

After NAFTA: *An Unexpected Development*

For Immediate Release

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A recent article in the American Geographical Society's GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW (GR) finds that an important Mexican manufacturing sector – in serious trouble before the advent of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994 – is making a surprising comeback despite experts' predictions that NAFTA would add to its woes.

The industry, known as "Muebles Rusticos" roughly translated as "authentic furniture" defied such predictions, substantially increased exports to the United States and benefited Mexico's Muebles Rusticos manufacturers, a number of well-known retailers in the U.S. and Europe and thrifty U.S. and European consumers with a good eye for 'authentic' furniture.

Dr. John Harner, author of the article entitled, "Muebles Rusticos in Mexico and the United States" and a professor of geography at Colorado University points out how serious the decline was in Mexico's furniture industry prior to January 1, 1994, the date NAFTA went into effect. Sixty five percent of Mexico's furniture makers had already closed up shop and, with money tight in Mexico and cheap furniture imports coming into the country from the United States, things were indeed dire.

But fashion stepped in and provided an unexpected boost. A desire for the 'crafted look' and the popularity of Southwestern design in the United States had major retail chains and their customers looking south of the border.

Dr. Harner's article provides an in-depth explanation of all the factors that contributed to the upsurge. For one, many of Mexico's Muebles Rusticos manufacturers are in the small to mid-range size and therefore can be very responsive to market demands, redesigning as customers request alterations in styles.

Secondly, each of the industry's four major geographic centers in Mexico (there are many cities with viable operations) have been able to link up with certain retailers and markets. For example, the furniture that is made in Chipilo, Puebla is sold in Pier 1, Pottery Barn, Macy's and J.C. Penney while that made in San Pedro Tultepec, Mexico is more likely to find its way to markets in Spain.

According to Dr. Harner, the future also seems bright: the workmanship is good, the designs are compelling, the prices are right and the export networks are firmly in place.

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The American Geographical Society was established in 1851 and is the oldest national geographical organization in the United States. Its more than 600 members worldwide are professional geographers engaged in education and industry and cover the broad range of geographic disciplines from agricultural geography to economic geography to medical geography to zoological geography – and more. In addition to the Geographical Review (GR), the Society also publishes Focus on Geography, a magazine that helps educators raise the level of geographic awareness in schools and institutions throughout America and the world.

The Society's website is www.amergeog.org.

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