

GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

CONCRETE-BLOCK FARMERS IN MEXICO*

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In 1989 Augustín was a campesino who grew potatoes, fava beans, and corn on 2 hectares of land on the slopes of the Cofre de Perote in the highlands of central Veracruz State, Mexico.¹ He also raised goats, sheep, and chickens. He learned to farm from his father and hoped that his sons would learn to farm from him. Life changed, however, in 1995, when farming could no longer sustain his growing family. In order to make more money, he began to work for one of the many concrete-block producers in the nearby Perote Valley. Today Augustín still grows some corn and raises a few goats, but only during the afternoons and on weekends. His sons help, but at fourteen and seventeen, they too spend most of their time making blocks.

The manufacture of concrete blocks is hard work. Workers wake up at 2:30 A.M., arrive at work by 3:00 A.M., break for a half-hour at 10:00 A.M., finish work around 2:00 P.M., and arrive home by 3:00 P.M. Pay is not hourly, but based on piecework. Workers are constantly moving: lifting, shoveling, carting, stacking, and mixing (Figure 1). Work is also loud. The vibrating machines that compress blocks reach near-Harley Davidson decibel levels. No small talk, no conversations about football pass the time. It is dusty, too: cement dust, aggregate dust, dust from the road, and dust swirling from the back of dump trucks. Consequently, making blocks is not only tiring and noisy but also lonely, grimy, and cold at 2,500 meters above sea level. Despite these difficulties, minimally educated farmers caught in a seventeen-year-long agricultural price slump have few other options. For most, making concrete blocks here is certainly better than the alternative: temporarily migrating to work elsewhere—whether to the United States or, more likely, to a big city such as Veracruz, Puebla, or Mexico City.

The concrete blocks consist of locally mined lightweight aggregates, Portland cement, and water. It was the aggregate or construction material mining that originally attracted me to central Veracruz to conduct my dissertation research. Central Veracruz is part of the Mexican Volcanic Belt, where volcanic materials have been used as building materials since prehistoric times (West 1964). The Los Humeros Volcanic Center, in the eastern portion of the Volcanic Belt (Figure 2), is an imposing feature on the landscape. It is a large caldera with an array of silica-rich eruptive deposits in a region dominated by Pico de Orizaba, Cofre de Perote, and other andes-

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