More Than Meets the Eye: Socioeconomic Complexity in Mecca

One of the first things I did when I began fieldwork was to find a place to live, not an easy task in the eastern Coachella Valley. While it may superficially appear that there is an abundance of housing in Mecca, like houses, duplexes, apartments, and the omnipresent trailers, each dwelling is occupied and accounted for and I soon found this out when I inquired about renting a place. Locating housing is one of the most troublesome issues for farm laborers in the area, who are constantly looking for a decent place to live and opportunities to move into more desirable dwellings. For me, it was a minor irritation, but for them it was and remains an unfortunate burden.

After looking for two weeks I got a tip from a local business owner, who suggested I ask about an apartment above a liquor store over in North Shore, a derelict former resort community about nine miles east of Mecca. North Shore sits adjacent to Highway 111 and the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, and like Mecca, seems to be a town that you pass by at a high rate of speed unless you're forced to pull over to pay for overpriced gas. There is a rundown and boarded up yacht club nearby which alternately attracts the curious and those up to no good. The apartment itself was decent, with air conditioning and view of the Salton Sea, but like a lot things in the desert a little expensive for what you got. Below my apartment and adjacent to the store was a vacant office space. It remained empty during my tenure there except for one day in June 2001.

It was midday when I looked out my apartment window to see about 45 men, women, and children gathered outside the office, which still had old signs up proclaiming its former life as a medical clinic. Today the office appeared to be open and busy, and the people waiting for the office to open occupied most of the shade afforded by the slight overhang of the building, escaping the blistering sun. The always present odor from the Salton Sea wafted around but over time you only really notice it on particularly bad days. Some people made small talk about work, while others sat quietly with their families, gently swatting at the flies and gnats that are particularly bothersome in the summer. The renter of the office was a local Mexican-American realtor who was providing tours of North Shore house lots to prospective buyers. He was just pulling up to the front of the store as I was coming downstairs. I learned that flyers advertising today's event had been put up in stores, the post offices, and other areas about a week before to generate interest. The crowd patiently waited their turn as they signed up to be taken out in the realtor's SUV, view the house lots, and returned to the office where the realtor's wife would provide more information and begin the process of purchasing. Of the over twenty house lots he had available for sale, four were sold that day: not to retirees looking for a home in the desert, nor to young professionals looking for a vacation house, but to Mexican immigrant farm laborers looking for a homestead.

A few hours later I was able to talk with realtor Manuel Parilla, who had been conducting tours like this for the last year and a half, typically renting out a space nearby for convenience. Every couple of months Parilla would hold land sales and each time the crowds would gather to snatch up opportunities to own property in North Shore. All of this left me with questions: How is it that...
farm laborers are able to settle in areas like Mecca and North Shore? What happens when large numbers of farm laborers and their families become residents in these small towns in very short periods of time? I kept these questions and others in mind when I interacted with and interviewed farm laborers in Mecca and North Shore.

In this chapter, I outline the larger social, economic, and political events that form the backdrop to settlement by farm laborers. Farm laborers are coming to Mecca and the Coachella Valley because of the shifts in the agricultural industry. Because of the sustained settlement that has been taking place over the last 20 years, the population as well as the business sector, schools, and other features of small towns have shifted from the interests of small farmers to those of farm laborers. In short, Mecca is not simply a homogenous assemblage of houses and farm laborers, but an area that is complex and increasing in complexity.

I discuss the complexity of Mecca and the Mecca area through an examination of housing, settlement, and the non-farm business sector. First, I examine the treatment of farm laborer settlement in the academic literature, and specifically, how scholars have depicted and described the settlement of rural communities in California and how farm laborers fit into the local social fabric. I then move on to Mecca as a specific area for farm laborer settlement, presenting ethnographic data on the processes of settlement. A fluid and dynamic process, settlement is not easily categorized; nonetheless, through my encounters with farm laborer residents the details began to emerge. Finally, I discuss the larger impacts of substantial change that comes with settlement. Mecca has become increasingly complex over a short period of time and here I present examples of socioeconomic complexity through a discussion of the business sector and other non-farm aspects of the community.

Up to now, I have referred only to the town of Mecca in my discussion of farm laborers in the Coachella Valley (see Chapter 1). My research started out as a community study of Mecca, with the focus on the town as a community in both the physical and social sense. As the investigation progressed, I realized that the focus was too narrow. There are many people living outside of Mecca the town who consider themselves to be living in Mecca the community. They reside in trailer parks, on ranches, or in isolated dwellings. Most of the stores, markets, and other services are located in Mecca, forming a commercial core for people living south of Coachella and east of Thermal. Given the lack of available lots for sale and the low turn-over in house sales in Mecca, there are more viable options for becoming a homeowner outside of Mecca. It's no surprise that North Shore, the largely vacant former resort area to the east of Mecca, is becoming a new destination for settlers in the Mecca area.

In order to capture these developments, I broadened my scope to include North Shore and the areas between it and Mecca. What I found useful in conceptualizing this larger area was to use a combination of two institutional boundaries. First, there are the Mecca School district lines, which reach out to the east and include the town of North Shore and all of the areas in between them. The two elementary schools which serve the district are located in Mecca. Second, there is the postal zip code of 92254, which for the most part replicates the school district lines. The post office which serves the zip code is located in Mecca. The added benefit of using these boundaries is that they are also meaningful to the residents who live there. Mecca is the main town for this small region north of Salton Sea, and North Shore is functioning as a new satellite
settlement of the Mecca community.

THE CONTEXTS OF FARM LABORER SETTLEMENT

In this section, I address the structural contexts that are playing a part in the trend of farm laborer settlement in rural California, contexts that envelop the social fields in which farm laborers find themselves enmeshed. Certainly, the current state of production in agribusiness, with its rising concentration in specialty crops, is one of these factors. As detailed in Chapter 3, acreage devoted to labor-intensive specialty crops is increasing, and in doing so, creating heightened demands for farm laborers. Labor demands are met by increased flows of both migrant and immigrant Mexican farm laborers, as well as numbers of laborers from Central America. IV. Palerm (1997:22) found that the increase in jobs and periods of employment, the formation of multiple income households, and the availability of state unemployment insurance between seasons of employment are all factors in the trend to settlement in rural California communities.

Rural communities are being repopulated and redefined as farm laborers continue to settle in greater numbers. Throughout rural California the incipient formation of new communities is taking place. Migrants continue to journey across the border in search of employment, while many have settled to become immigrants in new communities. Laborers are now coming from a greater variety of places. They continue to come from traditional sending states in central Mexico such as Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacan, but increasing numbers of migrants are coming from southern states such as Oaxaca and Chiapas. Greater numbers of indigenous laborers such as Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca, and Purepecha from Michoacan, are comprising the agricultural work force. In addition, laborers from Central American countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala can be found working alongside Mexican laborers in the fields.

Migrant or Immigrant?

Who becomes a settler? What makes some immigrants choose to leave behind their home communities and settle in new communities in the U.S.? Scholars writing on the subject of settlement among Mexican migrants and immigrants have focused on two categories, sojourners and settlers; respectively those who return to their communities and those who stay (Alarcon 1995; Chavez 1988, 1992, 1994; Cornelius 1992; Massey et al. 1987; Rouse 1991, 1992). Sojourners are those migrants who maintain strong connections with their home communities and retain intentions of returning. They might typically be target earners, persons who come to work in the U.S. to earn a specific amount of money and then return home. Their patterns of migration can range from sporadic crossings in times of need to career migrants who may cross the border annually, or even those that work as day laborers, crossing the border daily. Additionally, they could be working for specific periods of time, such as harvest periods, followed by a return to their home community once the period of employment is over. Settlers, on the other hand, are persons who have decided to remain in their new communities. Like the experiences that brought them to the U.S. in the first place, the reasons for settling are varied. The acquisition of a better-paying job, the necessity of taking care of family members, or securing a permanent dwelling are just a few of the reasons that laborers reported to me as they recounted their transition from migrant to immigrant.
In a series of influential articles from the early 1990s, Roger Rouse (1991, 1992) typified transnational laborers as always remaining migrants, for they never truly lose their attachment to their home communities. They are always migrants, because whether they are away from their homes for a period of one month or 25 years, their attention remains fixed on their home communities while living abroad. Leo Chavez (1994:54-55), on the other hand, reminds us that although linkages to home communities can continue and cannot be understated, it is also important to emphasize how transnational laborers attach themselves and make investments in their new communities. I follow Chavez's lead in describing settlers as persons who have oriented themselves "from their places of origin to their new communities" (Chavez 1994:54). They see themselves as permanently staying in the U.S. and have turned their attention to developing social and economic ties to their new communities. I believe that this is an important clarification, because even if a settled immigrant continues to dream of the day when they might retire to their pueblo, in some cases this never comes to pass. Circumstances change, so even if a perception of return is dearly held, ties intentionally or not are made in the U.S.

Since one of the first steps laborers take to establish themselves in their new towns is to acquire shelter or a home, I looked at housing as a lens through which to examine the process of settlement. How do farm laborers locate housing, and thereby establish themselves? With most activities among immigrant populations, especially so among farm laborers, much of how an immigrant gets along is through social networks. Social networks provide the contacts, connections, and transference of knowledge that is crucial to the successful navigation of everyday life (Velez-Ibariez 1988, 1995). Locating and acquiring housing makes extensive use of social networks and typically they are the initial means for establishing a residence. In the following section I give an overview of housing and settlement in the Mecca area as a facet of the complexity of farm laborers' lives.

DIFFERENTIATION IN HOUSING AND SETTLEMENT IN THE MECCA AREA

From the face of it, Mecca appears much like any other small town in an agricultural area. There are orderly rows of houses along paved streets with varying differences between styles of architecture and age, but much of the current housing was only recently built. From its founding the population density was quite low and accordingly matched the construction of housing. It wasn't until the return of the braceros in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the town began to grow with the influx of more people. Arlena, an occasional farm laborer and housewife, recalls what Mecca used to be like: "Oh, when my father brought me, my mother, and my brothers here to Mecca in 1969, there were only about 30 or 40 houses. But by then there were other Mexican families here, too." Farm laborers were at first housed outside of the town in labor camps run by growers. But after the return of the braceros Mexican laborers were settling with greater frequency in town.

Table 5 - Construction of Housing in Mecca Region (92254 Zip Code), 1939-2000

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<th>Year Structure Built</th>
<th>Number of New Structures</th>
<th>% of Existing Total Housing</th>
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<tr>
<td>1999 to March 2000</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1995 to 1998</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>11</td>
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Table 5 shows the numbers of housing units built over time in the 92254 zip code, which contains the towns of Mecca and North Shore and hinterlands between them. Mecca serves as the larger of the two where services and shops can be found, and North Shore represents a newer area of settlement by farm laborers as housing becomes more scarce in Mecca. Immediately apparent are two large periods of housing construction. The first occurs in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s and can be attributed to the return of the braceros to the Mecca area. Up to 1959 a total of 219 housing units had been built, accounting for 11 percent of existing housing. But by the end of the 1970s, 608 more housing units were built. As much as this sounds like a veritable boom, and it was, it only accounts for about 33 percent of the current housing in Mecca. The real explosion took place in the 1980s through to the 1990s. By then Mexican laborers were becoming more sedentary in the wake of amnesty and acquiring work permits after the passage of IRCA in 1986. It was also in this period that house lots were being bought up as farm laborers became involved in self-help housing programs and private developers were buying lots to sell as tract housing. Mecca was also selected by valley officials as the location of low-income housing programs in the form of apartment complexes, built on the edge of town where some land was still available. In one eight year period from 1990 to 1998, 726 housing units were built, accounting for over 39 percent of existing housing. The total number of housing units in the 92254 zip code was 1,878 in 2000, of which 1,058 were located in the townsit of Mecca. Unfortunately, the construction of housing has not kept pace with the explosion in the population. In 2000, there were only 125 vacant units in the zip code, or a vacancy rate of 0.9 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

The data in Table 5 do not distinguish between apartments and residential homes, but we can discern aspects of the building types from informants as well as available maps. There are a variety of housing types in the Mecca area, with the majority of housing comprising single family houses and apartments. The building boom that took place in the 1990s included both the construction of apartment complexes and homes. The construction has become more dense since the arrival of the braceros and the subsequent boom in the 1990s. Houses on the streets on the west side of town near Highway III were among the first built in the 1960s and 1970s. As the town grew and house lots were taken, the construction of housing crept toward the north and east of the town.

Another development that arises out of the ongoing settlement of Mecca is the growth of North
Shore. Nine miles to the east and along the Salton Sea, North Shore was originally built as a resort and vacation site, complete with a marina and yacht club. The main draw to the area was the Salton Sea and all of the water sports activities associated with it. But since the rapid fall in the popularity of the Sea beginning in the 1980s due to increasing salinity, sulphuric odors, algae blooms, and massive periodic fish and bird deaths, the whole area went into general decline. Permanent residents began an exodus from the area, while vacation home owners started selling their properties. House lots stand empty and undeveloped along streets that had been carefully laid out and named in anticipation of the crowds of retirees and vacationers that never came. As in the opening vignette I used for this chapter, farm laborers are beginning to settle in North Shore in greater numbers due to the lack of opportunities elsewhere in the Mecca area.

Housing in the Mecca area can be categorized into two types: regulated and unregulated. Additionally, there are two other characteristics of housing, that of rentals and ownership. I conceived these categories for housing because they resonate not only with the perceptions of their owners and residents, but also with how they are perceived from outside of the community. When I inquired about housing and settling in Mecca, informants expressed values on certain types of housing. For example, most everyone who came to Mecca initially had to contend with a temporary living situation, be it living with relatives, renting a room, or sharing a trailer with others. To be able to purchase and live in your own residential home was what many strived for, if not dreamed about.

Over time there is a pattern of settling farm laborers to consciously move from informal unregulated housing to formal regulated housing. Farm laborers who intended to settle were not content to live in marginal housing, but rather struggled to move into better housing. This pattern was not evident among every household and farm laborer that I encountered, as the settlement process was linked with factors such as time of arrival in the community, incomes, and if they had children. The progression from marginal cramped living quarters shared with others to a single family house was not an automatic development, but an outcome that was planned by farm laborers and their families as part of the wave of homesteading in rural California (Palerm 2002).

**Regulated Housing**

Regulated housing is that which has been planned and built according to construction and housing codes mandated by local and state agencies. The authorities have approved their construction through the granting of building permits and inspections. While Mecca is filled with all sorts of informal dwellings, most of what you see as you make your way through the streets are the formal type: single-family houses, apartment complexes, and tract housing. Before the 1970s, however, the town was less densely settled than it is now. "I remember when the houses were all separated by dirt lots. They looked like they were kind of scattered around, not tightly packed into blocks like they are now," recalled Jose Luis, a former bracero who returned to Mecca in 1966. After securing a job as an irrigator with a local citrus grower, he sent for his wife Antonia back in Michoacan. They both knew they didn't want to live forever in the small apartment they were renting from Jose Luis' uncle, nor did they want to live in trailer. Antonia explains:

> We came to the U.S. with the idea that we were staying for good. I thought, 'Why
should we live in a trailer when we came all this way?' We paid $15,000 for our house and now our mortgage is paid off. My husband built this house with his own hands, but his cousins helped him too.

Other returning braceros and their families, like Jose Luis and Antonia, bought vacant house lots as they could in the 1970s. As farm laborers were able to save, houses were built.

The initial settlement of braceros resulted in the expansion of the actual physical space of the community. The braceros returned to a town in the 1970s when there was available lands for sale and vacant lots. Reminiscent of the original Anglo pioneers who arrived to a fledgling community, the braceros returned to Mecca at a point when there was still land available for purchase, resulting in the first crucial step towards resettling the town.

Several square blocks of homes were built by farm laborers themselves in the 1990s. The Coachella Valley Housing Coalition (CVHC), a local non-profit housing organization, offered a program beginning in 1990 in which farm laborer families, together in groups of ten, would build their own homes. Through "sweat equity," a total of 72 single-family dwellings were constructed over several years, creating new sections of housing on the eastern part of town. Pilar Villegas, a mayordoma (foreperson) for a citrus grower, was one of the first participants in the program.

When I first heard about this thing they were doing, I thought it was a scam. Everyone I knew said 'Don't get involved.' But I checked it out and it was for real. Later, when all my neighbors in the trailer park we were living in found out, they wanted in on it too. The first group of ten families all came from my trailer park.

Families were responsible for contributing 40 hours per week and were guided by experts in every aspect of construction. Pilar continues:

I remember telling them, 'Hey, I don't know how to build a wall or install wiring in a house!' But the supervisors were there and they would show you how to pour a foundation or frame the house. Sometimes we would notice later down the line that a wall was off a little, but we built it ourselves and we felt good about it.

Pilar, her husband Santiago, and their two children moved into the first home completed in 1991. A local bank qualified them for a low-interest loan with a standard 30 year mortgage and a monthly payment of $100. Standing outside of her home she directed my attention down the street and with a great deal of pride said, "Each one of those houses I worked on, we all did. This neighborhood was built by us."

The CVRC is still running self-help housing programs, now located further to the east in North Shore. There is no more land for building houses in Mecca and the few empty lots you can see around town are being held by their owners as investments, unwilling to part with them unless the price is right. So those seeking land for a house look farther to the east in places like North Shore where house lots remain available. As described in the beginning of the chapter, private realtors as well are brokering the sale of house lots to farm laborers. Other available lands in the Mecca area are locked up in agricultural production and unless the prices offered are high
enough, growers are reluctant to lose property and future earnings.

Apartment Living: Low-Income Housing Comes to Town Throughout the history of Mecca, actual housing has been limited and in recent years a boom has been underway. In large part that boom is accountable to the five low- to medium-income apartment complexes, and smaller clusters of apartments found on house lots. The complexes were built just on the northern and eastern edges of town on some of the last available parcels of land.

The Pie de la Cuesta Apartments built in 1992 and are subsidized housing for farm laborers only. There are 68 units, with an estimated 500 persons living at the complex. Rent is figured by calculating 30 percent of the tenants' annual income; rent can increase or decrease over time, based on what the tenants are earning. There are waiting lists for people to move in and the rare vacancies are typically found in the dead of summer when many people go north for the table grape harvest in the San Joaquin Valley.

Mrs. Gomez, the manager at Pie de la Cuesta, takes care of the daily business of the complex. She explained who the tenants were:

Though these apartments were built for farm laborers, persons in each apartment household can work in other jobs. A lot of the people in this complex work at hotels, golf courses, landscaping, restaurants, and other jobs. Many work in the western part of the valley, over by the resorts. But they have to earn a minimum of $3,885 from farm labor, either a single person or pooled together from several income earners. Some families might send out the wives or work extra jobs in order to qualify for living here. It's also complicated when the workers might choose to leave farm labor for other jobs like landscaping or on the golf courses, but then not tell us.

So, despite the fact the complex was built to house farm laborers, laborers in other industries like the service sector are able to acquire housing as long as they can prove that someone in their household is working for a minimum period of time in agriculture.

Tenants are typically families with an average of six to seven members. The families are usually nuclear families, parents and their children. The complex requires at least one adult member of each family to possess legal immigration documents; other members can be undocumented. "It's hard on them, you know, when their children might have papers because they were born here but the parents do not. If that's the case, then they cannot rent here," said Mrs. Gomez.

Adalberto and his wife Reyna are typical of the farm laborer families living at Pie de la Cuesta. Adalberto is an experienced farm laborer originally from Linares, Nuevo Leon, having worked across Texas, Arkansas, and California in everything from vegetables and table grapes to clear cutting pine forests. He first came to the U.S. as a 17 year-old in 1985. By 1990 he came directly to Mecca because he had some cousins there who could get him a job and a place to live. At first he lived with his cousins, but within a month he found a very small trailer to live in on a rancho outside of Mecca. He had married Reyna in 1989 while in Linares and together they made plans for her to come and live with him in the U.S. Adalberto had applied for amnesty on the tail of
IRCA in 1986 and he received a work permit and permission to stay, so their reunification was in process. Together they could work in agriculture and make enough money to set up their household, so for several years they lived in the trailer.

In May of 1992 they qualified to live at the Pie de la Cuesta Apartments and were anxious to move out of the confining trailer. They lived for four years in a two bedroom apartment, paying $180 a month for rent. Their rent fluctuated seasonally, mirroring the seasonality of their employment and income. In 1996 they were able to move into a three bedroom apartment in the same complex. By then they had two children and Reyna was pregnant with their third. Their rent has since stayed the same at $376 a month.

When I interviewed the family, I asked them about living in the complex. Adalberto said:

We don't like it. There's no room for kids to play, like skating or riding their bike. If I wanted to have my friends over we can't sit out in front of my door and just relax and have a beer. You don't have any privacy here, or if you want to have a party, you can't because after a certain hour there's no noise allowed. We would like to be able to move, but right now we can't.

Adalberto further mentioned that they are at a stage where they are comfortable as they have enough work and can buy things like nice furniture, but they eventually want to move out of the complex and into their own home. They were currently mulling over whether to buy a large trailer over in North Shore, but weren't sure if they wanted to wait for another opportunity. "Sometimes you have to take what comes before it's gone," said Reyna.

Tenure at Pie de la Cuesta is about two years on average. Usually within a two year cycle the tenants will find better jobs and move out. Others are looking for a home of their own or simply move to other locations in the area. Mrs. Gomez comments:

Our tenants start out in the fields and in packing sheds, but then they get promoted to other positions such as foreman ... their motivation is to get out of the apartments, to strive for something better and to earn more. There are some families that have been living in the complex since it opened in 1992. They'll probably never move out, but there are a lot of families that move in for a while and then leave. The motivation is to buy their own homes, get better jobs, and increase their incomes.

Complicating this, however, is the very requirement of farm labor income in order to qualify for an apartment at the complex and the variable costs of rent. Because farm labor income is required, tenants feel as if they cannot take other jobs in order to meet the criteria; others are simply stuck in the farm employment cycle. Couple this with the dearth of housing options in the Mecca area and many tenants feel that their best strategy is to remain at the complex where rents can be very low when working in farm labor, the only employment option for many people.

The other four complexes are similar to that of Pie de la Cuesta, but are not restricted to farm laborers, even though farm laborers and their families are the majority of the tenants. They are all
subsidized and waiting lists for them are long as well, often with families waiting months for a vacancy to open up.

The Dr. Clair S. Johnson Apartments are located in the northeastern corner of Mecca. The complex has a high fence and a security gate complete with a keypad for opening the gate, but I've never seen the gate closed. The Johnson apartments are a low-income housing project built in 1993 by the Public Housing Authority of Riverside County. The complex has 40 units with about 240 persons. Rent here is also figured at 30 percent of each unit's combined income. Mrs. Lopez, the manager, describes this as having positive and negative aspects:

There's one divorced woman on disability who has three young kids, so she's not earning an income. Her rent is $3 a month. Then, at the other extreme, there is another single woman with adult sons. They are all working with decent jobs and incomes, so their rent is about $580 a month.

The tenure period here is unlike that of Pie de la Cuesta. "Once they're here, they stay," said Mrs. Lopez. "The only reason that people ever leave is because there is no air conditioning in the units."

Mecca has been saddled with a reputation for being a poor, farm laborer town, and moreover, that it is populated with Mexicans who are known for drinking, drugs, gang activity, and violence. Negative social and criminal acts do occur in the community, but the town is also not enmeshed in a never-ending crime wave. When it came time to build low-income housing in the valley, housing for which most valley cities did not want, Mecca was selected. Long term residents felt that it was the reputation that prompted officials to choose Mecca. "The only reason they built them here was because no one else would take them," declared Corazon, a resident of Mecca for over 25 years. "Since they are low-income apartments, they just attracted more poor people to Mecca. The town is filled with strangers now."

Arturo, a long-time resident of Mecca and supervisor for a citrus grower, told me why he thought the apartments were built in Mecca:

When they built those apartments in the early 1990s, it was because no one could stop them. This is the kind of housing that those other cities like Indian Wells or Rancho Mirage didn't want in their town. It's for low-income people, so it would bring in an element they didn't want. What they really didn't want were poor Mexicans living with them. So they came down here, where no one could stop them and built them up. Now they are filled with low-income people from all over the valley.

Arturo's comments bring us back to the point of how the settlement process viewed within and outside the community. Families that have lived in Mecca for decades see the rapid changes as shifting the social dynamic from a town where people knew each other and had long-term relationships to a town populated with strangers. Newcomers see themselves as part of the growth of the community, a place where they can raise their children and establish themselves. Outsiders see Mecca, and other towns in the east end of the valley, as places of poverty and
locations that only farm laborers would live.

**Unregulated Housing**

Unregulated housing, like its name suggests, is informal, spontaneous, and constructed without the knowledge and approval of the authorities. Types of dwellings in this category are quite diverse: additions to homes, converted rooms, garages, tool sheds, mobile homes, recreational trailers, and pickup campers. Just about anything that can marginally be considered a shelter can be counted as housing. Unregulated housing tends to be hidden from view, most typically found in the back yards of residential homes. A drive around Mecca and a glance into back yards illustrates that almost every house lot in town has some sort of informal housing unit, while some homeowners have become landlords to collections of dwellings in their yards. Another major form of informal housing that bears mentioning are the "illegal" trailer parks found throughout the countryside in eastern Coachella Valley.

Unregulated housing is often the only opportunity for newly arrived persons in Mecca. It is also the type of housing most sought after by migrant laborers. There has been a general crisis for housing that has plagued the town for the last twenty years. The housing condition is exacerbated with the influx of migrants during the seasonal harvests. The more formal apartment complexes located in Coachella and Indio are reluctant to rent to migrants, who cannot sign long-term rental leases and are only in the area for short periods of time. The crisis becomes obvious when the streets are filled with people living in their cars and trucks, hovering over fires in the night while cooking their food. Newcomers look to family and friends to assist in providing them with housing, or at the very least in assisting them in securing a place to live. While perceived as a temporary measure until another opportunity presents itself, the length of time spent renting a room or a trailer in a relative's or a friend's backyard can vary widely from several months to years.

Emesto, a young man from La Piedad, Michoacan, recalls moving with his wife Leticia and infant daughter Yeseli from place to place when they first arrived in Mecca:

> At first we lived with my cousin and his family in a trailer outside of Mecca for $250 a month. We stayed there for three months then moved in with a friend we knew from La Piedad who had an apartment in Coachella. We lived there with 10 other people, all from La Piedad, for $200 a month. But we couldn't stay there, it was just too many people. So finally, we found a trailer of our own to rent.

Multiple households within one housing unit is a common living strategy. Two or more households share common expenditures for rents and utilities, slightly lessening the financial burden of all parties. Utilities alone are extremely expensive in the desert; obviously water is an issue, but electricity bills skyrocket in the warm months because of fans, air conditioners, and swamp coolers to cool residences to at least tolerable levels.

No one advertises that they have such housing. Landlords are reluctant to disclose the fact even if trailers can be seen in their backyards from the street, and for good reason. Their rentals are built without permits, and as such, many are not in compliance with building codes. Most of their
tenants are undocumented, so they would not want to risk a raid from the Border Patrol. Garages are converted into one room studios where several migrant men or a migrant family might crowd into it. Homeowners with several rooms in their houses might rent one room out and build a door for separate access. Older mobile home trailers are typically found in backyards, but so are converted tool sheds, small travel trailers, and pickup truck campers. The owners of the lots link the extra dwellings up to the sewer system, and provide hook-ups for electricity and water. The craftsmanship involved varies from a simple extension cord running on the ground to elaborate wiring systems that run underground installed by skilled electricians. Rent is charged for these extra dwellings, with the costs of utilities typically included. Typically, rents runs from $200 to $300, seemingly irrespective of factors such as type, condition, location, and availability of facilities such as restrooms and hot water; the cost of rent varies by the landlord.

The prime motivation of providing a rental to someone is for the money. Homeowners and property owners are fully aware of the absolute dearth of housing in Mecca and the surrounding area. Rent from tenants contributes to an owner's income and for many goes toward their own housing expenses. Carmela, a long-term resident and homeowner in Mecca, has an arrangement with the young undocumented couple, Jorge and Marisela from Nayarit, who have parked an old mobile home in her backyard. They've had this arrangement for two years. Jorge and Marisela bought the 30 year-old mobile home for $1,400 dollars, $1,000 coming from their savings and the remaining $400 paid over four months. The rent was agreed to at $200 a month with utilities included. Jorge and his father laid down the pipes for connecting the mobile home to the house's sewer system, a pipe for the water hookup, then dug a small trench and buried the cables for electricity. This type of arrangement is fairly common in Mecca. For a landlord like Carmela, it means extra income. "I don't mind doing it. They're a nice couple I've known for a long time. His dad used to live on my mom's yard. Besides, it helps me with my mortgage payment," explained Carmela. For Jorge and Marisela, it's also beneficial. Said Jorge:

We really like living here. Carmela's a good landlord. She didn't make us feel bad for using her water or electricity. We can invite our friends over for carne asada on the weekends. She doesn't mind, and sometimes she comes out to eat with us.

Since Jorge and Marisela are the owners of their trailer, it's always waiting for them when they return from their annual migration to the table grape harvest in the Central Valley. They can choose to sublet it or leave it vacant while they are up north. What might appear to be vacant trailers to be rented in most cases are other people's property as I found out when I inquired with several lot owners to rent a place to live. Another important dimension of their arrangement is the comment from Carmela concerning her relationship with Jorge and Marisela. Carmela's mother rented a space to Jorge's father years before, a clear indication of the potential depth of the social networks for those involved in establishing a residence in Mecca.

While the arrangement between Carmela and Jorge and Marisela is satisfactory to both parties, not all such arrangements are so mutually beneficial. Miguel, a Purepecha Indian from Ocumichu, Michoacan, lives with his wife and two pre-teen sons in a cramped 15 by 20 foot apartment. Their apartment is one of ten crudely built dwellings located on a small house lot in Mecca. There are many little complexes in and amongst the houses in Mecca, built by a homeowner or the owner of property to cash in on the presence of farm laborers in town.
Miguel's landlord, a local businessman, rents properties almost exclusively to Purepecha, one of the newest segments of Mecca's increasingly diverse population.

All available space inside Miguel's apartment is occupied by regular size furniture forced into a very small area. One can only walk a pace or two before running into a bed or a dresser. Outside of each apartment is a propane gas canister next to the door, supplying fuel for heating and appliances. The appliances themselves, a stove and refrigerator, are the very small types found in offices or college dormitories. The rent here is $405, without utilities, an amount that is high even for Mecca, especially given the living conditions. Miguel has been living here with his family for seven years now, saving money for a down payment on a house he hopes to buy in Mecca. Although Miguel and the other Purepecha with whom I spoke mentioned that the landlord was kind to them, other residents referred to him as the patron to the Purepecha. Because of the higher than normal rents and the near-exclusive dealings with the Purepecha, Mecca residents think of his relationships with them as exploitive.

Moving from Unregulated to Regulated Housing: Becoming a Homeowner

Previously, I suggested that there was a pattern of movement from unregulated to regulated housing over time. As farm laborers successfully established themselves, found places to live, and secured employment, eventually for some there was a desire to move out of cramped quarters or other undesirable living conditions. I believe that it also stems from a desire to settle permanently and to invest in their new community. From interviews with a cross-section of Mecca residents, it became apparent that the longer they had lived in Mecca the more likely it was that they had moved from informal to formal housing. Here I present the case of Maximo and Lisa, a young couple who are new homeowners in North Shore.

Maximo, a 34 year old machine operator and irrigator for a major grape grower is originally from Guanajuato, Guanajuato. Lisa, a homemaker and part-time employee to the local school district, originally from Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas, is 32 years old. They married in 1985 and then lived in a converted garage at Maximo's cousin's house for a year. Desiring a little more privacy they took an unregulated apartment in a small complex of four dwellings in 1986. Although they loved their families and treasured their company, they appreciated the space that moving afforded them, especially since they were beginning to start their own family.

One day in 1987 as Maximo and Lisa were traveling by bus from a trip to Tijuana, their bus was in an accident in which Lisa broke both her legs. The accident devastated them financially, so they resolved to move in with Lisa's parents while they paid off their debts and saved money again. By 1989, they paid off Lisa's bills and managed to save $2,500. Their savings coupled with a loan of $2,500 from Lisa's brother allowed them to buy a trailer and once again set up an independent household. The trailer was located in a date grove outside of Mecca where Maximo worked. Maximo actually heard about the trailer from his supervisor and by most standards the trailer was rather nice. By 1990 they paid off the loan from Lisa's brother and owned the trailer free and clear. They lived in the grove for four years until 1993. By that time they wanted to find a house they could buy, something big enough for their children who were growing and needed their own rooms. "When your kids get older, they need privacy and their own space. Those trailers are not that big, so it was time to look for something better," explained Lisa.
After much searching, they found their present house in North Shore in 1993, only a few miles from the old trailer they used to own in the date grove. The owner was an old Anglo retiree who was getting too old to live on his own and was planning on moving out of the area. The original asking price was $60,000, so Maximo and Lisa wanted to wait. While the house was seemingly inexpensive, their modest incomes kept them from impulsively taking the asking price. "We probably could've afforded to buy the house for that much, but we didn't want to cut our resources too thin. When Lisa had her accident, it wiped us out. If we can keep our bills low, we can handle something like that better in the future," said Maximo. Their patience paid off: after a couple of months the price of the house dropped to about $45,000. They turned to a local bank for a home loan and they were approved. About eight years into their 30-year mortgage, Maximo and Lisa are homeowners. And they beam with pride over their home, showing me around the yard, the landscaping that they have carefully placed around the perimeter of their grass lawn. Maximo even built a small pond with a flowing waterfall for the pet turtles that his children dote on. They have made improvements to the interior of their home, painting and adding updated fixtures. Having dinner with them was pleasant because it felt like a happy home, welcoming and warm.

I was curious as to how Maximo and Lisa felt about living in North Shore, since they had lived in both the town of Mecca and an isolated ranch. Their current home is farther away from everything. "Over here in North Shore, the kids can play, we don't have to worry about cars racing through the streets, or strangers harming them. The only thing we have to worry about are the snakes," said Maximo. They said that they know all of their neighbors, pointing in each direction to a house and saying that's so and so, he works here, he's related to such and such, and so on. Most of the people who live around them are farm laborers, in varying positions and companies, or work at golf courses and landscaping. What they also like is that they and their neighbors look out for each other. "When we would go on vacation, I told the guy who lives next to me, and he said 'Don't worry, I'll take care of your house.' I like that people around here are taking care of each other," said Maximo.

The experiences of Maximo and Lisa are typical among farm laborers who have become homeowners. Like anyone else, regardless of the industry they work in, laborers feel the same desire to establish themselves with their families. Living independently is a goal for many laborers in the valley, but it often becomes a matter of circumstances and timing. It took Maximo and Lisa several tries to acquire their own household, which ultimately culminated in them purchasing their home. Being a homeowner is a massive investment, usually the largest in a person's life. Homeownership represents financial freedom—a homeowner has security, equity that can be used for establishing a credit history or obtaining loans if necessary. As such it really represents an important step in the financial life of a family. Among a low-income group such as farm laborers, owning their own home is an incredibly life-altering experience, one that finally puts them on equal footing with their fellow residents, as property owners, as settled persons.

**FROM CRACKDOWN TO SHOWDOWN: THE COUNTY AND "ILLEGAL" TRAILER PARKS**

Settlement has been a factor in increasing levels of differentiation in the Mecca area, and the process is not without controversy, from within and without the community. Unfortunately,
because of the housing crisis, low wages and undocumented tenants, over 300 "illegal" trailer parks have sprung up all over eastern Coachella Valley. Their establishment can be traced back to the passing of the Farm Labor Housing Protection Act in 1992—the so-called Polanco Bill—that exempted new farm laborer housing parks from business taxes, local registration fees, conditional use permits, and zoning restrictions (Riverside County Grand Jury 2001). Intended as an emergency measure to get laborers into homes and residences, many would-be landlords never applied for the proper permits and inspections, while others simply said they were unaware that it was required. Their actions accounted for a huge increase in unregulated housing, which the county tolerated for many years before they took any action. For years the trailer parks went unnoticed, or ignored, until the winter of 1998 when several people were electrocuted from faulty wiring, fires broke out, and there were some deaths (Wilberg 1998).

Martin is a former farm laborer turned landlord, the owner of a trailer park located in a date grove just east of Mecca. He has been operating the park for 15 years, but for the first time has fallen under the scrutiny of county inspectors. There are 61 trailers on his 20 acre park, with at least 61 families living there. The population of the park rises and falls with the local harvest seasons, as tenants often allow relatives and friends to live with them. Rent is $200 per month for a small trailer and $240 for a double wide, and includes utilities. All of his residents are farm laborers who like to use the park as a base for working in local harvests and then traveling to other harvests in the Central Valley or elsewhere. Septic tanks are used for sewage but clogged pipes are a frequent nuisance. The waste runoff is directed to a small protected area on the park property, away from where children play. Even so, you can find raw sewage all over the park. It was especially this kind of violation that brought county inspectors to Martin's door with citations. An estimated cost of bringing the property up to code was $500,000, a sum that was completely out of his reach. Martin described his frustration:

I'm not a bad landlord like some other people. I try to keep this place safe, but there's only so much I can do. They wanted to close the park down and kick out all the people. That's not right; these are their homes. But then they say I have to make all these repairs. What am I supposed to do?

Martin's feelings on the matter were common during the crackdowns, as the county targeted both landlords as well as tenants.

The County's solution was to evict park residents and fine landlords, which was countered with a moratorium on any action until the courts could decide how the situation could be handled in June 1999. The actions of the county, however, unexpectedly added a new dimension to the valley's housing crisis. The eastern Coachella Valley, especially around the communities of Mecca and Oasis, is also home to multiple tracts of Native American reservations belonging to the Torres-Martinez Band of the Desert Cahuilla tribe. Since the crackdown on the illegal trailer parks, there has been a boom of farm laborer trailer parks on reservation land. The parks are becoming known not only as havens for the undocumented of the valley, but particularly as locations where Purepecha Indian farm laborers are establishing homes. Part of the allure of the reservation trailer parks is that they are inexpensive, but the most important factor is that they are located on the sovereign territory of the Torres-Martinez tribe. Reservation land is not beholden to any municipal, county, state, or federal authorities, therefore there are no raids from the
Border Patrol looking for undocumented laborers, nor are their officials from the county evicting people from their trailers.

Duro's Trailer Park, by far the largest of all parks in the eastern end of the valley, has grown immensely since the crackdown on the parks. Located on Torres-Martinez tribal land just west of Mecca, it has become the park of choice for the Purepecha, undocumented persons, and others desperate for housing. It is owned by Henry Duro, a tribal council member, and two other local business partners. I had cause to initially visit the park when I heard that a local Mecca business owner had opened up a small store there. Even then, the park was shaping up to be something big. Founded in November 1999, a vast tract of desert adjacent to the east side of Highway 195 had been cleared of bushes and leveled out; sitting on that barren lot was nothing more than 15 trailers. Tenants own their own trailers, pay rent of $200 a month with utilities included, and must leave a $100 deposit. Most of the trailers were quite old, but they were neatly aligned along freshly cut dirt streets, appearing orderly in spite of themselves. Each trailer occupies its own 15 by 25 foot lot and bears a number, contributing to the notion that this is a neighborhood. Adjacent to the park was a massive waste disposal area, filled with crumbling pieces of concrete, twisted and rusted metal beams, coils of steel wire, and all sorts of materials most dumps prohibit. Near the highway entrance was a used car lot, with a chain link fence corralling the cars in a group around a very small trailer that was the office. Next to the used car lot was the store, which was a long double-wide trailer that had been transformed into a market, complete with shelves for canned and boxed food and refrigerator doors stocked with beverages.

It would be some months before I had a chance to visit the park again and when I did it was astonishing. The park had grown to over 100 trailers, coursing with cars and trucks ambling along the dirt roads, children playing with each other, and residents making their way in and out of the shops. In addition to the used car lot and market, which had expanded to three times its original size and now boasted a taqueria (taco shop), there was now a beauty parlor, restaurant, laundromat, travel agency, and a second used car lot. The roads had sign posts, the names in honor of members of the Duro family. Some residents used their spaces to create yards, complete with grass, flowers, plants and trees. Some put up elaborate wrought iron fencing. As I made my way around the park, I saw that the rear of the park had been cleared and leveled, another area created in anticipation of more growth. With the brush gone I could see Mecca off a short distance to the east. I couldn't help but wonder if this park would continue to grow and eventually meet the edge of Mecca, becoming the newest addition to the town. Making my way back to the entrance I saw water that was collecting in pools and becoming stagnant and trash blew in the wind. "This is cheap living," said Carlos, a 35-year-old security guard for the park. "It's cheap because it's on Indian land. They don't have to fix things like they do in those other parks around here."

Madaleno, a 40-year-old harvest laborer, has had a trailer in Duro's Park since it opened in 1999. His trailer is positioned close to the entrance, something he has come to regret. "There's a lot of traffic running through here now, and they have to go right by my house!" Despite the location, Madaleno says for now he is content. "It's better than before, when I was paying the same rent to live in a room with 'five other guys over in Mecca. The patron (boss) crammed us in to make more money." He paid $1,000 for his worn-out trailer back in 1998, which was already located in another trailer park. Over there the county inspectors paid a visit and the landlord decided to shut
down the park rather than pay for the" expenses. That left the tenants scrambling for a place to live. Duro's Park had just opened, so Madaleno was one of the first to bring his trailer to the reservation. "This park had grown very quickly. There are a lot of people who are like refugees, coming from the other parks," he said. At first the park took on the characteristics of just another park for migrant laborers, where a landlord would just park a group of trailers on a portion of their land and rent them out. But over time more families began to settle. "You've seen all the children round here, right? We've got school buses that are picking up and dropping kids off now. The mothers take walks around the park with their children, visiting with friends. It's a different place from when it first opened." Madaleno shares his trailer with three other men with whom he works, spreading out the rent and living expenses enough that Madaleno is able to save more money. For the time being, he indicated that the trailer was satisfactory. He wasn't sure what his plans were for the future other than working for money. "We'll just have to wait and see," he said.

Despite the settlement of families with children and the apparent desire by some residents to make the best of their living situation, the growth of Duro's Park was not welcomed by everyone. As the park began making appearances in the local media, I inquired about people's perceptions of Duro's Park. "You know, it's a shame that people have to live like that," began Millie, a 53 year old homemaker in Mecca. "We've got no housing out here, but those types of conditions are just not right." Mario, a 41-year-old citrus foreman, was more blunt: "Not even in Mexico were we living that bad. That these guys make low wages is one thing, but this is the United States. This is not right."

The future of Duro's Park has come into question. Authorities have kept close watch on the park since it opened, conscious of the fact that it happened as a result of their housing reform campaign. Until recently they have been unable to intervene in any meaningful way against the construction and growth of the park but that is changing. Riverside County authorities have been placing pressure on the Torres-Martinez tribe to close or improve the park since it opened.

CARNICERIAS, MARKETS, AND RESTAURANTS: THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Whenever I go to Mecca, one thing that I always find striking is the vibrancy of the town. From accounts of rural California communities in the literature and the almost incidental media coverage the community receives, one would expect to find nothing there save some houses and streets. But if you go into the little markets and carnicerias (butchers), you see a swirl of activity as customers buy their favorite cuts of meat, canned products from Mexico, or purchase some staples to fatten their pantries. Commerce is not dead here, and in fact it is in much better shape and greater demand than it ever has been. At the crux of this commercial life are the small independent businesses, another example of the increasing complexity of this town. In this section I describe these businesses and their owners, and how they have developed their enterprises.

Types of Businesses

In the singular local history available for Mecca, then long-time resident Cecelia Foulkes wrote of the extent of Mecca's growth by 1985:
As of January 1985, little change has taken place. Since Mecca is an unincorporated town, there is a limited amount of business or commerce. Mecca's main source of income is agriculture. There are two packing houses for grapes, two cafes, one garage, an equipment service, a self-service laundry, a doctor, two markets, a minimart, and a new establishment (1984) with fast foods, groceries, gas, a bar, and an auto parts store, a lighting district, sewer system, fire department, U.S. Post Office, water service, public free library, trailer park, two churches, telephone exchange, fish farms, Nutritional Food Company, and an elementary school (1985:39).

Since then, some things have changed while others have not. The main source of revenue and income for the Mecca area continues to be agriculture. As for the packing sheds, both are now located outside of town. The garage had its gas pumps removed and the business turned into a carniceria (meat market). The doctor has since retired and passed away, but there are now two medical clinics. The lighting district and sewer system were sold to and are operated by the Coachella Valley Water District. The auto parts store closed and relocated to Thermal. The Nutritional Food Company is still located on the edge of town, but it was never really important to Mecca's socioeconomic base. The two churches remain foundations to the social and religious life of the community. And there is now another elementary school to handle the increase in children in the area. All of the other services described by Foulkes are still there: the U.S. Post Office is overflowing with postal boxes and there is a wait for vacancies; the Riverside County Department of Forestry station has expanded its staff to handle the greater number of fire and emergency calls they now get; and the Riverside County Library branch is in the midst of an expansion in order to handle the growing number of patrons.

Currently, Mecca has more businesses than one would expect. Adjacent to the Highway III and near to the entrance of town is the de facto town center where the majority of the businesses are located. Most prominent is Leon's Plaza, a strip mall that houses Leon's Other Place, a gas station/liquor store/deli. The L.O.P., as the locals call it, is a very popular spot for convenience foods and lunches. It is also the only location for gas in Mecca. Also in the strip mall is the Estacion de telefonos (pay telephone service), a pool hall, a clothing/gift store, and a small medical clinic. One block to the east of the strip mall is the newly refurbished Leon's Market, which also houses a tortilleria (tortilla factory) and a fast food take out window, and now the largest grocery market in Mecca. One more block to the east is the Carnicería Jiquilpan, a small market and meat counter that used to be the original location of Leon's Market. Across the street to the east is the Restaurant Aztéca and attached to the building is a small gift store. Directly across the street from the restaurant is another strip mall, housing a laundromat, the Español Video rental store, and a small thrift/gift store. Heading back west toward the highway and on the corner of Avenue 66 and Coahuila are Carnicería Mexicana and Floriana's Restaurant. A few streets away from the main business sector is a hair salon and several tire repair and sales shops. In addition to the permanent businesses are ambulant vendors who roam the streets, ringing bells and honking horns to announce their trips through the neighborhood. Typically they sell treats like paletas (popsicles), elotes (roasted corn ears), candy, and sodas.

Consumers in the Mecca area face two options when they purchase goods: they can either buy from the local businesses or travel to the larger towns of Coachella or Indio, or further to the
western valley or beyond. Purchasing patterns very among different segments of the community and have to do with personal preferences. Also, much of what determines whether or not a person shops in town or not is having access to a vehicle. Shopping for groceries, for example, is often done in both Mecca and outside of the town. There are much larger chain stores and independent markets in Coachella and Indio "that residents frequent when making regular grocery purchases. However, the smaller markets in Mecca do fulfill a direct need for most people, providing both regular sundry items along with fresh meats, fruits and vegetables, and other perishables. Some people prefer shopping at the carnicerias because they offer Mexican-style cuts of meat and imported Mexican products, things that the larger chain stores to the west are starting to offer in hopes of luring away customers.

What follows are a selection of descriptions of a few of the businesses in Mecca and their owners. The business sector in Mecca has always catered to the population which lived there; without a clientele, no business can survive. What's interesting about these examples is that they have opened at different times within the last 20 years, over the course of Mecca's transformation from a farmer to a farm laborer town. But they all specialize in selling to the resident Mexican population, be that through certain kinds of merchandise or services.

**Floriana's Restaurant**

When I walked into Mecca's oldest restaurant, I found Floriana sitting behind the low, long counter that fronted the kitchen. She was reading a magazine while a *telenovela* was playing on the TV. "You're back," she said. I sat down across from her and ordered a coke and some french fries, almost not ordering because the heat always seems to kill my appetite. She said it would be right up. As I waited a group of three teachers from Saul Martinez Elementary School came in and ordered some food to go. They chatted about the students in their classes, and the end of the year preparations they were making. Then a pair of young women came in to order some food to go. Then a young man came in, then a phone order, then yet another young man with three orders to go. Everyone ordered either the burger or tacos, the most popular items on the menu. In the midst of the activity, my order slid in front of me without arousing my attention. I was preoccupied with studying the restaurant, which appeared to have lived through several transformations and additions. Despite the structure's readily apparent age, Floriana had managed to keep the inside looking cheery. Behind the counter and on the wall were pictures of saints, several *milagros* (small prayer tokens), and an ever-burning candle to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. Several framed photos of Floriana's children and grandchildren were given a prominent position. Finally, Floriana was sitting back down in front of me. It was pretty busy, I mentioned. "It comes and it goes, but usually there are customers and that's what's important."

Born in Texas in 1952, Floriana Altiveros' mother was a homemaker and her father was in the U.S. military, but decided he was going to quit. Because of this the family fled to Mexico and lived there for the next 11 years in Chihuahua. Floriana likened it to exile; they were already U.S. citizens but now had to live outside of the country. Floriana was introduced to farm labor at the tender age of 13 in the fields of Texas. There she picked tomatoes, onions, potatoes, cucumbers, and the worst of all, cotton. "Cotton was bad because it cut up your hands and arms so bad," she explained. She was married at 19 and came to live directly in the Coachella Valley because her husband was able to get a job here working for the gas company as a meter-checker. Eventually
they would have four children and began renting a house in Mecca. Floriana took farm labor jobs in the valley, picking table grapes, lettuce, melons, onions, parsley, eggplant, and corn. In 1982 and at the age of 30 things began to change. She used to get gas all the time at the Xochimilco Market in Oasis, west of Mecca. The owner, Mr. Castelo, approached her on one occasion and asked if she would like a job working in the store and the adjacent restaurant. "I had growing kids at home and if I took that job, I could earn more money for them," she said. For Floriana, her kids are her life and the reason why she works so hard, to give them something better than what she's had. Floriana jumped at the chance to get out of the fields after 17 years of farm labor. Castelo started her at $70 a week, working twelve hours a day, six days a week. Her only day off was Sunday, so she could take her kids to church. By 1985, she was being offered another job with the competing Apple Market, which she promptly took because the daily hours were less and she earned more money at $6.25 per hour.

In 1988, Mr. Castelo got in touch with Floriana again. He was tired of running his store and restaurant and asked her if she was interested in buying it from him. Castelo knew she had no money to buy the business outright, but he was willing to work out a payment plan. However, just a few months into the agreement, they had a falling out and they mutually nullified the agreement. The prospect of owning a business didn't die with that plan. Floriana began looking for another restaurant to run. She considered buying a taqueria that used to be located in the strip mall of businesses next to the post office in Mecca, but decided against it. She turned her eye to the old cantina at the southwest corner of town. When Floriana first went in to the cantina it was filthy. It wasn't a restaurant at all, just a place where men came to drink. Floriana signed a lease with the owner and in 1988 began converting the place into a restaurant, cleaning it up, putting in a kitchen, and making all sorts of repairs, all at her own expense. She paid $600 a month, an arrangement that would last for ten years.

Floriana's landlord died in 1998 and his son took over her business affairs. He offered to sell the place to Floriana for $120,000 but she didn't have that kind of money. Floriana went to banks to try for a loan, but no bank would give her one, citing that the structure was too old and run down. Fortunately, the son couldn't find a buyer so Floriana has remained as the tenant. However, the son increased the rent to $700 a month, making it harder for Floriana to make a profit. The son has continued with the precedent of making Floriana responsible for all repairs and maintenance, an arrangement she doesn't like but one with which she is stuck. She has been able to cut the costs of some of this work by having her sons or other relatives with construction and other skills do some of the work. One of her sons is a roofer, so he put on a new roof a couple of years ago. She mentioned that she did have to pay for the covered stucco patio and a lot of plumbing to the old system.

Working at the restaurant is hard on Floriana. She is there from open to close, alone and with no one to help her. She had help before, but she suspected that her employees were stealing from her. All of her children are busy with their own lives and jobs. Sometimes her husband comes into help, but this is rare as he is working as well. What pains Floriana about this is that she is unable to leave the restaurant even on Sundays to go to church. "But," she said "I have la Virgen here, so I at least have that," pointing to her framed portrait of the la Virgen de Guadalupe on the wall behind the counter, the candle before it flickering under the torrents of air being pushed around by the creaky box fans in the comers.
Regalos Carolina

While I was living in North Shore, my mail was going to a post office box in Mecca. For me it was just one more excuse to go out, walk around Mecca, and meet people. One day I was standing outside of the post office and noticed that the little gift shop across the street was open; often, the closed sign was in the window and I figured it must have been a part-time business. I walked over to find out. I found a boy and his mother, the owner, who were busy going through a stack of papers looking for one in particular. Jovita invited me to sit down to talk, telling her son Fermin to bring in a box for her to sit on. I insisted on taking the box, but she would hear nothing of it, so I reluctantly sat in the chair.

Jovita Sanz was born in 1954 in Jiquilpan, Michoacan, to a family of seven children. Her father died when she was in her early teens and her mother was a housewife. The death of her father left the family in poverty, but Jovita managed to stay in school and finish her education. Her first job was in 1971 at age 17 with a government utility office, where she worked as a cashier. After working there for a year, she then took a job with a Bancomer branch in Jiquilpan in 1972. She started out as a teller, then quickly moved through different positions: secretary, accounting, then onto department manager. She worked there for a total of five years until 1977.

She married in 1975 into a family of merchants. Her husband opened up his own store selling abarrotes (household and convenience items), which they operated for 13 years. They had four children. In 1988 they refinanced their store, hoping to expand and grow. "It was during this time that the cardenistas came to power, and all of a sudden things were very unstable," she explained. They were unable to make their payments on the loans they took, and not even the interest could be paid. Delinquent for months, the bank decided to seize all of their assets; they lost everything, their store, their house, and their meager savings.

They decided as a family to move to the U.S., following the immigration circuit that other jiquilpefios had already established. It would be a chance to start over again. They arrived in October of 1989 to Anaheim, CA, and stayed with some cousins. Fermin was born a few months later in early 1990. The family only stayed with the cousins for several months before they moved to Mecca, where they lived in a trailer behind another cousin's house. Jovita and her husband found work in farm labor, while the children were enrolled in the schools. From 1989 to 1992 Jovita worked in grapes, doing thinning, pruning, and harvesting. In 1992 Jovita got a job through a friend over at Mirage Date Gardens in Thermal. She currently works full-time as a palmera, thinning trees, tying bunches, and harvesting the dates. When she isn't working out in the groves, she works in the packing house. She enjoys her job although the work is hard, but her mayordoma treats her crew well and looks after them.

The Sanz family moved to the Johnson Apartmynts from the cousin's trailer. In order to make ends meet, the family became very involved in the informal economy of Mecca. At first they sold sodas, candy, and other items from their apartment. Then they expanded to going to swap meets and other events in Coachella and Indio and set up stands to sell tacos. They also did this for charity for the church, selling their tacos to collect donation money for the church after masses on Sunday.
Jovita's *compadre* (co-godparent) is the owner of the small restaurant to which her store is attached. The compadre mentioned to Jovita and her daughter Carolina that he had this additional space in the structure and he wanted to do something with, perhaps turn it into a small store. Carolina wanted to start a small store there, so in 1995 they tried to do it. There was a man they knew who sold all sorts of items at swap meets, items like perfumes and housewares, so they bought his stock to sell in the store. Carolina obtained the necessary permits from the county to operate the store. The store indeed sells all sorts of items: perfumes, cosmetics, cleaning supplies, party supplies, toys, children's clothes, and religious icons. Looking over their stock indeed reminded me of the staggering amounts of different things available at the swap meets.

The store, like other aspects of life for the Sanz family, has become a family affair. Keeping the store running has been difficult because all of the family has to work, was attending school, or both. Jovita, her husband, and the children would take turns when they were available to mind the store. Many people and friends advised against opening a store like Regalos Carolina in Mecca. "They told us, 'You won't succeed here,' or 'There are not enough customers here to stay alive.' But we've stayed alive, we're still here," she said. Jovita said that they have survived in spite of this, and in fact, as Mecca has grown, they have been able to do better. There are more people living here now, and they sell more. The summers are slow, as they are for all of the businesses, but they make up for it during the table grape season and when everyone returns in September.

**Mercado Michoacana**

Businesses in Mecca seem to pop up out of nowhere at times. This is not really how it happens as there is a lot of planning involved for most entrepreneurs. One such example is the Mercado Michoacana, located just outside of Mecca in the infamous Duro's Trailer Park described above. Hearing how a new park was opening, Adelina Ojeda quickly made a deal with the park owners to open a small convenience store in the park. Adelina comes from a family of farm laborers turned merchants; the family owns the Carniceria Michoacana in Mecca. She had been waiting for an opportunity to come up to branch out and open her own business. Adelina struck a deal with her family to borrow money to cover the initial costs of setting up a store, which she pays off as a loan. By March 2000, a long trailer had been converted into a store and the doors opened to a regular throng of customers, patronizing the only market in the park.

I made many visits to the market during the time I was living in the valley. Every time I returned there was always a new addition to the merchandise, or the place had physically expanded. What started out as a small space selling chips, sodas, and candy has grown to include a walk-in cooler that runs the length of the trailer, beer sales, a meat counter, a deli counter for sandwiches and Mexican food, a dairy case, fresh produce, and a money-wiring service. Adelina talked about her business strategy: making the store the only place to stop for everything you need. "If people come into your store and you have everything they need, then they won't go somewhere else. Even if they only buy one thing on one day, they might buy other things on another day," she explained.

I would always find Adelina behind the register helping customers.
I usually sat on a stool behind the counter and just watched customers come and go while we talked. The store hours are from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week; on Saturdays they are open until 11 p.m. She spends most of her time at the store. Adelina has only two employees working for her and occasionally will bring in others when there are holidays and other busy times of the year, but she keeps the numbers low and to people she knows she can trust. Adelina gets some help from her son Rafael, who is in middle school now. He runs the register, under the eye of another employee for about two hours on weekdays. This gives Adelina time to attend to her other business, a tax preparation service, which she runs out of the rear of her family's market in Mecca.

Adelina said that her profit margin for the store is very slim. She must pay taxes on most items, except things like fresh food and grocery items. Most of the merchandise in her store is taxable, things one would find in a convenience store: snacks, sodas, sundry items, and beer. Beer is a good seller but brings its own set of problems. "It can be bad because many men who buy my beer like to sit outside my store and drink it. The women who come by don't want to come in if they see a bunch of guys hanging out and drinking," she explained. Adelina usually tells them to move on, and they do so without a fuss or hard feelings. Occasionally, someone gets belligerent and she sanctions them from buying at her store. "I tell them they cannot buy beer from me for a week. Then they come in and try to buy it and I tell them to come back next week. They look at me and know they cannot buy it, so they just leave. They come back the next week and then I say it's okay again."

As we sat behind the counter, customers marching in and out, we talked about the future of her business. "I have dreams and I'm going to try and make them come true," she said. Adelina told me that she has a 15-year lease on the store in Duro's, but she is thinking of rebuilding the store from scratch. The store is presently just a trailer that has been added onto extensively; it was never meant to be a commercial space. "It really needs to be torn down. The air conditioning is terrible and there is no room left to grow." She has an uncle who works in construction, and through him she could get a good deal. If she had to go to a regular contractor it would be too expensive. She took a pen and my notepad and sketched out the dimensions of her future store, drawing a large rectangle and inside that a smaller one off to one side. "Here would be my taqueria, where the ladies would make the tortillas by hand, and here would be the comal (griddle)," she said pointing to the smaller rectangle. There would also be tables for people to sit and eat inside. She then drew lines to indicate floor to ceiling refrigerators along one long side of the rectangle, and then islands of shelving out in the middle of the rectangle. Another small box was drawn in another comer for a desk or booth for the money wiring service. She is three years into the lease and she figures it could take about two months to tear it down her present store and rebuild it. She wants to do this soon, maybe even in the next month or she will have to wait until next summer. Summer would bean ideal time because people leave the valley and business would be slow. Because it's on the reservation, there are no inspections and county people to deal with, so the construction could be done rapidly. I asked her how long it would take her to get the money for something like this saved, and she replied that she already had it. "Why should I continue to use and sink more money into this limited store when I can build me the store that I really want and still enjoy it for another 12 years?" she asked.

In a town of farm laborers, there is more than simply farm labor. Former laborers and farm
laboring families have crossed that unbridgeable gulf between labor and ownership. In the cases noted above, the growth of the towns and community has resulted in a community that is more dynamic and varied than ever. Responding to niches for entrepreneurial activities, the business owners above have made forays into independent small business and further enriched the socioeconomic context of the Mecca.

Mecca and the area it encompasses is a rapidly growing region, fueled by the re-intensification of agricultural practices and settlement of farm laborers. Mecca has been a target destination for many decades, but as the impetus for settling has escalated in recent years, the surrounding hinterlands are also being settled as all available space gets snatched up. Nothing illustrates this better than the development of North Shore as a satellite settlement to Mecca. In the past, farm laborers were often relegated to life outside of final communities and their social spheres. Currently farm laborers are the residents of these same communities and are creating the social space for new spheres of interaction and participation. And if we examine the case studies presented in this chapter, of both settlement and the non-farm business sector, it is safe to say that there is significant complexity across the population to refute the notion that farm laborers and rural communities in which they reside are merely "bedroom" communities. They are neither sites of socioeconomic homogeneity nor are they hotbeds of spectacular and untrammeled prosperity for all who live there; the truth lies somewhere between the two.

The owner of the factory was active on the Mecca Civic Council years ago, and was part of a council that was instrumental in bringing many improvements to the town, but the factory was never a significant site of employment for Mecca residents. Moreover, tax revenues generated by the business went to the County, not directly to the town.