

## PEÑON DE LOS BAÑOS

by Anita Blue Graham

2007 student intern

“So, what exactly are you guys doing here?” Martín asked me. He is one of only two 18-year-old boys that I met during my two-week stay in Peñón de los Baños. In response to his question, I explained that we were seven students – two Mexicans, two Cubans, and three gringos – sent by the Center for Global Justice to find out what we could about the small community.

“But why do they want to know about us?”

“The Center would like to help Peñón to start a cooperative for growing organic tomatoes in a greenhouse. What do you think about that?”

Martín didn’t want to offend me by disagreeing, but he did have some objections to the idea. “Are you sure people here would work together? I mean, in society people always disagree and here people would rather work for themselves and their families, don’t you think? They worry that they won’t get a big enough piece of the pie for the work they do.”

“But maybe if it is the only way for them to keep their lands in the face of big agribusiness...”



*Anita Graham Blue  
with friends in Peñon de los Baños.*

PEÑON DE LOS BAÑOS is a small rural community set on *ejido* lands near the town of Los Rodriguez. *Ejido* lands are owned by an entire community and originally could not be sold. Each family has its own plot, which is tended individually, and its yield belongs to the family. *Ejidors* are generally not collectively worked. One thing that makes Peñón different from many other ejidos is that the inhabitants are not indigenous and did not originally live in the Municipality San Miguel de Allende. Most of the residents transplanted from Salva Tierra or other parts of southern Guanajuato thirty to forty years ago. The population is between three or four hundred inhabitants, constituting about seventy families. Today, their primary economic activities are the cultivation of beans and corn for sale and milk from dairy cows. The livestock is fed with oats and alfalfa also grown in the family plots.

In terms of physical set-up, the town consists of a block of houses and a small church. Surrounding the houses are the corrals in which each family individually cares for its cows or bulls. Outside of this tiny population center are the plots of land. A few houses are scattered along the road, apparently where children of community members have set up residence on their parent’s land. All around Peñón are

lands that were once ejidos, but they have been sold to a single private owner, Javier Usabiaga, the former Secretary of Agriculture in the Fox administration.

This is where Peñón has hope because they have not decided to sell their lands. Due to an amendment to the Mexican Constitution by President Salinas, ejido communities can now choose to privatize the lands, which can then be sold. In Peñón, the forty landholding families are at least conscious that selling their lands would convert them from landholders to employees of Usabiaga, or force them to take their chances in the city. The people we talked to said that they would hold onto their lands because it is the patrimony that they will leave to their children.

Unfortunately, Peñón is facing some serious problems in its daily life and its long-term survival. First of all, the fact that the corrals are located *in* the town poses worrisome health risks. These risks are aggravated because manure is rarely, and in some cases never, removed from the corrals. The animals live either on top of mounds of their own waste or wading in thigh-deep ponds of it. The manure breeds bacteria and parasites, among them varieties that invade the cow's hoof, affecting her strength and milk production. Because the manure leaks into the streets with each rain, it is tracked into houses. The dogs roll in it. One interviewee observed that children who play in the dirt often have problems with skin rashes. Another immediately noticeable effect is the profusion of flies. The little black creatures buzz in every part of the rancho, walking on animals, food, and people's faces.

Why are the stables not cleaned? The main reason given was that hauling heavy mounds of manure requires young bodies. But the young bodies of Peñón are in Houston, and other U.S. cities. This does not only affect the cows' living conditions, but also the cultivation of the fields because youthful workers are scarce.

Whether or not the workers could be paid, if present, is a question raised by another problem: cost vs. profit. The cost for the ejidatarios to plant, tend, and harvest their crop grows each year. Certified seeds must be bought, muscling native seeds out of the cycle and constituting an expense to the farmer that could be avoided if he could save his own seeds. Gasoline for machinery becomes more expensive every week. Added to these costs are the expenses of fertilizers and electricity to run the irrigation wells.

All of these steep prices are accentuated by the low prices paid for the products of Peñón. A kilogram of beans sells for ten pesos at the market in Los Rodriguez or San Miguel de Allende. Families sell their milk for anywhere from 2.8 pesos to 3.2 pesos per liter. According to one Peñón resident, the government regulates the prices that can be charged for their products because they are basic necessities in the Mexican diet. These prices sometimes do not cover the price of operation, making it very difficult to support a family or have any hope of advancement.

In the case of an emergency or an illness, the situation is even more impossible. Diabetes and anemia are common ailments in the community. Few preventative measures are well-known, much less followed. But when the effects of the diseases become serious, residents must make huge sacrifices to compensate for the costs.

The mother in the family that I stayed with fell ill with anemia about three years ago. It cost 6,000 pesos just for the initial analysis to diagnose her. The family had to sell a cow. Unfortunately, she needed to take medicine and have more studies done. So, her husband headed north on a bus, crying because he didn't know if he would see his wife alive again.

As can be seen in many communities throughout Mexico and Central America, the men between eighteen and forty are almost completely absent from Peñón. Generally, the heads of house do not leave, but the adolescents all do. The fact that so many Peñón natives have migrated to the United States is both a problem and a solution. Remittances keep the agriculture and dairy endeavors afloat,

and they can be a source of a little extra money to buy a tractor or open a tiny store. Immigration also provides an option in the face of an emergency, as in the case of my host family. At the moment, there are about one hundred to two hundred people from Peñón in the U.S., depending on who you ask. Most work in construction in Houston, though others are sprinkled throughout the county. According to a 16-year-old who plans on leaving next year, the people from Peñón already in the U.S. pay the coyote for young boys aspiring to get there. They also help newcomers to find jobs because some who have been there for a while are apparently supervisors.

However, this doesn't mean that the trip is easy; most immigrants walk through the Texan desert for up to eight days. When the father of my host family arrived, his feet were two big blisters. And although he started work only days later, after a month his feet were still swollen. Once in the U.S., the men work excessively in questionable conditions and with little time to rest. One of the issues that was mentioned numerous times was that of fidelity. Men often have a second romantic relationship or even a second family while in the north. On the other hand, people talk if a woman gets a ride from a man into Los Rodriguez while her husband is away. Another issue is that of the grandchildren. Although Peñón natives usually can't return easily to visit their parents and family, if they have children born in the United States the children can cross to visit their grandparents. This means that there is a generation gap in family relationships as well as in the labor force.

When the men go away, their wives or daughters must take over their responsibilities in tending to the fields and the livestock. Suddenly the women have the double role of outdoor laborer and homemaker. However, it is still generally looked down upon for a woman to work outside of the community, in a salary job in Los Rodriguez, for example. One woman expressed her frustration that she has to carefully spend what her husband sends from the States, whereas if she worked too, then she could save what he sends her for a future project. The taboos against women working differ from family to family. It seems that, in some families at least, young unmarried girls can work. A few young women work in factories around San Miguel de Allende, catching the bus around 5 a.m. and returning at 5 p.m.

The gravest problem standing in the way of a cooperative project is that of community division. There are members of the tiny community who, even though they have to shop at the same miniature convenience stores, do not speak to each other. They also don't speak about the problems that have caused these rifts. The only information that I was able to come away with was that these differences stem from irreconcilable political disagreements (PAN won in the community last year). "Different community members belong to different political parties," was the answer we were given when asking directly about hostilities. However, I have a hunch that the problems are deeper and more personal.

As a final challenge to a cooperative, the history of the community includes several attempts at collective production. Some of the initiatives have been informal agreements within families, but these have ended with disastrous results. In one case, a dissatisfied brother moved his family out of the community because of a dispute about the collective operation. As Martín expressed above, many people are skeptical about the plausibility of getting along and working things out in a group. There are also worries about division of labor and profits; families would rather work individually to ensure that they would be the recipients of all earnings due to them. Martín mentioned that envy is a dividing element among the community members.

However, in light of my studies of globalization as an intern with the Center, I think that joining together is the only chance Peñón stands against forces like Usiabiaga. The land pirate would be happy to exterminate the way of life in Peñón and can do so easily as long as each family continues to struggle individually. But if the town could achieve economic stability and especially community unity, they would constitute a more solid resistance.

The main solution to the economic problems in Peñón has been migration to the north. This provides an

inflow of capital independent to the falling prices of corn and milk. It is a sort of subsidy to agriculture with a very high human cost. The youth of Peñón, especially young men, see very little future in Peñón. They have the mentality that the good life will be in the U.S. So, they leave and the money they send back allows farming and livestock operations to hold on. The stories they send back, whether of a new car or of employer abuses, all add to the mystery and lure of the north.

But while this situation is perhaps the only option at this point for the survival of the community, in the long-term it will lead to its evaporation. There is no up-coming generation in Peñón. If the young people don't come back, and the children continue to grow up and leave, the town will shrivel up in a matter of forty years.

The solutions for the health problems are less noticeable and less affective. Curtains on the doors to keep the flies out, a car that comes to town every week or two with a loudspeaker announcing a miracle tonic to cure everything from arthritis to anxiety, a "deep, deep well for drinking water" far from contamination...hopefully. From what I saw in the community, they put up with the manure and other unsanitary conditions, dealing with the health effects rather than preventing them.

The Center for Global Justice's proposed cooperative to assist the community would face several very complicated challenges. However, I believe that with sufficient attention and support, it would be possible for it to work. Half of the key would be to unite a group and form a successful cooperative that other community members could see. But there would also need to be simultaneous education aimed at creating the sense of community that is currently lacking within this collection of families. The residents not willing to join in the initial cooperative endeavor might feel differently after seeing its success. But the important thing would be to ensure that they felt inspired to join, rather than feeling jealous.

As I said before, I feel that the rifts in the community may run deeper than political variances. Any initiative would have to be handled very carefully so that no particular family would feel excluded or unwelcome. Also, to lessen the hesitancy left by the past attempts of cooperative production, the participants would have to understand the legal rights and responsibilities associated with an official cooperative.

For me, the great hope of the cooperative would be that it could create a new source of income that would provide another option for the young people. For that reason, it would be wonderful to incorporate the few adolescents remaining in Peñón from the beginning. In that way, they will feel that the project also belongs to them and is not just another old-person endeavor, meaning that their only future lies in the north. A second hope, though it may be a long shot, is that a successful project might bring people back. One gentleman said that his oldest son isn't happy in the U.S. anymore, after living there for many years and starting a family. He would like to come back, but he doesn't because there is no work for him in Peñón. If a cooperative could provide work, would he come back?

Peñón de los Baños is a community facing both outside pressures and internal challenges. It may be destined to vanish, its residents scattered in Mexican cities and the U.S., converted to mere cogs of mass production. Nevertheless, the people I met there are bright and hard-working, and they don't want to lose their home. I believe that with the right tools, possibly provided by the Center for Global Justice, this community could become a model for other ejido communities resisting the privatization of a means of survival.