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The Anti-Uber

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN JUNE 17, 2017

HURON, CALIF. — Carmen Lopez, a retired farmworker, keeps a Bible on the back seat of her silver 2003 Honda and crochet hooks and a Spanish-language potboiler in her purse. In her line of work, she waits a lot.

In this isolated agricultural community of 7,000 in the Central Valley, one of the state’s poorest cities and a place where nearly a quarter of households don’t have cars, Mrs. Lopez works as a “raitera” — driving people to the doctor’s office, the courthouse and other places found only in Fresno, 52 miles away. She ferries asthmatic children and women who have overdosed on prescription pills to the hospital, and students who have missed the bus to the high school in another town. She once delivered a baby in her car, which has covered 194,000 miles and counting.

Huron’s mayor, Rey León, thinks of the Latino tradition of rural ride sharing as “indigenous Ubers” and has plans to formalize the service. One of seven raiteras in town, Mrs. Lopez now works in exchange for gas money, lunch at a local buffet or taqueria, and the pleasure of some company and conversation. Passengers who can afford it pay \$0.50 a mile.

Last week, the founder of the country’s most famous ride-sharing start-up, Uber, agreed to take a leave of absence. The company, valued at an estimated \$68 billion, has been tripping over itself in a series of disasters, including allegations of

sexual harassment and the exposure of an app cooked up to trick regulators. But anyone who thinks that the future of ride sharing is threatened by Silicon Valley's misbehavior should look elsewhere, to some of the most isolated parts of America, where intrepid networks of volunteers and entrepreneurs are making it possible for their neighbors to get around.

The indigenous Ubers are a must in Huron, a predominantly Latino city ringed by garlic and tomato fields. There are no real Ubers here; few could afford them anyway. The lone county-operated bus takes nearly three hours to get to Fresno, making 16 stops at even tinier locales like Raisin City (population 380) before turning around four hours later and heading back. A round-trip ticket costs \$9.

Once called Knife Fight City and still plagued by gang violence, Huron seems like an unlikely incubator for renegade transportation ideas. But starting this fall, the city will provide two electric vehicles for use by Mrs. Lopez and others, part of a project called Green Raiteros that is supported by Valley LEAP, a nonprofit Mr. León founded. It will employ a longtime raitera as a dispatcher — riders will need only a phone number, no app necessary — and pay drivers a small amount based on the miles they travel. A flotilla of charging stations will open next to pistachio and almond groves on the roads to Fresno.

The California Public Utilities Commission approved \$519,000 to build the stations, and more funding will probably come from a novel policy that sets aside 35 percent of the state's cap-and-trade auction dollars for clean energy in poor communities. The law is intended to wrestle "EVs" away from "their boutique-ish environment," said Kevin de León, the state senator who sponsored the bill. "If the market is left to its own devices, it will not correct the inequities that exist," he said.

Green Raiteros and Van y Vienan ("they come and go"), a shared electric van that, starting this summer, will connect nearby tiny Cantua Creek and El Porvenir — twin communities separated by a spine-rattling road — are the latest examples of a movement to democratize ride sharing as a solution to rural isolation. The goal is to lower transportation costs, provide a living wage for drivers and reduce pollution,

country's worst. Those who have driven the Central Valley's Highway 99 have probably seen the white scrim that often obscures the Sierra Nevada, a nasty blend of pollutants from tractor-trailers, farm equipment, pesticides and more.

More broadly, "people in rural communities really get social capital," said Katherine Freund, founder of ITN America, a nonprofit network of more than 700 drivers across the country, most of them volunteers, who give rides to seniors and the visually impaired.

Huron has no movie theater, no newspaper, no pharmacy, and the main highway is impassable in heavy rains. As in many rural towns, increased consolidation — regional schools, hospitals, courthouses and malls — "makes the transportation element more vexing," said Scott Bogren, the executive director of Community Transportation Association of America.

In Cantua Creek, there is only one bus: the school bus. "The lack of transit is a huge obstacle to economic opportunity," said Phoebe Seaton, a co-director of the nonprofit Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, which is working with residents on the new electric van. "It affects access to employment, health services, education and healthy food."

Silvia Mora, a 52-year-old case manager for a social services agency in Huron, had no car in the 1990s when her baby Minerva, now a 26-year-old teacher, became seriously ill and had to be airlifted to Valley Children's Hospital in Madera, 62 miles away. Mrs. Mora had to scrounge for a ride.

Now Mrs. Mora spends one day a week volunteering as a raitera; she recently drove a victim of domestic violence to the Mexican consulate in Fresno to get a passport so that she could apply for a special visa for crime victims. "I tell myself, if I can help this person, why not?" she said from behind the wheel, a crystal angel hanging from her rearview mirror.

The Central Valley isn't the only place where grass-roots models are flourishing. In Nebraska, Ohio and South Dakota, drivers for a start-up called Liberty Mobility

services agencies pay a monthly fee to request rides for clients through an “enterprise portal.” Valerie Lefler, the start-up’s executive, recruits drivers at the local Lions and Rotary Clubs. “Those are the drivers who are going to get out of the car to help you into the hospital and find your doctor,” she said.

In Watertown, N.Y., about 30 miles from the Canadian border, the 25-year-old Volunteer Transportation Center has 250 drivers covering a three-county area the approximate size of Connecticut. Charlie Lehman, a 75-year-old retired teacher, frequently takes people in wheelchairs to dialysis. He has to dodge winter whiteouts and twice totaled his car after hitting deer. The center reimburses drivers for mileage, subsidizing the operation through Medicaid and contracts with local social services agencies. “Our model is about neighbors helping neighbors, versus a side hustle,” said Samuel M. Purington, the agency’s executive director.

These rural areas have “a culture of engagement and a level of benevolence that could be galvanized to create innovative forms of mobility,” said Susan Shaheen, a co-director of the Transportation Sustainability Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. The challenge will be finding ways to make initiatives like Green Raiteros sustainable over the long haul.

Driving in Mrs. Mora’s van, past fruit-packing warehouses and palm trees, I thought about transportation as a human right, like clean air and potable water, and the best way to protect it. At a moment when autonomy is the darling of Silicon Valley, efforts like Mrs. Mora’s represent the opposite: community.

Patricia Leigh Brown, a former reporter for The New York Times, writes on culture and community from California.

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