her husband's sisters lived. "He promised he would help me," she said. "I thought that he would change."

But seven years ago, when Chavez opened La Michoacana in Woodburn named after Chavez's home state, her husband left for Mexico with another woman.

Chavez, now 39, is stylish and elegant -- and she made it on her own. Her father, who owns and runs a rancho with 800 cattle in Mexico, is her main source of advice and support. "My father taught me to be a businesswoman," she said.

Every Christmas, her entire family makes the trek to Mexico to visit him. But Chavez, her two sons and one daughter always return to Woodburn.

"I like it here because my children like it here," she said. "They want to study and progress in Oregon."

La Michoacana has changed over the years. The store that once carried ice cream, candy, music and videotapes is now stocked with the finest of Western wear -- leather boots made of alligator, ostrich or deer skin, expensive sombreros, clothing for fiestas of all sorts.

### Salvation Army Camp

Three of them had never been to summer camp. So 14 kids set up shop in front of the Woodburn Salvation Army, spreading their favorite board and video games, their comic books, stuffed animals and other toys on long wooden tables -- for sale.

The yard sale, organized by the kids and Salvation Army workers, helped them raise money to attend Camp Kuratli in Boring. The kids and their families contributed between \$50 and \$100 each, and received a matching grant from the Salvation Army to pay for the camp.

"We had the yard sale so the kids could learn a sense of responsibility and feel that they actually earned their trip," said Salvation Army worker Joseph Cisneros. "They were very enthusiastic."

Cisneros and the community also gathered school supplies to distribute to students from low-income families.

Cisneros said the Salvation Army serves 120 families in Woodburn and is in the process of building a larger food bank to serve more people.

Many families join the Salvation Army to help others less fortunate. "The Latino community is very united in Woodburn," Cisneros said. "People work well together."

Cisneros and the kids who participate in his program visit workers in area migrant camps. The kids -- whose families migrated to Woodburn from Mexico, but who, for the most part, were born in the United States -- distribute cookies to the workers.

"The kids really help these men," Cisneros said. "Migrant workers feel more comfortable, more secure when the children are around." Perhaps they remind them of kids who are awaiting their return back in Mexico.

### Iglesia Pentecostes

When Felipe Cruz was growing up in Quilometro 22, a village of roughly 200 people in the Mexican state of Guerrero, four factories producing alcohol stood practically in his backyard.

Cruz, one of 10 siblings, soon joined the many village drunks. He spent all his money on women and alcohol.

But at 35, Cruz's life took a sudden turn. He experienced a vision in the city of Juarez, joined the Christian Pentecostal movement and tempered his vices.

Ten years ago, Cruz came to Woodburn in search of employment -- and a church. He now wakes up each morning at 3 to pray and read the Bible, works at a local nursery and attends Iglesia Pentecostes at least three times a week.

"There are places in Mexico where Pentecostals are not welcome, where people are killed," he said. "The church here is like a family. It's very peaceful in Woodburn. It's a little Mexico."

Cruz's pastor, Victor Vargas, who hails from Costa Rica, said Iglesia Pentecosta's 150 active members are, like Cruz, farmworkers and their families, though many of them have settled in the area and have American citizenship.

"The church offers the kind of social interactions that remind them of home," Vargas said.

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