

Deep Ties, Tested on Mexico's Border

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Joined by a Border

Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

LAREDO, Tex. — The state's standardized test approached like a spring storm, and Alina Quiroga knew her fourth graders could drown. Here at a school about a mile from Mexico along Interstate 35, most of her students rarely speak English outside class. Many, living with distant relatives, lack the confidence to speak up even in Spanish. **Ms. Quiroga** circled the room, her pearl drop earrings swaying, as the children read aloud about George Washington.

“What does independent mean?” she asked at the end of the passage. “Alone?” one

student responded. “Free?” another said.

“As you know, a lot of people come to the United States from other countries,” she continued, referring to the early English colonists. “Do you know why?”

“Los van a matar”(they will be killed), a girl with a ponytail said. “People come from Mexico because there’s no jobs,” another student said. Suddenly, everyone was engaged and shouting — “To be safe!” “In Mexico, they steal your organs and sell them!” — until a petite girl near the front quietly added: “They want a better life.”

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The Way North



Join Damien Cave and Todd Heisler as they travel up Interstate 35, from Laredo, Tex., to Duluth, Minn., chronicling how the middle of America is being changed by immigration.

Day 1: A Shared Journey

Fewer Laredoans now go south to visit friends or shop, while more from Mexico land here, staying longer instead of just visiting or moving on. Some are desperate and willing to accept lower wages. Others push their children into public schools, setting them up with distant relatives who sometimes apply for food stamps if the children were born on the American side of the border, leading to complaints that Mexican families are more interested in benefits than work.

Ms. Quiroga, 48, paused. She had arrived in the United States from Cuba as a child. “A better life,” she repeated, smiling. “What does that mean to you?”

Laredo, a majority-Hispanic city since its founding in 1755, knows what it takes to incorporate immigrants. But over the past few years, as violence across the border in neighboring Nuevo Laredo has surged and as Border Patrol surveillance and checkpoints have made it harder to travel north of Laredo without documents, Laredo’s magnetic appeal has intensified, drawing immigrants who are testing local confidence, finances and the city’s bicultural equilibrium.

The bigger worry is that in a city long known for its successful hybrid of Mexican and American cultures, the schools, churches and other institutions are underequipped, struggling to raise young Laredoans with the skills and attitude needed to fully succeed.

“We want these kids to have the same chances as someone born in New York, to follow their dreams,” said Miguel Castillo, 44, the principal at Antonio M. Bruni Elementary, where Ms. Quiroga works. “Education equalizes society.”

On the national continuum of cultural and economic integration, Laredo’s challenges are extreme — it is the most Mexican of American places, **96 percent Hispanic**, with a bilingual population that often prefers Spanish to English. Its daily, difficult effort to meld two cultures, though, is one local version of an evolution occurring in many cities and towns nationwide, as it has become clear that immigrants are putting down permanent roots.

Washington remains paralyzed, unable to agree on an immigration overhaul. But to understand the long-term effects and the more recent wrinkles of immigration, a New York Times reporter and photographer will explore what is happening at the community level by following the road that is Texas’ central artery and a main entrance to the American heartland: Interstate 35.

Sometimes called “**the Nafta corridor**,” it traces over part of the **Chisholm Trail** used for 19th-century cattle drives and runs the length of the country’s middle, stretching north from here for around 1,600 miles to Duluth, Minn.

Photo



A view of Nuevo Laredo from across the Rio Grande River in Laredo. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Along the way, it edges close to classic Americana: the hometowns of Woody Guthrie, Jesse James and Donna Reed. Yet it also passes through what the country is becoming, from cities in Texas that have long been immigrant destinations to those in the Midwest that knew only black and white, or just white, until newcomers from Mexico, Bhutan or Sudan arrived to butcher beef or build houses.

And for so many, it all started here — on a highway where, heading north, the first road crossed is named Washington, and the second Moctezuma.

“If you thought about what would be compared to I-35, historically, it’s the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, and after that, the trans-Pacific railroads,” said Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton University who grew up in Kansas. “The history of the U.S. until maybe the last generation or two was an east-to-west migration. Now, it’s south to north, and it’s on the highways.”

Melding Cultures

The new cars and the heroin, the avocados and the immigrants: They all pass through here before heading up I-35 to Kansas City or Minneapolis. Especially since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, Laredo has become a city of global commerce, with truck stops the size of stadium parking lots.

But along with the legitimate trade — Laredo is the busiest commercial port of entry on the border, processing \$98.5 billion in imports last year — comes whatever else the country desires or demands. Late at night, residents near the river often wake up to helicopters and squealing tires as drug smugglers try to outrun the American authorities. Immigrants, meanwhile, have come across in a variety of ways.

Some have border-crossing cards that let them travel about 25 miles into the United States for up to 72 hours. Others were born in the United States, but stayed in Nuevo Laredo until the violence exploded about four years ago as the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas, rival drug traffickers, fought for territory. An unknown number have also come north as tourists or slipped across illegally.

There has always been some of this — “We are joined by the border, not separated,” said Raul G. Salinas, the [mayor of Laredo](#) — and cultural mixing has been happening organically in the region for centuries. Even the city’s response to its first immigration surge, after the railroads reached Laredo in 1881, ended up as a hybrid: City leaders devised a celebration of George Washington’s birthday that included a mock battle at City Hall between “Indians and white men” in which the key to the city was given to Great Chief Sachem — Washington in disguise.

Photo



Prekindergartners pledged to the American flag at Antonio M. Bruni Elementary, which is 99.9 percent Hispanic. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Today, the celebration continues as an elaborate party, lasting for several weeks, starting with a welcoming ceremony on one of the international bridges, followed by a jalapeño eating contest and debutantes in \$10,000 colonial gowns throwing beads from parade floats to gathered crowds.

Residents describe it as a celebration of “Americanness” and a nod to Mexico. In the 1990s, that kind of friendliness was easier to maintain. Gradually, though, the pressures and opportunities of immigration spread. Some residents recalled seeing silhouettes of men with backpacks riding on trains heading north toward San Antonio. Downtown, at El Conejo, one of the first bus companies catering to Mexican immigrants, every bus going to Iowa or Kansas left nearly full as entire families moved north.

Then suddenly the border tightened, first after 9/11, followed a few years later by a major border security expansion that added American officers, boats, cameras and checkpoints farther north on I-35. By 2011, after an especially bloody year in Nuevo Laredo, the distance between the two cities had become a canyon: Laredo's Chamber of Commerce asked Texas to remove Nuevo Laredo from road signs denoting the distance to the two cities so people driving south might not associate Laredo with its neighbor.

People's views hardened. "Mexico," said Hilario Martinez, safety director for the El Conejo bus service, as he tapped his Bible for emphasis, "is like an elephant in the circus — looking straight ahead, rocking back and forth, and going nowhere."

What used to be an almost-invisible barrier became an often-insurmountable obstacle. Every month at the county clerk's office, about 20 people deliver notarized letters saying a fiancé lives in Mexico and is not allowed to come across, leading couples to marry on an international bridge or at the fence line.

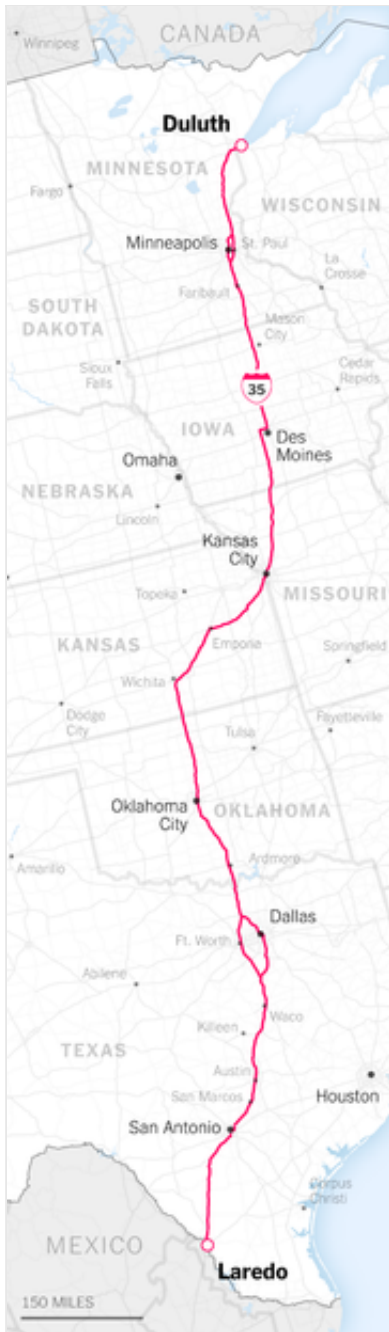
The city's cultural mingling manages to continue. Laredo is still the Little League field near the tortilla factory a few blocks east of I-35, where coaches in Texas Rangers hats could be seen on a recent afternoon teaching players how to field ground balls in the patois of the border. ("Eso, good job, Pedro!")

But as often as not, the process of becoming American seems to have slowed, or become less assured. From 1990 to 2012, Laredo's population doubled, to more than 244,000, and about 30 percent of the city is now foreign born, maybe more as Central American immigrants have recently begun to appear in larger numbers.

In some cases, fully joining American life means leaving.

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Tolbert Garcia, 29, joined the Marines in 2007, returning to Laredo after serving in Iraq. Standing by the fence at the



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Pushing English

Antonio M. Bruni Elementary, named after an Italian immigrant, is a squat brick building near a Roman Catholic church that pulls its 650 students from a district that stretches from the border through a neighborhood of old wood-frame homes tilting this way and that.

Most of the children are American citizens. The school is 99.9 percent Hispanic and

Little League park, watching his middle son, Tristan, run the bases, he said he always kind of knew Laredo was a little different because when he played football in high school, other teams would often scream, “Hey, go back to your own country.”

“I was always like, ‘Dude, we live in Laredo,’ ” he said. “ ‘It’s not Mexico.’ ”

At boot camp, though, he discovered his English was not as good as he had thought. He had grown up on the grittier west side, where Spanish dominated. But, he said, Laredo is still a place where most people can join the American mainstream without giving up their Mexican roots, and as proof, he cited the names for his three sons: Tolbert Jr., Tristan and Timothy.

He turned toward what sounded like an ice cream truck, but was actually a pickup selling chicharrones — another reminder of Mexican Laredo. “My uncles made fun of us: ‘Put some Mexican names on those kids!’ ” he said. “But I was like: ‘What? No. I’m not in Mexico.’ ”

99.3 percent economically disadvantaged, and nine out of 10 students speak English as a second language.

If there is a school where the challenge of integration is more acute, its principal, Mr. Castillo, a conservative Democrat whose necktie never seemed to loosen, would like to know about it.

Photo



Rebekah Morales, whose family opted for something less traditional than a quinceañera, primped for her Sweet 16 photographs. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

His school is constantly in flux. Laredo's two school boards after much debate successfully persuaded voters last year to approve bond issues for \$533.7 million to deal partly with the overcrowding often associated with children arriving from Mexico. Some show up for the first or second grade having never attended school. Involved immigrant parents like Erika Gomez, 41, the mother of a fourth

grader and a first grader, are a rarity.

“I always invite the other mothers or relatives to come and help, and they never do,” she said. “Everybody always has to work.”

Last year, Texas labeled the school “improvement required.” This year, the school overhauled its curriculum, using English instead of Spanish for children in second grade and below.

Maritza Lozano, 53, a prekindergarten teacher at Bruni with more than 20 years of experience, said she was reluctant at first.

“I just kept seeing all these blank faces staring back at me,” she said. But with the school year nearly over, many of the teachers’ views have changed. “I really am very surprised,” Mrs. Lozano said. “I’m speaking all in English now, and they understand.”

Non-Hispanics and Hispanics, in national surveys, have generally agreed that English should be a priority. Beyond that, there is widespread disagreement over what immigrants should do to become more woven into American life, or even what it means to be American.

The latest [New York Times](#) poll, conducted May 7 to 11, with 1,000 adults nationwide, makes clear that the country is conflicted about its evolving identity. Most respondents, 65 percent, agreed that the United States is a country made up of many cultures and values, but that is not how most say it should be: 54 percent said it should be a country with a basic American culture and values, though a majority of younger people — under 45 — said it should be made up of many cultures.

The United States also seems to be split over how immigration resources should be deployed. While 50 percent said the federal government should focus more on

protecting the border and stopping the flow of illegal immigrants, nearly the same percentage, 46 percent, said government should focus on helping those who are already here become part of the broader society.

At Bruni, the challenge is not what to teach, but how to teach it. Bruni's **per pupil spending** last year was \$5,932, below the state average of \$8,276 and the national average of around \$11,000.

Ms. Quiroga, the fourth-grade teacher, said she feared that her students would not see themselves as valuable. Her question about the meaning of "a better life" led to a litany of needs, excitedly described by the children as if they were luxuries never to be attained: "a house, not an apartment," "to be able to buy food and water whenever I want."

Sitting at a child-size desk near a bookcase of English and Spanish paperbacks after the students had left, Ms. Quiroga said: "I'm just hoping to keep them motivated. I'm just hoping they won't give up."