

## Editorial Notebook

### In Farmingville, an American Story

#### A Clash of Culture and Economics Unfolds in an Unprepared Suburb

There is a sense of dependable sameness in the day-to-day life of some working-class suburbs. One house resembles the next. Churches fill and empty on schedule on Sundays. Hangouts hum with activity in the evenings. Neighbors know one another, sometimes for generations. In recent years, however, some of these communities have found their routines disrupted by waves of undocumented immigrants who have bypassed the cities as they look for work.

That has been the story in Farmingville, a Suffolk County community in the middle of Long Island, which, as it happens, is a perfect encampment for undocumented immigrants looking for day jobs in landscaping and masonry, or other difficult manual labor that teenagers and other residents don't want to do themselves. In the 1990's, more than 1,500 such immigrants — most of them Mexican — arrived in Farmingville, where the population was 15,000.

What began as a curiosity turned into an annoyance as workers gathered daily along roads to be picked up by contractors. Residents began to complain that homes in their midst had effectively been turned into dormitories by dozens of workers who could not otherwise afford housing. After two Mexican workers were severely beaten by two young white men in the summer of 2000, two filmmakers, Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini, turned on their cameras.

Their documentary, "Farmingville," recently won a

special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival and will be shown on PBS stations in June. It has already made an impact on the island and on its namesake town in particular. Paul Tonna, a county legislator who displays a sensitivity to immigrant issues in the film, says the film has forced a kind of community introspection. Brian Foley, a legislator who tried to establish an off-the-street hiring site for the workers, says that with the notable exception of the firebombing of a Mexican family's home last year, local reports of immigrant-related trouble have quieted, at least for the moment.

Mr. Sandoval and Ms. Tambini say their goal was to produce an honest and balanced piece by listening to all sides. When a local opponent of the workers welcomes extremists from California and elsewhere, the ensuing anti-immigrant rally is long on chest-pounding speeches that echo, almost literally, before a largely empty hall. But quieter moments resonate with humanity. The workers have an almost stoic sense of purpose as they go about stomach-churning and dangerous jobs, including cleaning a crawl space strewn with toxic trash. One tells of hearing a small child he left behind in Mexico speak for the first time — by telephone. Others try to collect from a cheating contractor. A resident named Louise rejects being labeled a racist as she gives a heartfelt and reasoned assessment of what she sees as a diminished quality of life since the workers arrived. All of this is presented in *vérité* style, unvarnished by little beyond the voices of the subjects.

A film cannot solve the problems of illegal immigration, nor does it try to. But "Farmingville" is a primer for anyone — whether lawmaker or citizen — who cares to better understand the usually unseen cost of America's appetite for cheap labor. CAROLYN CURIEL

## LONG ISLAND Newsday

### Farmingville, the Movie

*It captures the fear and anger when immigrants unexpectedly move into a NY suburb.*

There really is a difference between the forest and the trees. The distinction is as clear as the way the intimacy of an insider differs from the insight of an outsider. As clear as information severed from context, action loosed from consequence.

Such observations spring to mind when viewing the film "Farmingville," which, for 78 minutes, serves up the incredibly strange sensation of peeping into your own bedroom through a crack in the blinds.

The documentary film, which is entered into the competition to appear at the Sundance Film Festival, examines a national phenomenon — the arrival in unprepared communities across the United States of waves of workers from Mexico — using the Long Island suburban hamlet of Farmingville as the case study.

The film, brainchild of Amagansett filmmaker Carlos Sandoval, chronicles Farmingville's attempts to deal with Mexican men, many in the United States illegally, who seemed to appear one year by the hundreds to cram into single-family housing and line busy streets daily, looking for landscaping and construction jobs.

The story is painfully familiar: Immigrants flood Farmingville. Residents seek help from local elected officials, whose capacity to help is

restrained by the reality that immigration issues must be handled by the federal government, which can't be bothered to deal with Farmingville. The community splits over proposed, and loudly defeated, legislation to create a hiring hall that would get the men off the streets. The film captures fear and anger on all sides. And the camera captures the racism and the violence that occurred when two Mexican workers were lured from Farmingville with a promise of work — and then beaten.

The two men convicted in the assault are villains, no doubt. But the film has heroes too, among them Suffolk County legislators Paul Tonna and Brian Foley. And then there are residents, including a woman identified as Louise, who state their case about what is happening in their community and why it is wrong.

Still, it's one thing to know from local newspaper and television reports what happened in Farmingville; another to witness it from the intimacy of a documentary. What becomes clear is that the tension captured on camera in 2001 exists to this day.

At its best, the film is a stinging indictment of what happens in suburban communities because of the U.S. government's failure to craft policies to handle the historic influx of immi-

grants who enter the county illegally to work in a growing underground economy.

It is painful to watch, however, because it offers up a hard picture of what happened on Long Island when so many local leaders hid behind the U.S. government's inexcusable inaction, rather than embracing their own responsibility to find a workable way to protect the community's health and welfare.

"Farmingville" unflinchingly portrays the worst of what can happen when the so-called border wars spread to suburbia. It also demonstrates what happens when politicians opt to run rather than lead. It should become required viewing for every decision-maker and local official in the State of New York.