The Editorial Notebook;

It's Not Tia-Wanna Anymore

The New York Times

April 17, 1987, Friday, Late City Final Edition

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Section: Section A; Page 30, Column 1; ***Editorial*** Desk; ***Editorial***

Length: 644 words

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Dateline: SAN YSIDRO, Calif.

Body

Peer south from Otay Mesa in this southernmost part of California and you can see the future. Scrub grass and bare canyon stretch to the border. Then, suddenly, on the hilly Mexican side, the vista is transformed into city. Twin 40-story hotel towers rise from an urban center. The receding hillsides bristle with thousands of tents, shacks and concrete block houses. The flats below are packed with hovels, sticks and blue plastic.

This is Tijuana, stunning symbol of the third world that overhangs America's borders.

The new Immigration Reform and Control Act is about to take effect, and seeing Tijuana puts the law into perspective. Already there are encouraging signs that the law will help slow the flow of illegal aliens. But even the new law can only begin to control the borders.

"***Tia-Wanna***": ***it's*** the gringo name for what used to be a seedy border town of a few thousand, a place where tourists were entreated to buy "feelthy peectures," among other things. The tourists still arrive, in bermuda shorts and white sneakers, drawn by places like the Chicago Club, the Disco Salsa and Chuty's House of Beer. But the tourist strip now is only one facet of something vastly larger.

What's the population of Tijuana? Some say two million. That's easy to believe, looking south from Otay Mesa. At twilight, the two million seem to unravel at the edges. All across the grassy slopes, people gather in twos, threes and dozens. They are mostly men, mostly young, in bright shirts that read "L.A. Rams" and "Smiley." Some sit and smoke, or start cook fires, or play soccer, waiting for the larger game. Come nightfall they will dash and scramble across the canyon, hundreds of them, trying to elude the helicopters, horses and sixth sense of the Border Patrol.

But ***it's*** ***not*** night yet and ***it's*** the overhanging city that still commands attention. It is varied. Yes, poor migrants cluster in the shabby Hotel de la Paz waiting for the "coyotes" who'll try to smuggle them in. But there are thousands who commute legally to San Diego, and who have to wait 90 minutes during rush hour at the border station. Modern Japanese electronics factories stand out. At the sleek Comercial Mexicano supermarket, well-dressed shoppers crowd all 36 checkout lanes. "Tijuana is at the beginning of an industrial age," Richard Rodriguez wrote in Harper's last month, "a Dickensian city with palm trees."

Tijuana may be as much an engine as a place, an engine of transition. Cheap labor spurs construction of plants to assemble the products trucked over to the other side. And cheap labor exports itself, at a pace that can be gauged by numbers like the "1146" chalked on the money changers' booths. There was incentive to sneak across two years ago when a dollar bought 240 pesos. Consider the incentive now, when a dollar buys 1,140.

America's response to the illegal tide so far has been to rely on the patient professionals of the Border Patrol. They know they can't stop the tide. The officers are human: "Hell," said one, "if it were me, I'd be doing it too." But their job is to slow it down; and they do.

The new law, about to take effect, should slow it down some more. Now it will be illegal to hire undocumented aliens; so far, it has only been illegal for them to be hired. That should weaken the magnets. Big employers seem eager to comply.

The knowledge that jobs will be harder to get may explain why border apprehensions are already down a little, especially those involving "O.T.M.'s," other than Mexicans, migrating from dozens of other countries. But the new law can't turn the magnets off.

Their pull can be measured in another way. The United States minimum wage is $3.35 an hour. The Mexican Government has just ordained a 20 percent increase in its minimum wage for big cities and border areas. The new amount is $3.30 a day.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (90%); MAMMALS (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); IMMIGRATION (78%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); LEGISLATION (75%); ECONOMIC MIGRATION (75%); IMMIGRATION LAW (75%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (75%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (74%); SMUGGLING (74%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (63%); SOCCER (62%); PLANT CONSTRUCTION (60%); NEW MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (60%); ***EDITORIALS*** & OPINIONS (52%)

Company: BORDER PATROL (58%)

Organization: BORDER PATROL (58%); BORDER PATROL (58%)

Industry: HOTELS & MOTELS (77%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (63%); GROCERY STORES & SUPERMARKETS (62%); PLANT CONSTRUCTION (60%); NEW MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (60%); HELICOPTERS (50%)

Geographic: SAN DIEGO, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); MEXICO (94%); UNITED STATES (79%)