

Farming In Mexico

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MEXICO — Four hundred miles south of El Paso, Texas, is a thriving farming community. Surrounded by arid desert, the

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Pictured is a house in Campo 3 which was built in Manitoba Canada, dismantled loaded on a train and brought to Mexico in 1922 when the owner immigrated to Mexico.

area is home to 30,000 Mennonites.

A high plateau puts their settlement into semi arid zone where crops can be grown.

Traveling by train from Canada in 1922 has proven to be a success. Today's farmers' grandparents chartered whole trains to take their cattle and equipment. Some even disassembled their houses to bring along to start subduing the untamed wilderness of Mexico.

They purchased an entire mountain valley, about 50 miles long and 20 miles wide, for their new home. Settling in this desolate area where the sagebrush tumbled among a few rangy cattle, the Mennonites started converting it into a thriving asset to the economy of Mexico.

These immigrants to Mexico, often called "Old Colony Mennonites," built their homes clustered in small villages — follow-

ing the example of their Russian ancestors and called them "Campos."

Each Campo of 25-30 families is surrounded by around 3,600 acres, with about 2.5 miles to the next Campo. Each family owns their ground purchased from the governing body overlooking the land purchases.

A Growing Community

Today, the closest town, Cuauhtemoc, has grown from a dusty cattle town to a thriving metropolis catering to the needs and marketing the products this community produces.

Oats for Quaker Oats, white corn for the famous Mexican tortillas, beans the Mexican staple, Mennonite cheese, a Latin American favorite, and various fruits are flowing from this community. What is life like for these farmers, who still speak the language of their forefathers, low German, in the heartland of Mexico?

These farmers face many of the same challenges U.S. farmers do, plus many others not common to the U.S. Large variations in the value of their money, the peso, make buying and selling a challenge.



An Indian boy hired by a Campo keeps the free ranging cows from getting into the crops. Each farmer lets his cow into the village street in the morning where the designated caretaker collects and takes them to the range land to graze for the day.



Every morning the village street is lined with these small wagons, holding milk cans awaiting pickup. The milk is collected each morning by this milk truck and taken to the local cheese factory. The cans are emptied and returned to be washed.

An undependable supply system and the extremely high cost of borrowing money (15-25 percent is common), are factors which hinder them.

Living in the semi arid mountain plains east of the Mexican Rockies makes rainfall unpredictable. Three years of drought in five is common. Irrigation is needed to grow a good crop year, yet the water supply is extremely limited.

Unfortunately, rain is nonexistent over the winter and the rainy season usually does not start until late June or early July.

Unless a farmer has access to irrigation, crops are not planted until the rains start. Also being situated at a high elevation brings a risk of early frost, thus the growing season is relatively short. Constant wind makes wind erosion a problem.

Dairy farming is very common and most farmers have 8-12 cows, however, some modern parlor type milking barns scattered throughout the community house herds up to 80 cows.

They milk them by hand or with a milking machine — placing the milk in cans such as dairy farmers in U.S. did 50 years ago. Most of the milk is used to produce cheese.

The milk is not cooled. The evening milk is placed into cans, and the next morning milk is added. About mid-morning it is picked up, taken to the local cheese factory, and processed.

The whey is saved and taken to a drying facility, which is then used to make baby food.

In some of the Campos, all of the individual farmers' cows and heifers are gathered into a group, herded to a common pasture land to graze for the day. A designated youth on horseback watches over them all day.

At evening milking time, the herd is brought back to the Campo. Each animal knows its home in the village, and goes there without help.

The small individual cheese factory cannot afford pasteurization or modern processing equipment. Neither can the small herds afford refrigeration.

In the northern part of the colony six cheese factories and 1,500 farmers, are forming a co-op type partnership and building a large modern milk processing plant.

It is planned that the milk will be picked up after every milking, pasteurized, and processed. Amish and Mennonite communities throughout the U.S. are giving monetary support.

Campo 4 has built a modern dry-lot, milking parlor dairy farm with the capacity of 600 cows. At the present time, they are milking 240 cows at this facility.

Because the milk is refrigerated, they are receiving a 10-peso-per-liter premium. The cows are owned by individual people who are also responsible to provide a share of the dairies feed supply.

These owners also have first opportunity to work for this community project and receive wages. This program was also helped by the Amish of the U.S.

Milk is the main source of income for most of the families. Most milk is still shipped in cans, but bulk tanks are gaining in popularity.

Irrigation, Raising Corn
 Being located in an area where rainfall is not dependable, irrigation is relied on where water is available. Most farms have long rectangular shaped fields 1.5 miles long and 400 feet wide.

The irrigation overflow is directed to a holding pond to be used by a neighboring farmer, so no water is wasted.

The corn is left in the field

until the moisture is low enough to store and yields of 200 plus bushels per acre are almost guaranteed. They grow mostly white corn for tortillas, but also pinto beans.

Many native poor people glean the fields after they have been harvested with the combines. Almost without exception the gleaners are welcomed, as they reduce the chance of volunteer corn the following year. By gleaning the Mennonites' fields, many Mexicans store a full years supply of food for their families.

home in one large building, as was their custom brought from Canada.

Today, however, they are building their homes similar to ranch homes in the U.S. They are also starting to color the concrete with various shades.

Vehicles

Most of the equipment and vehicles brought from the U.S. and Canada are well used.

Pickups more than 10 years old to be used by farmers can be purchased in the states and brought into Mexico without paying duty.



Here a Mennonite farmer grinds corn fodder for his cows. Three bales of corn fodder, a gallon tin of shelled corn, and a gallon tin of concentrate equals a Mexican TMR.

Since the rains come in late July, some corn is planted for the fodder. Almost all the land is planted in oats, in hope of a grain crop, but used for animal feed if not enough rain arrives.

Because of the lay of the land and surrounding mountains, only about a third of the valley has water available for irrigation. There is drastic difference in the type of farming and the prosperity of its farmers. Those who have access to water to irrigate have equipment and homes, which would be comparable to a U.S. farmer.

Whole families are often seen hoeing by hand, following an ancient John Deere. The men and boys commonly wear bib overalls and a big white cowboy hat. The women and girls wear dark large print dresses wearing a large brimmed straw hat with a ribbon around the crown and under the chin.

Initially, the Mennonites used adobe brick as a building material, later covered with a concrete mix to protect the adobe from weathering. Today, almost all buildings are built with poured concrete.

After switching from adobe brick to concrete, they combined an implement shed, barn, and

Numerous Mennonites earn their livelihood going to the states to find tractors and pickups to supply dealers with well-used equipment and pickups.

In 1996, the new colony "Colonia El Valle" was formed. Approximately 25,000 acres were purchased for \$200 an acre.

Today, the barren land is home to 50 young families, growing mainly cotton and corn, along with some sorghum and wheat. Living in small prefab homes or travel trailers and then building homes in their spare time, they have brought this desert into bloom.

A modern cotton gin site sits on the edge of the thriving village. Other than operating the store, all the families are tilling the soil. Two hundred feet below the ground is an abundant source of water which made this possible.

Some homes are finished, landscaped with shrubs and trees, while others live in trailers and are building new homes. Implement sheds are scattered throughout the village shielding the farm machinery from the desert sun. However, making sure the crops have adequate water is the main thrust of these young farmers' work.



Two Mennonite boys heading for town.

