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Lakeview Newcomers: Mexican and Caucasian Perspectives

I was looking for a town that was still alive. And you have to go a long way from a bigger town before the little town is still alive. You have to go farther than people will drive for every little thing. And that seems to be about 100 miles. -- Emma Kovats

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Kovats is among a growing population of woman who move to Lakeview in their early 60s. And according to locals, the Mexican population is also increasing in Lakeview; however, that increase is not yet captured in the Census data. In 2000 Lakeview had a population of almost 2,500 people, many of whom are from ranching families that have lived in the town for over a century. However, according to the Census, the population of Lakeview is slowly declining; hence, it is important to understand why people decide to move to Lakeview and what their experience is like after they relocate. In this paper, I'll discuss why people choose to relocate to Lakeview and the challenges they face in their new community. I place special attention on grocery shopping and gardening, as my research is part of a larger project that seeks to understand the food system in Lakeview.

During 2 weeks, I interviewed 12 newcomers in Lakeview, where newcomer is defined as someone who has lived in Lakeview for 11 years or less. Six interviewees were Mexican women who had moved to Lakeview within the last six years, and on average they lived in Lakeview for four years at the time of the interviews. All of these women were under approximately 45 years old and had at least one child at home.

I also interviewed six Caucasian newcomers (five women and one man), all of whom were over 60 years old. None of the Caucasian newcomers moved to Lakeview with children,

and five of the six were not married at the time of our interview. On average the Caucasian interviewees had lived in Lakeview six years at the time of the interviews.

I did not intentionally seek out women; however, 11 out of 12 of my interviews are with women. In the Mexican population, this might be explained by the fact that women prepare almost all of the food; hence, I assumed they would be better able to answer my questions about the food system. My Caucasian sample might reflect the fact that there are more female Caucasian newcomers than male newcomers; however, it might also reflect my tendency to interview females. In all cases, I selected interviewees using street-intercept and snowball sampling.

Why Lakeview Move to Lakeview?

A Place to Work

Mexicans and Caucasians move to Lakeview for very different reasons. Latinos come because of work opportunities and family connections, whereas Caucasians are attracted to the town because of the retirement lifestyle it offers, which includes the low cost of living, health care, and friendly people.

All of the Mexican woman I interviewed had extended family living in Lakeview before they moved here. When asked why she moved to Lakeview, Juanita Allende said, “My husband’s cousins talked to him and said, ‘Come [to Lakeview]. It is pretty and there is work...It is good because the base [of Lakeview] is work. It is what people are looking for...as long as there is work, we are going to be fine.” Isabel Gonzalez, who moved to Lakeview six years ago said, “I had brothers here and they told me every time when I called – why you don’t come here because you know, it is small town and you can raise your kids, you know, more better and

everything.” In many cases, Mexican newcomers live with other family members in Lakeview until they are able to find work and rent housing.

Like many Mexicans, Allende and Gonzalez came to Lakeview looking for work, but once they relocate, some Mexicans find that there are limited jobs available here. Most Mexican men, and some women, are employed by one of two door factories. Angela Ramirez has a college degree in teaching and started working at one of the door factories as soon as she moved to Lakeview. After working at the factory for two years, she developed carpal tunnel syndrome from lifting large planks of wood. She showed me her wrists, both of which are scarred from corrective surgery. “The work is so hard, is so physical for me, but I not the person who stand by at home waiting for the money. I want to make some to spend,” Ramirez said. Later she told me that those scars will always serve as a reminder of coming to Lakeview.

Jobs for college-educated newcomers like Ramirez are scarce in Lakeview, but so are working-class jobs. Eva Frias is a young mother who moved to Lakeview a few months ago with her husband and their toddler. She found part-time work as a maid at a hotel in town and makes \$4 for every room she cleans. It takes her over an hour to clean 2 rooms on a good day, and there are often days when there are no rooms to clean. Frias’ husband didn’t find work here, so he commutes to California every other week to work construction jobs. Frias lives with her brother- and sister-in-law, neither of which has a job right now. Frias told me, “It is really different. Supposedly we came here because there was work, but right now it is really hard for immigrants....The truth is it is difficult. Sometimes I don’t know if I am going to stay [in Lakeview]...If we had good work things would be different.”

A Place to Retire

While Mexican newcomers move to Lakeview because of family and jobs, all of the Caucasian newcomers I interviewed were attracted to the town because they think it is a good place to retire. The friendly people, low cost of living, and the health services Lakeview offers all factored in to their decisions to move here. Samantha Ferris, a retired woman who has lived in Lakeview for 6 years, said:

[Living in Lakeview] has been refreshing. I was seriously ill about 6 months after I came here, and people...that I didn't even know just came and brought things while I was in the hospital. They put a twin bed in the house, and they put in the television and VCR along with some Lonesome Dove tapes. They had supper delivered [every night for a week] from one restaurant that is closed now, but it was the best restaurant in town.

Like other people, Ferris was also attracted to Lakeview because she could afford to live here. All of the Caucasian retirees that I interviewed live on a fixed income, and many said that Lakeview was appealing because the cost of living is reasonable. Heather Foster, who moved to Lakeview to retire with her husband 4 years ago, said:

In 2002...it was just wonderful, for 10.5 acres, it was \$15,000... And, being on social security, there is just kind of a set wage there, so we thought, if we take that, we have to pay for it in cash because we have never done anything on credit...and then I said, honey, or children have cars that cost more than that. So we bought the 10.5 acres and put a house on it—a little manufactured home—and that is what brought us here.

While most of the Mexican newcomers I interviewed did not own homes in Lakeview, some of them were also attracted to the town because it is less expensive than California.

Of course, as people grow older, they anticipate needing more medical care, which is another reason Lakeview is attractive to retirees. Every Caucasian I interviewed had something positive to say about Lakeview's hospital. Heidi Slahor broke her leg shortly after moving here and subsequently developed blood clots, and she said that she was very impressed with the care she received during her stay at the hospital. Lisa Hanseder was "dreadfully sick" when she was

passing through Lakeview, and she ended up in the hospital here. She had such a good experience during her stay that she decided to move here. She says,

Everybody was so kind right down to fact that one of the girls that did house cleaning at the motel took my cat home with her to take care of here while I was in the hospital. And I just met so many wonderful people and I thought, you know, this just might be a really good place to be.”

Eleven years after her hospital stay, she told me she never plans on leaving.

Challenges to Living in Lakeview

Staying Healthy

While many Caucasian newcomers decide to move to Lakeview because of the healthcare, many Mexican newcomers find it difficult to get their basic healthcare needs met. Of the six Mexican newcomers I interviewed, four people had returned to Mexico or had a relative return to Mexico specifically for health care since the time they moved to Lakeview. In all cases, the cost of attaining healthcare without insurance was so prohibitive that they felt they had no other alternative but to return to Mexico. I asked Maria Jimenez, who runs a day-care business in her home in addition to taking care of her two sons, if she noticed a difference between the health of Mexicans in Lakeview and in Mexico, she said:

Well, health is better [in Mexico]. I like it better there because there doctors attend to more people. And here they don't have to attend to people. Look what happened with my mother. She fell and the doctor didn't want to attend her. So she went [to Mexico] so they would attend to her. And there...with the little [money] that we send them, there it is a lot and you can go to the doctor.

Sofia Mendoza has lived in Lakeview for almost two years. I asked her what she does when she has health problems, she said:

Nothing, nothing. Here we just have to deal with it. I am going to go to Mexico soon because I am not going to let him die. My husband is sick and needs attention. I am not going to leave him. He has serious health problems because of his knee. What am I going to do? I have medical training and I feel like I have my hands tied. I would do the

impossible for him, but the best thing is to bring him to Mexico. Within a few weeks I am going to Mexico to consult a specialist. There is nothing else we can do.

Mendoza went on to explain that she brings medicine back to Lakeview when she goes to Mexico, and she gives it to other Mexicans in town when they need medicine that they cannot afford, especially antibiotics.

Some Mexican interviewees mentioned that while it is difficult for Mexican adults to obtain healthcare in Lakeview, it is easier for children to get the care they need if they were born in the United States. However Mexicans with children who were born in Mexico have a much harder time finding adequate care for their children. Eva Frias, a Mexican newcomer who moved here with her toddler, said that she could not get care for her child:

Right now because [my daughter] was born in Mexico, I don't know how much weight she has gained and I don't know if she is missing a vitamin ... Well I need to treat her but I can't do anything...because there is no doctor for her. But she has a pain in her stomach and she doesn't want to eat. I don't know what is going on. It is difficult.

It is hard to say if Jimenez, Mendoza, and Frias' situations illustrate a healthcare issue that is unique to Lakeview. One interviewee mentioned that she is afraid to go to the doctor because she does not want anyone to find out that she is living in the United States illegally. Her situation might be different in a larger town with multiple healthcare facilities where people can take comfort in anonymity more readily than they can in a small town.

Making Friends

Many Caucasian newcomers said one of the reasons they decided to move to Lakeview was because people were so friendly, yet the same people also said that they don't have many friends. Heather Foster has lived in Lakeview with her husband for 4 years and she said:

There are about two couples that we are really close to, but it takes a long time to develop friendships because...when you come into a situation, people that you are coming into

have already made those friendships...people don't block you out. We just have to be forceful enough to get into other people's lives, but it still takes a long time.

Another woman who belongs to six volunteer organizations in Lakeview and who appears to have a robust social life told me that after almost two years here she doesn't feel like she really has any friends in those volunteer groups. Another newcomer told me that she felt like she was not welcome in two of the volunteer groups she tried to join, so she did not return. Both people asked that I not mention their names when discussing these sentiments. Those requests to remain anonymous follow the small-town rule – be nice because everyone knows everyone.

Mexican newcomers also mentioned that they had very small circles of friends, and some of them said that they are only friends with their family members. Angela Ramirez moved here four years ago after she married her husband, who is a Mexican man who has lived in Lakeview for over 20 years. Ramirez said:

We have just, we have a very small social life and because I don't now if you heard about a little town, when you have a very close contact with another person and then that other person was your friend and then if they want to be in your house or they always want your help and they always want you at their house and you go to another house they say, oh, you are...mad with me. ...We prefer not to have that kind of a problem. We are welcome to everybody but we never have a preference for nobody.

It is difficult to tell if newcomers deliberately choose to have small social circles or if they are forced into small social circles. In either case, it is clear that people are aware of how quickly gossip travels in this small town. Mexican newcomers might be especially hesitant to form relationships if they are here illegally, as they are trying to remain inconspicuous. Many of them are have limited or no English skills, which also limits their interaction with the larger community.

My interviews only scratched the surface of people's social networks in Lakeview, and those networks, especially the relationship between Mexicans and Caucasians deserve further attention. Perhaps Ted Mason, a newcomer who has been in Lakeview for 7 years, said it best, "Now, once I have lived here for a couple of years, as any place, you begin to see the other factors or fractions, but as a community as large, it is still a down-to-earth, friendly, cooperative town with good integrity."

Grocery Shopping

Mexicans and Caucasians newcomers said that one of the major challenges they face in Lakeview is grocery shopping. Every Mexican I interviewed said that food is too expensive in Lakeview, and many made frequent trips (1-4 times a month) to Klamath Falls to buy things in bulk at lower prices from stores such as Wal-Mart. Isabel Gonzales is a single mother of six children, and she depends on food stamps to buy her groceries. She explained that when she first moved to Lakeview, she shopped in town, and she could not afford to buy enough food to last her for the whole month, but now she goes to Klamath Falls once a month, and there she can buy enough food to last her all month with the same amount of money.

Juanita Allende, who does almost all of her shopping in Lakeview, said that she sometimes runs out of money at the end of the month and that it is difficult to buy all the food she needs, she said, "When the kids say, 'I want this.' And [I say], 'no, not right now.' It hurts to tell them that we [don't have money for that] right now because they don't know. They don't need to know if there is or isn't [enough money]."

Some Caucasian newcomers who live on a fixed retirement income also find it difficult to shop in Lakeview. Heather Foster said:

[Food prices] keep going up and up and up, and it is like I am finding myself saying more and more. 'Oh, I can't afford that.' I mean I can, but I think, 'I am not going to pay that.' I will find a substitute or something.... I love this town so much. I really want to go shopping here, but my husband and I talked about it the last time, just about two weeks ago, and decided that we are going to go [to Klamath Falls] and buy meat.

Despite Foster's intentions to eat locally and support local businesses, she and her husband find it extremely difficult to do so within their budget. Once people start driving to Klamath Falls for specific items, I think they will be more likely to do other shopping there. If gas prices continue to increase, it seems that people will purchase more in Klamath Falls to make their trips there worth the money they spend on gas to get there.

In addition to prohibitive prices, newcomers also find it challenging to get the variety of foods they are accustomed to when they move to Lakeview. Samantha Ferris said, "Grocery shopping here is not fun for me, and there have been times when I have gone around and walked all through the store and gone out with nothing." Eva Frias said, "There are times when I look for avocado and I can't find it. [...] I go to Safeway and I don't buy almost anything, and then I go to Klamath. It is the truth that it is farther away and the gas and everything but [I do it anyway]."

Not being able to find an avocado might not seem like that big of a setback, but all of the Mexican newcomers I interviewed maintain tradition food customs at home, and specific items like avocados are integral to maintaining their traditions. Besides the occasional hamburger and pizza dinner Mexican women are still cooking up posole (a Mexican stew), enchiladas, quesadillas, beans and rice, and homemade flan among many other traditional dishes. Some Mexican families go to great lengths to get specific ingredients for their favorite recipes. Angela Ramirez gets a cooler of fresh seafood from Mexico about 3 times a year. She travels to Mexico to pick it up herself, or she drives to Reno to pick it up from a relative who has just returned from

Mexico. Eva Frias sends money home so her mother can send her specific ingredients for making her favorite salsa. Some specialty items, such as tortilla flour and drink mixes, have recently become more readily available in town. Safeway and Stewarts both have Mexican food sections, and there is a small Mexican store in town.

However, fresh fruits and vegetables are especially difficult to buy in Lakeview. Both groups of newcomers said they would like to see more fresh fruits and vegetables on the shelves of stores. But for now, many people go without fresh fruits and vegetables, or they depend on their own gardens to provide them with things they cannot find at the local stores.

Gardening

Of the six Caucasian newcomers I interviewed, three people grew gardens to supplement their diets with fresh fruits and vegetables. Caucasian gardeners grew corn, squash, raspberries, watermelon, snow peas, lettuce, chard, peppers, tomatoes, strawberries, currants, broccoli, artichokes, turnips, onions, potatoes, eggplant, okra, and various fruit trees including apple, apricot, and plumb. Ted Mason, who lives outside of town and cultivates about a half acre, said that his garden provides him with about 40% of his food in the summer.

In addition to vegetable gardens, four of the six Caucasians I interviewed had extensive flower gardens or were working on developing flower gardens. Heather Foster, who lives outside of town on 10 acres, said:

I have a gazillion flowers. I don't have as many vegetables in my garden because it takes a lot of time to do that. With flowers you scatter, you put in some good ground, you put in some fertilizer and you scatter wild flower seeds and they just come up, and you pull a few weeds. But in a vegetable garden, you kind of have to do a lot more work.

Emma Kovats has a small house in town and is working on developing about a half acre of garden space. When I asked her if she was going to grow vegetables, she said, "No! Vegetables,

no, no, no! Decoration!” I asked Heidi Slahor a similar question and she said she wasn’t going to plant vegetables or fruit trees because they are too messy.

Of the six Mexican newcomers I interviewed, only one woman, Sofia Mendoza, had a vegetable garden to help supplement her family’s diet with fresh vegetables. Mendoza’s garden also provides her family with specific ethnic foods that they could not find enough of in Lakeview, such as cilantro and jalapeños. Another Mexican woman, Maria Jimenez, had a vegetable garden in previous years, but she and her husband recently covered the garden space with grass so that their children had a place to play. In addition to cilantro and jalapeños, Mexican gardens included onions, squash, peppers, zucchini, broccoli, radishes, and cauliflower.

Overall, Caucasian newcomers had more gardens than Mexican newcomers, and Caucasians grew a larger variety and quantity of food. This could be due to a number of factors. Five of the six Caucasians I interviewed owned their own homes, whereas only one of the Mexican newcomers owned her own home. People might be more likely to invest time and money in a garden if it is on their own land. Additionally, none of the Caucasians I interviewed had children at home, and only two of them worked full time. In contrast, all of the Mexican newcomers I interviewed had children at home, and four of them worked full time. The Mexican interviewees simply might not have enough time to maintain a garden while raising a family and working. Finally, Mexican newcomers might also be limited by their language barrier. Lakeview is a hard climate to grow plants in, and many of the Caucasian gardeners depend on advice from other people about how to grow in the region. This advice might not be readily available to Mexican newcomers who do not speak English. However, Sofia Mendoza does not speak English or own her home, and she has a successful garden, she said:

I think that people have not taken advantage of a lot of the agriculture here. It is true that it snows a lot here but after the snow I see that there is a lot of precious sun and there is a lot of water, and it is not completely utilized...I have little garden that is 5 by 5 meters, and I have everything growing there—onions, radishes, cilantro, broccoli, cauliflower...What is going on is that people don't have the motivation....

Perhaps Mendoza is right, it takes a lot of work to prepare the soil and maintain gardens in Lakeview's climate.

While both groups of newcomers struggle to find the things they want at a price they can afford in Lakeview, it does not seem like their struggles deter them from staying here. I think Emma Kovats said it best, "I would say the food is probably the biggest drawback. But...I didn't come here for the food. I didn't come here for the culture with a capital C and quotes around it. I came here for the culture...and the food that it has."

Conclusions

The future of Lakeview is uncertain, but as more and more young people move away, it becomes increasingly important to understand what draws new people to the community, and perhaps even more important, it is essential to understand what makes them stay in the community. My study did not capture newcomers who lived in Lakeview for a number of years and then decided to leave. Including that demographic in future research would add an important perspective to the attrition rate of newcomers in Lakeview.

As I discussed above, a lot of people go to Klamath Falls to do their grocery shopping. It seems that making Lakeview's economy more sustainable depends on keeping those food dollars in town. Hence, future research is needed to better understand what would make people stay in Lakeview to shop. Could a small grocery outlet provide low-cost, bulk items in town? Would expanding one of the grocery stores provide the sufficient variety? If so, what specific items would people want?

My research provided a cursory evaluation of newcomer's gardens. In future studies, it would be interesting to map gardens of both ethnic groups, to log garden production, fertilizer and chemical input, and water use. Two people who have gardens on their properties outside of town mentioned that the cost of water in town would prohibit them from gardening there, hence water-saving techniques might be included in future research.

Finally, by all accounts, the Mexican population in Lakeview is increasing, and I noticed that there is some animosity toward this increase in population from both Caucasians and, surprisingly, from some Mexicans. One Caucasian woman who has been in Lakeview 11 years said:

I am fearful of the community's reaction to minorities. It is an old-time, good-old-boy kind of town, and as I said, everybody pulls together, and people are supportive of each other, but I am concerned...my hope is that if [more minorities move here] that people are kind. Because I have reservations about whether or not they would be. I have seen things happen that are disturbing. You think someone has a non-discriminatory background and goes to church every Sunday, and then [that person] treats someone with very little respect just because of their race.

A Mexican woman who has been living in town for a few years said:

Almost all Mexicans...when they came here think [they are] in Mexico because [there is] too much drinking—big trouble. They go to the jail, and I am so sad because we need change. We need to change this traditional...style of life...I feel bad because almost all Mexicans here or Latinos go to the jail every week.

I don't think most Mexicans actually go to jail every week in Lakeview, but her perception of the community, of which she is a part, is telling. In a community where everyone is so friendly, the tension between Mexicans and Caucasians might be especially difficult to explore and discuss in public.

One hand, Lakeview residents seem to recognize that the town will need to change if it is to continue to grow. On the other hand, long-time residents seem hesitant to introduce too much

change. In the future, both the Mexican and Caucasian newcomers could play an integral role in keeping Lakeview alive, but it will be up to current residents to decide how wide they want to open their arms to newcomers.