

IMPACTS OF TRANSPORTATION CHANGES ON THE WOODWORKING INDUSTRY OF MEXICO'S PURÉPECHA REGION

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ABSTRACT. The Purépecha region of Michoacán State, in west-central Mexico, has a strong tradition of craft production, especially wooden items. Transportation improvements in the region since the mid-twentieth century have led to a higher level of integration of the regional economy, yet access to the broader Mexican market remains limited. Towns throughout the region have experienced substantial changes in the types of crafts produced, the extent of their local and external markets, and the location of craft production. Transportation improvements have, in part, led to agglomeration economies and a resultant contraction in the number of different types and an increase in the volume of the crafts produced. Market changes have led to the proliferation of craft storefronts in towns with higher levels of accessibility. Conversely, remote towns still rely heavily on distributors and have not been able to expand their markets. As a result, the region has seen the development of a two-tiered system whereby towns with increased accessibility have viable craft industries and towns with limited accessibility struggle with stagnant craft industries. *Keywords:* Michoacán, Mexico, Purépecha region, road network, transportation, wooden crafts.

During the 1940s and 1950s a series of cultural geographical studies examined village life in the Purépecha region of northwestern Michoacán, a part of Mexico that was geographically remote and both culturally and economically insular (Brand 1943; Beals 1946; Foster 1948; West 1948; Stanislawski 1950). Movement in the region was difficult, hampered by the rugged topography and lack of infrastructure. In the late 1940s, as those studies were being conducted, the situation began to change—first with the completion of the highway connecting Guadalajara and Mexico City and then, shortly thereafter, by the construction of an extension highway running through the Purépecha region to the Pacific coast. By the 1970s most of the larger settlements had been connected by two-lane blacktop roads, and the more remote settlements were linked by improved dirt roads. Bus service was established in the region between the larger towns (for example, Uruapan and Zamora) and the major urban centers of Guadalajara, Morelia, and Mexico City and was eventually extended to the smaller settlements. These transportation improvements have led to a higher level of integration of the regional economy with the broader Mexican economy, but integration has come at a price.

The Purépecha region has a strong tradition of craft production, and much of what was locally produced was locally consumed. As connectivity to the rest of Michoacán increased, less expensive and/or higher-quality products manufactured outside the region were substituted for locally produced crafts. In response to this influx of external goods, towns throughout the region experienced substantial

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