

**We Became Mexican American:
How Our Immigrant Family Survived
to Pursue the American Dream**

By Carlos B. Gil

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Seattle, Washington**



Miguel, Guadalupe, Carlota, and Pascual (ca. 1945)

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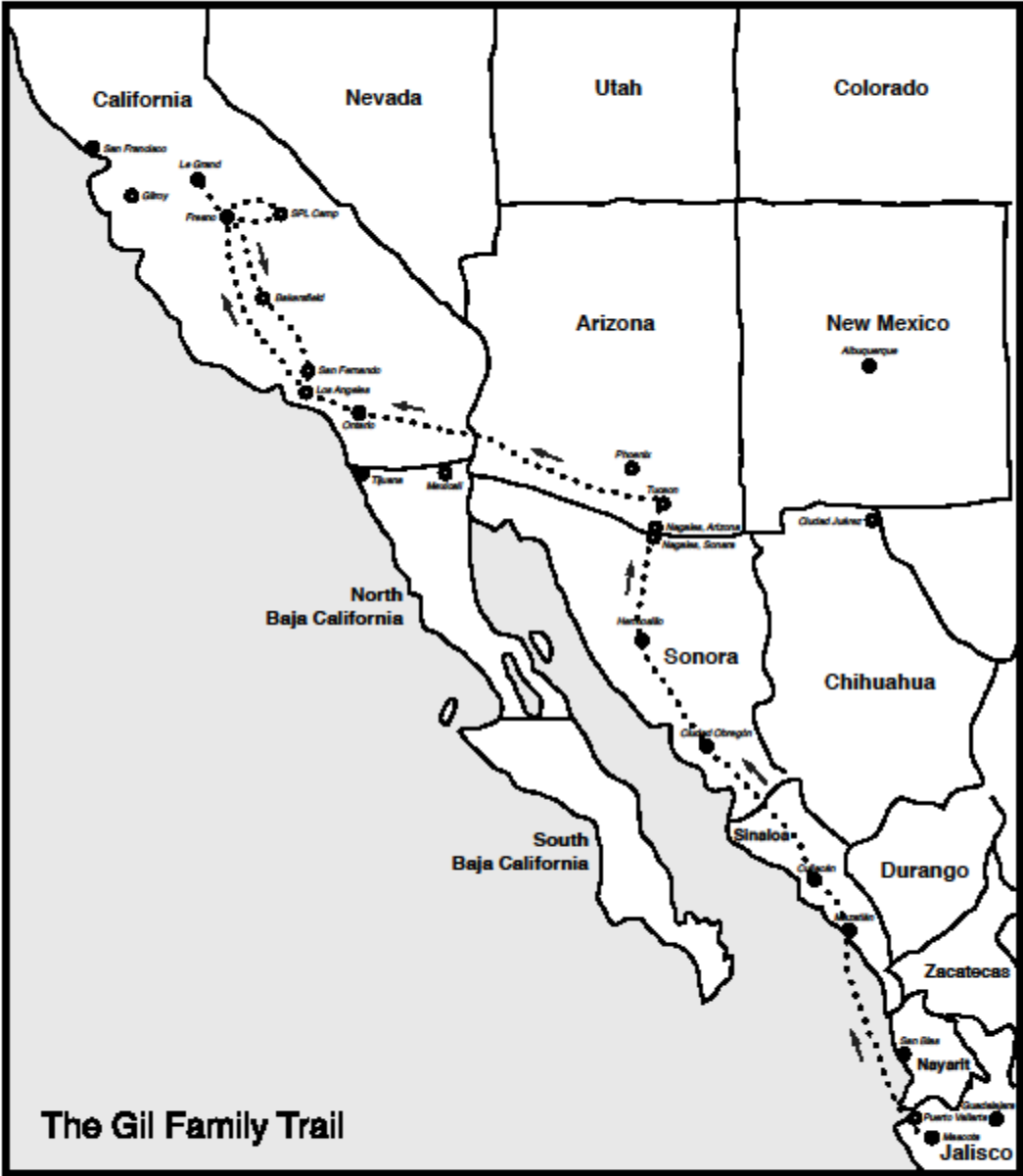


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Introduction

This is a story of my ancestors emigrating from Mexico in the first decade of the twentieth century and settling in San Fernando, California, on the northern edge of Los Angeles. In this story you, the reader, will learn that despite their unprivileged background and utter poverty, they were propelled to leave Mexico in order to keep the family together as one of them had already gone north on his own, driven by the political instability of those years. They all traveled in stages in order to earn money at each stop and thus be able to push on to the next locale, and then finally cross the border and step onto American soil.

The chronicle laid out in these pages leans on several key ideas concerning Latinos in the United States, Mexican Americans constituting the largest and oldest component. One of them is that migrating from Mexico to California began over a hundred years ago; it is not a contemporary phenomenon. Despite the fact that Mexico and the United States share a contiguous border, this exodus was no easy feat and my folks' experience bears this out quite clearly. Moreover, reaching the border and crossing over were not ends in themselves. They constituted only the beginning of a long battle to survive in America because my folks knew neither the language nor the culture and had little schooling. The two countries may be long-standing neighbors, but they are vastly different from one another and this is why immigrating to the United States is no walk in the park. Another component of my story is that my folks arrived in the United States at the worst of

economic times—the beginning of the Great Depression. The reader will discover that my ancestors managed to survive and multiply despite the staggering challenges that overcame them because of this economic turn of events.

But surviving the Depression to pursue the American dream was only the beginning. They also came face-to-face with the vexing decisions that immigrants worldwide must make: how much of the new culture to accept and how much to reject. Which cultural rules were going to guide my parents in their child-rearing? Lastly, what would the impact of all these contradictions be on my parents' and *our* lives, the lives of the children born in America?

The story in these pages may also offer an opportunity for the reader who possesses prior knowledge of the immigration experience either through personal experience or through study. If so, my chronicle offers the possibility of comparing immigration experiences, although a comparative view is not the objective here. Still, what we, the Gils,ⁱ lived through, may offer an insight into the formation of a Mexican American family, one that immigrated to the United States in the 1920s. Considering the significant growth of the Latino population in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century and the consequent arrival of countless other Mexican families, our experience may serve as a contrast with those who arrived more recently. Only the informed reader and the interested student can make the ultimate judgment on this question.

Be that as it may, the story in these pages shows that my folks experienced a fair amount of anguish when they gave up their own country and took up a new one. Their distress was at least twofold.

On the one hand, my old folks felt the sorrow of loss when they left the only home they had ever known. Informed hindsight tempts me to say that while they may have left an archaic and unfair world behind, it was still theirs nevertheless. It was all they knew despite its outdated and antiquated way of doing things even as it gave primacy to the close human bonds that defined them up to the point of their departure. Archaic or not, my ancestors were near to weeping when they left their world behind. The reader may appreciate the words that my mother used to describe the moment when she and her mother and brother took one last look at the plantation where they spent all their lives. I believe they adequately convey the sorrow that overcame them. The words were heartrending when I first heard them, and then again when I wrote them down and looked at them again. Other moments described elsewhere in part I reveal this regret to part ways with the old. My grandmother, who led the way, was older and therefore must have felt the pangs of distress once they left home more than her children. Not surprisingly, she was often described as not feeling well for many years after. These early chapters will also show that my maternal uncle Miguel left Mazatlán quite reluctantly but not his rebel brother, Pascual. My ancestors stopped at this western port on the migrant trail in order to work and save money to be able to move on to the next stopover. Miguel's feelings clearly inform us that after settling in Mazatlán he no longer desired to reach the United States.

On the other hand, the distress my ancestors felt didn't magically disappear by simply arriving in "the land of the free." All indications are that the bewilderment they must have felt once arriving in California was soon taken over by a sense of growing apprehension not only because they found themselves in a foreign environment but also because they arrived just a few

years before the American economy plummeted to the historical depths we know as the Great Depression.

In fact, a paradox arose from my family's experience during the Depression. My ancestors not only survived these years of despair, they also managed to lay down the foundation for an old-age pension of sorts. Mom and Dad found themselves scratching and saving at the cost of great pain and stress in order to buy a small home, very small, as we'll learn below. Still, no one expected it, but it became the starting point for rental income half a century later, helping Mom to assure modest retirement income.

Be that as it may, our family grew in numbers as the economy tumbled, making things quite desperate. Life became so difficult for my parents in the depth of the Depression and even afterward, that I believe my mother, at least, looked back wistfully to her time as a teen ager in Mexico. We know she reminisced more than once on the rosy days she spent strolling the *malecón* in Mazatlán, arm in arm with her friends, enraptured by the sea mist blowing in from the ocean, so different from the places where she grew up and, oh, so distant from the responsibilities of being a wife and mother of so many children in Southern California, and not having a penny to spare.

Composing the chapters for part III (Taking Root) were the most challenging for me. Seeking to understand how my family evolved after settling in San Fernando was far from easy. I concluded there were several reasons for this.

On the one hand, my mother's memory, serving as a strong support for this book, seems to have favored the details about the migrant journey itself and remembered less or chose to remember less about the years after she married and began having children. It's as if the singularity of their decision to emigrate (my mother's, my grandmother Carlota's, and my uncle Miguel's)

and the actual migration itself—to abandon everything in Mexico and throw themselves into the journey, having to face daunting tests, undergo strange experiences, and having to meet new friends—came to a close when they arrived in San Fernando, where they finally settled. It seems that in her mind the uniqueness of the immigrant experience, no matter how trying or risky, outshined the more shadowed and sobering familiarity of raising a family in a new country and in the most daunting of times. It's also fair to speculate that Mother's limited recall of the settled years may have also simply been her choice in omitting details about her married life. The fact is that her notes and reminiscences about the settled years became devoid of enthusiasm, no longer crisp, abrupt, turning even sorrowful as the reader will see. My father's experiences, memories, and feelings are absent here because he died before I was old and sensible enough to interview him; I greatly missed his involvement for this story. What I attribute to him comes via our mother, my siblings, and my own remembrances.

Taking root in another culture is a very complicated and painfully frustrating process but doing so in the middle of the Great Depression could only add to the many predicaments that my family encountered. Had my parents remained childless after they came together, their trials might not have been so difficult but launching a family in those needy years definitely raised the bar for them—they had more mouths to feed as a result and this only added to their burden.

The other complications involved in this rooting process began to emerge when we, the Gil children, started arriving and growing up. In comparison to the home country, things were done differently in Southern California, where my folks chose to settle, and one of the many variances in this anchoring process was linked to how we, as Mexican American children,

were to be raised (the term *Mexican American* didn't exist at the time). Stumbling upon this question gave me some pause when writing these chapters. I discovered that my siblings associated conflict more than I did with the way our parents raised us, especially with regard to our mother; I was especially slow in grasping this hurtful dimension of our family life. The reader will also discover that this sense of discord was raised with some forcefulness by my older siblings when I started asking certain questions. It seems I had overlooked this friction, as I explain in chapters 10 and 11—and so I had to grapple with why I had been remiss, blithely musing on books and other things.



One of the deeper insights that gradually penetrated my mind as I prepared to complete this volume is that coming to America remains a complicated experience. There is more to the idea of arriving to simply fill a job that most native-born Americans may prefer to shun. While I might have appreciated this at one level, I believe I gained a new understanding when I applied it to my own family. I concluded that taking up a new life in a completely different land is akin to reforging one's personality or one's sense of self, at least for an adult immigrant, and it demands a process that is highly complex in itself.

I am convinced the immigrant experience is worth retelling because in our case it served as an opportunity to chronicle to the younger ones how our patrimony was built up slowly and painfully. Patrimony may be defined in financial or cultural terms.

The reader may appreciate how my folks shared their hopes and joys openly along with their anguish and despair. Their remembrances are stated in simple, everyday language, confirming in my mind the universal need for

self-esteem so essential for human survival no matter how impoverished a person might be. I exult in having been able to understand this and record it opportunely not only because these were my *viejos*, my own ancestors, but because their testimony reminded me of our tendency to overlook the humanity in the people who pick our fruits and vegetables, clean our yards, and build our houses. Immigrating to the United States, or to any country for that matter, is no joyride, and the experience of all immigrants is vastly under appreciated by those of us who don't migrate.

The precursors in our family, the subjects of this story, were like most of the men and women who have walked across the southern border over the last one hundred years. They never got into politics, and they never entertained the idea of forming a labor union or even joining one, even though I believe they commanded every reason to do so. Nonetheless, I hold that their lives possess an important meaning for the rest of us. I stress this idea more than once in these pages.

The apolitical past of my ancestors alone makes this account different from most explanations about Mexicans in the United States because much of what has been written about them tends to highlight an organized struggle usually against bad Anglo farmers and/or politicians. My folks in this story fought silently on their own, rarely searching for a larger solution to their specific condition. Like most of their compatriots who crossed the border in their time and afterward, my kinfolk shunned politically oriented leaders of any skin color and set themselves down to do the job that had to be done, to begin setting down roots in a land that offered them more than what they could find back home. Go to work, do it well, and come home and rest—if you can. And, as we'll see, they found a formula that allowed them to nudge

forward despite many painful setbacks. I hope my own children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren grow to appreciate this past.



I have woven the memorials of my old folks with other sources including the remembrances of my own siblings, all of whose voices were machine-recorded. The transcriptions of these recordings in English and in Spanish served as a foundation for the content written into the pages of this book. “Tell me what you remember about Mom and Dad and about when we were all growing up!” I pleaded many times with recording tools at the ready. I also include bits and pieces of my own memory although the premier sibling recollections naturally lie with my older *hermanos*, my sister Mary, and my brother Manuel (there were eight of us, three dying before I could put my questions to them). Mary and Manuel witnessed more because they were older. I too discovered that they inevitably honed a perspective different than my own, something that surprised me at the beginning—“how could this be?” I asked myself. “How could we have different angles of memory within one closely knit family?” But, of course, my older siblings *would* have a distinct view. And so would the rest of us who were younger; we would obviously preserve fewer reminiscences of our parents, in comparison, certainly different ones, and would remember shorter spans of the years we spent inside the family circle and these would conform to our own unique position in the family, to our own special point of view, to the way we reacted individually to our parents, and so on. I was amazed at how we all remembered different things! Yet they all added up.

Here are the names of my ancestors who play as the main characters in this story:

Carlota Hernández, my grandmother,ⁱⁱ

Pascual Naranjo, my uncle and my mother's eldest half-brother,
Miguel Naranjo, my uncle and my mother's elder
half-brother,
Guadalupe (Lupe) B. Gil, my mother, and
Bernabé Gil, my father.

Except for my grandmother and father, the above-named persons served as the main sources for this book. I interviewed them in the years 1978–1979 at their places of domicile in San Fernando when I was a Ford Foundation Fellow at UCLA in the History Department, eagerly learning and anxious to apply the tools of oral history provided to me by Dr. James W. Wilkie, an appreciated mentor. It took me more than thirty years, however, to finally work on these interviews leading to the preparation of this book because I had given priority to other kinds of historical work in the interim.

Here is an introductory statement about each of my interviewees.

Carlota Hernández, my grandmother. She is one of three key individuals whose decisions helped create our Mexican American family as we know it today. Born to a family of semi-indentured peasants (*peones acasillados*) tied to a *hacienda* in west central Mexico in 1880, and a full-blooded Indian, as we like to say in the United States, she made the initial determination to leave the world she knew in order to follow her ungovernable son, Pascual, to the United States taking her other children in tow, son Miguel and daughter Guadalupe. A stalwart and self-reliant woman, she finally settled in San Fernando and established a micro business that kept her afloat economically for the rest of her life. Needless to say, she etched a durable impression on the family she left behind when she died in 1953.

Pascual Naranjo, my uncle. My *tío* (uncle) Pascual is the second of the three individuals whose actions led to the founding of our family in Southern California. Born in 1900, he is clearly our first precursor in this story because his restlessness goaded him out of his mother's adobe hut at the age of fourteen and cast him all the way to California by the time he was eighteen. He thus led the way on my mother's side of the family. He worked hard in the United States and was savvy enough to become foreman on many jobs but he returned to Mexico at age 31 at the height of the Great Depression. His return coincided with Mexico's implementing socialist-oriented policies which generated considerable controversy and turmoil. Being politically minded and supportive of the rights of workers and land reform programs he took part in various labor-related encounters that put him at risk. This encouraged him to rejoin his family in California where he took employment in construction work for most his life. He had a handful of girlfriends, but no children and he passed away in 1985 near his extended Mexican American family.

Miguel Naranjo, my uncle. No one could have been a better contrast to Pascual than his younger brother, Miguel. Although they were both *morenos* (dark-skinned) and shared the same Mexican dark eyes and straight black hair pushed back by long receding hairlines in their older years, they were complete opposites in behavior. Where one was brash and willing to confront, the other tended toward politeness and civility. In chapter 4, I surmise that my uncle Miguel's personality may have taken on a softer quality because, as the youngest in the family, he spent more time with his mother and sister than did his elder brother, and he didn't live with his silver mining father like Pascual. My *tío* Miguel founded a large family in San Fernando, and his most significant job was helping to landscape the

numerous freeways that crisscross Los Angeles. After retiring, he died in 1995.

My mother, Guadalupe B. Gil. The reader will discover in these pages that my mother occupies a prominent position. Her remembrances and her later role as a full-fledged matriarch help explain the part she plays here. First, she outlived all the persons named above by at least twelve years. Dad died quite young, relatively speaking, a loss that permitted Mom the opportunity to cast her mark over the rest of us Gils because she outlived him by fifty-one years. Her influence on us was thus great to say the least. Moreover, she wrote a lot about her life in comparison to her brothers, who could write but with difficulty even though they were first-rate conversationalists. In 1999, eight years before she took her last breath, mother sent me her slim manuscripts in the US Mail, and she wrote on the back of the envelope, “*Aquí está mi historia y mi testamento.*” (Here is my history and testament.) She was always keen on sharing with us stories about her growing up in Jalisco and her initial journey to the United States. This repeated exposé of her experience, drummed into our memories, lasted right to her final days. She valued her story so much that she actually wrote three drafts of her memoirs and numerous letters where she repeated tales of her early life. The reader will learn that, like her brothers, she received no more than two or three years of grammar school education although this didn’t stop her from writing her *memorias*. The narrative in these pages also profits from the innumerable conversations she and I held until about 1998, more or less, when her memory and mind began to weaken. She died in November 2007, a few days before her 102nd birthday.

My father, Bernabé Gil. Despite the regrettable absence of biographical information about Dad, he nevertheless constitutes the third

key person responsible for our family taking root in Southern California. We grew up knowing that Dad was born in 1899 and became an orphan in a small farming town in Michoacán. Unlike Mother, he was reluctant to share information about his early life, so she became the vehicle to pass down to us the few fragments we inherited about him. While he didn't live as long as Mother, Dad nonetheless bequeathed a clear legacy of fatherhood to us, the Gil children. He suffered a tragic accident at age thirty-eight, but this didn't weaken his responsibility to his family. Because he avoided looking back on his home country, I felt compelled to go searching for information about him half a century after his death, and I write about my experiences in appendix I, a story within a story. In the end, Dad's tale confirms that Mexican immigrant workers have been contributing their labor and lives to the United States for at least a hundred years. He died relatively young on Christmas Eve of 1955.



As stated already, some of my siblings came to my aid in helping me gather information and analyzing it. They gladly shared from their store of memories, and they also helped me fill in the gaps and fissures in the remembrances my mother and my uncles provided. Excluding the three siblings who died before I could interview them,ⁱⁱⁱ my *hermanos* who helped me are as follows:

María de Jesús Gil Valdez (Mary Gil Valdez), my eldest sister,
Manuel Gil, my eldest brother,
Soledad Gil Ruitenbach (Sally), my younger sister, and
Emily Gil Countryman (Country), the youngest of us all.

Mary and Soledad lived in Southern California at the time of this writing not far from where we all grew up. When I interviewed them, Manuel

lived at the intersection of Arizona, California, and Nevada, and Emily held residence in Southern Arizona.

A third group of interviewees provided me with background information about my father who passed away when I was seventeen. In this respect, I owe important advice from his cousin, Francisco Negrete García (my *tío* Pancho), who in his last years resided with his very large family, my cousins, in Fillmore, California—many of them Mormons. I also appreciate the critical insights I gained about my father’s family from his niece, my second cousin, Eloisa Gil Barragán, who I found when I went searching for my father’s origins. She resided in Ario de Rosales, Michoacán, when I wrote this book. Their contributions to my understanding of my father’s origins are amplified in appendix I.

Parenthetically, I offer a brief examination of us, the Gil children, who gave shape to the second generation within the Gil clan. In doing so I discuss the ways we differed from our immigrant parents especially in sensing that we were no longer Mexican like them, that we were becoming, and in the end, became Mexican American. I offer a brief assessment of the third generation on similar grounds.



My role as storyteller gave me certain privileges as it also assigned responsibilities. It required me to interlace the individual accounts of immigration and settlement into a chronology that hopefully makes sense to the reader; it also necessitated that I lend perspective to specific claims and statements made by my main interviewees in order to make them more understandable. I did this by inserting brief summaries of the larger events and trends that lay behind a statement or claim made by my interviewees. For example, in Part I my mother refers cryptically to “the revolution” that

nudged them all into emigrating from Mexico. As an honest storyteller and professional historian, I felt obliged to explain that she was referring to the great Mexican Rebellion of 1910, nearly unparalleled in world history, and so I lay down a context for the reader's fuller comprehension.

As author and narrator, it is my place to regulate language matters too. This became critical because most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, of course, and so as author, editor, narrator, and translator, I took the liberty of rendering their words and idioms into everyday American English using appropriate turns of a phrase when necessary. My old folk may have employed words or phrases that might now be antiquated, or they may have chosen a regional or colloquial term, of the many in Mexico. This obliged me to restate what they said for greater clarity and understanding. When I believed their choice of words rang in a unique, rural, and working-class sort of way I preserved the Spanish words they used, always italicizing them and including an English equivalent. This was particularly true of the male interviewees who at times preferred a rough vocabulary except my uncle Miguel, who never employed rough language that I can recall.

The technique I use to refer to my ancestors in these pages is a simple one. For the sake of clarity, I use their proper names as needed in part I. In parts II and III, wherein I discuss the time when we, Gil children, lived side by side with them, I set their proper names aside and call them by the terms we used daily at the time: Grandma, Mother or Mom, Uncle or *tío*, and Father or Dad.



So why did I really write this book? One part of the answer is that I owed it to my old folks, my interviewees. They graciously allowed me to interrogate them and they generously shared from their memories in order

to help me understand the world in which they lived. They wanted to transmit their experiences. Another reason is that I came to the realization, in my teaching career, that my family and I had in fact lived through the major periods that constitute the bullet points in any outline of Mexican American history (distinct from Mexican history) as taught in most American colleges and universities between 1970 and 2005. Our family founders were “pushed” out of Mexico because of revolutionary turmoil; they were “pulled” by the labor-hungry farmers and railroad engineers in the United States; they traveled the migrant trail, they settled in an American community before World War II, they lived through the days of repatriation; they toiled in the fields, and so on. I finally understood that we, Gil family members, could describe each phase in Mexican American history based on our own angle of vision and experience, and perhaps in this way could help others comprehend the complexity involved even when a simple working-class family is concerned.

Another part is my wish to express my admiration for the sacrifices that our *viejitos* made for us, their children, often under discouraging circumstances. In the autumn of my own life, I can look back and appreciate the gauntlets they faced and the counter responses they chose. I am willing to recognize their failures and be proud of their accomplishments at the same time, nothing more, and nothing less. Their progress may appear turtle-like to my grandchildren and grandnephews, but they too will appreciate sooner than later that moving forward an inch at a time is meritorious, especially when it is costly. My forebearers were willing to pay the price; we, their descendents, stand on their shoulders, and this is the most important reflection that I can pass on to my own lineage.

Lastly, a caveat is in order here. While the following pages draw in the themes of Latino immigration, acculturation, and assimilation, the reader needs to keep in mind that this is not an academic study. It is mostly based on the testimony of my old folks and so I keep theory to a minimum. My purpose as author is to tell you their story about crossing the United States-Mexican border for the sake of family unity, settling in Southern California, and proceeding to raise a family that became Mexican American. And while this is a chronicle of just one family, an extended one to be sure, it contains, nevertheless, many details and insights that may inform the interested reader about America's current immigration challenge which defies an easy solution. The interested reader may peruse my "Afterword," now retitled "A Word About Discrimination and Racism," as it offers some brief comments about Latinos in the United States today.

Chapter 1

Peasants One and All

(1880–1914)

**The Hacienda Santa Rosa • Registering
Grandma Carlota's Birth • Mascota in
the Late 1800s • Grandma Carlota
Growing Up • Pascual Naranjo, Her First
Son • Miguel Naranjo, Her Second Son •
Guadalupe Gil, Her Daughter • A Time of
Revolution • Pascual Gets into Trouble**

OUR TALE STARTS in the late summer of 1922 when a young woman carried a new suitcase as she hiked in the hot sun toward a large opening in a low fence. Along the wide city street they were walking on, an older female trudged behind her with thoughtful deliberation. The two were walking away from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, the younger one springing ahead, letting her strides announce her excitement about walking across that opening which marked the Mexican-US border. This gap in the fence was the entrance to the United States at Nogales, Arizona, two sister cities separated by a simple barrier and a lone guard. After traveling by train from the interior, the two women had stayed in the Mexican Nogales a handful of weeks getting their papers in order, and now they were actually crossing. They would show their papers to the guard who would give them a cursory inspection, cross the wire

barrier that represented the line separating the two countries, and they would keep going north.

The older woman was my grandmother and the younger one my mother. Grandma Carlota, age forty-two, wore a simple shift dress made of plain cotton cloth that nearly touched the ground, combined with a dark handwoven shawl wrapped around her shoulders. The wrap, also called a rebozo, contrasted with the plain pale dress in a fashion typical of Mexican peasant women of the time. Long, thick braids or *trenzas* gathered her straight black hair, adding a touch of severity to what was already a strong-looking face. My mother, Guadalupe, seventeen years old, had put on that day a wrinkly piqué skirt trimmed with a simple cotton top that complimented her slightly fuller body. A pair of dark boots buttoned up on the side sharply accented her outfit. Miguel, one of mother's two older brothers, had already gone ahead crossing the border impatiently a few days earlier without documents. The three of them were eager to join Carlota's eldest son, Pascual, who was already working somewhere in a place called California. These four individuals, plus my father who entered the United States separately, comprise the immigrants in our family, and, as we can see, they arrived on foot from Mexico.

While my mother, the eager stepping teenager, might have been wearing new clothes packed inside a recently purchased suitcase, they didn't have too much else to their name. They walked across the border because they owned no automobile and could not afford to hire a taxi, having already spent a big part of their savings on their simple suitcases and their new clothes. What little money they possessed they carried in cash as they held no credit cards, of course, and retained no bank accounts. We'll learn later that they didn't pay for their train tickets in order to ride to Nogales all the

way from the port city of Mazatlán in the south. In any case, they were walking onto American soil facing many challenges. Not only did they not speak the language, they also didn't know anyone locally, and they were running out of money with no idea of how to replenish the little they had.

One of the purposes of this story is to lay out my family's Mexican origins. So, in order to do this, we need to look back a few years in order to learn what Grandma Carlota and her children were leaving behind. Where were they coming from? What kind of community did they surrender? We'll answer these questions in this chapter and the next before rejoining their journey into the United States in Chapter 3.

The Hacienda Santa Rosa

Three and a half years before arriving in Nogales, Grandma and her two children were living on a plantation called Hacienda Santa Rosa (the word hacienda refers to an agricultural estate) located about nine hundred miles south of the US border, in the state of Jalisco.^{iv} The hacienda was lodged in the high mountains just east of Puerto Las Peñas, a sultry port village that you could almost see from a mountain perch half a day's walk away if you knew the back trails surrounding the hacienda. The tiny seaport later became known as Puerto Vallarta which grew by leaps and bounds in the 1970s serving as a Shangri-la for many Americans. When referring to this port, however, we'll only use its newer name for the sake of clarity.

Even though the sun shined brightly on the hacienda and its rugged surroundings, the air always blew cool. It still does because the hacienda sits at 5,500 feet above sea level, free of the heat and humidity that hovers over the coast. While Puerto Vallarta is trimmed in jungle green, especially during the rainy season, Santa Rosa was painted in the darker colors of the Mexican

savanna that encourages *ocote* pine trees and wide leaf holm oaks to cover the encircling mountains, allowing at the same time a blend of shrubs to grow on the grassy floor which the locals call *raspa viejo* (rough leaf tree), *estafiate* (silver sagebrush), and golden *nanche* berries. In the 1910s, the hacienda held several pastures bordered by woodlands intersected with noisy creeks that traversed the narrow valley. In summertime, much of the farmland was covered with corn and wheat with beans rooted in between the corn rows according to a timeworn tradition. Lime-green bushy sugarcane reached for the sky, as well, in the distant corners of the property. Scores of cattle roamed the many *potreros* or open pastures that filled up the property, including the plentiful burros that also left their organic trace wherever they went. This was the land Grandma Carlota and her children left behind when they traveled north.

Santa Rosa was a place of work. The people who lived on the hacienda included the owner and his wife, Don Manuel Merino and Doña Victoria, his family, and the folks who actually did the work. (In the early 1900s, the words *don* and *doña* were used in front of a man or woman's first name to denote upper-class membership and therefore special status.) This is where our folks come into this story—or at least my maternal ancestors. The workers on the estate included Grandma and her children and numerous other family members, plus many other campesinos or peasants who tilled the soil and cared for the animals. The wives and daughters of these families helped out in the owner's house. They did the cleaning, cooking, and looking after the owner's children. Peasants who lived on the plantation were known locally as *peones acasillados*, which means live-in peasants. This is what my ancestors were, and they had lived on the Hacienda Santa Rosa for many generations.

Campesinos had little say about their lives. Our family lore includes assertions by our relatives that young peasant girls in those days were raped by the hacienda owner, their fathers, not being able to do anything about it without getting killed or losing their jobs if they were lucky. What we know for certainty is that when a plantation was sold from one landowner to another in this region, the peasants were listed as assets in the local land records. In other words, when a property was sold, the number of cattle on the property was noted in the local land office along with the number of peasants who lived on it, all listed as part and parcel of the possessions being transferred. They were all viewed as mere enhancements to the value of the property. In more ways than one, the peasants belonged to the hacienda and to its owners who prevailed over them easily.

The two-room adobe hut that Grandma Carlota's family lived in didn't belong to them given this situation. In fact, they could only live there if they worked for Don Manuel and did his bidding. Their chances of moving on to find better opportunities were, at best, extremely challenging because it required, among other things, saving money, a next to impossible task. The necessities they needed to live on, like beans and corn, cloth to make clothes, candles to light up the night, and so on, could only be bought at Don Manuel's hacienda "store," a simple storeroom. Also called *tienda de raya*, in the old days, this is where their purchases were deducted from a monetary value assigned to their labor. Essentially, the price of the goods they purchased was deducted from the "pay" they received although they were never paid in cash. What's more, they were never paid more than they could buy, and so this is why they lived in endless debt to the hacienda owner. The concept of saving for a better future was simply unthinkable. It was next to impossible to be

ambitious and beat the system. Most *peones* lived like slaves, and millions of Mexican campesinos toiled in a similar situation.

Most of the campesinos of the Hacienda Santa Rosa lived in scattered shelters on the farm property. Grandma and her children lived immediately behind the owners' large home, at the foot of a tall, craggy bluff. I remember visiting this site for the first time in 1984 when I accompanied my mother there because she wanted to revisit her birthplace. When we spotted a creek that ran by the foot of a bluff, she yelled excitedly at me, "Look, *mijo*, there's the *acequia* (a water ditch) that ran by our house moving water to a grain mill that was located right over there," pointing down yonder. The mill was gone but the memory remained.

The life of a peasant might appear simple to our eyes, but nothing could be further from the truth. For example, Grandma's father, Francisco Hernández, arose before dawn in his dark two-room adobe hut in order to trek to the fields to begin the day's work. His job included planting corn, cutting wheat, feeding the animals, or whatever Don Manuel ordered him to do. He was always on call.

Of course, growing corn was central to Don Manuel and nearly every other Mexican hacienda owner at the time. But for men like my great-grandfather, Francisco, it meant even more because he actually did the work. He had to ready the oxen that pulled the plow to furrow the rich earth where the corn seeds were sown by dropping them and stepping on them as he goaded and guided the big animal. Diana Kennedy, a close observer of life in rural Mexico, aptly described the toil that occupied my ancestors for the most part of their lives:

[The] planting [of corn] . . . begins just before the rain starts toward the end of May. [This is when] the first longed-for rain

eventually falls and the corn sprouts and grows; there is first the weeding, *la descarda*, to be done. As the rain continues and the corn grows apace, new weeds spring up and thicken around the base of the corn, and the *segundando*, the second weeding takes place. It is a backbreaking job for the laborer, who squats with his knees almost up to his chin, coaxing out the weeds with the tip of his curved machete so as not to hurt the young corn plant. Then there is the fertilizing and afterward the anxious watch for mealybugs that burrow through the heart of the sprouting ears, until the first tender *elotes* (ears of corn) begin to form.^v

The *tiempo de los elotes* (time for corn on the cob) would take place in October when the rain began to thin, and the harvesting was completed. By December, when the rain was gone, the dried-up corn ears were removed from the stalk and stored in “rustic bins made of reeds,” as Kennedy carefully notes, in the *trojes*, the hacienda barns. Lastly, around the New Year, the final task was carried out when the dried cornstalks were cut and chopped up as fodder for the animals.

Francisco would sometimes be assigned to assist the hacienda mule drivers who, in the absence of automobiles or trucks, prodded their animals over mountain trails and valleys to deliver grain poured into gunnysacks loaded on the mules. In some cases, they traveled in a southwesterly direction for four or five days to the outskirts of the big city of Guadalajara to deliver a shipment of corn or wheat to buyers there. At other times, the mule drivers pulled their animals westward and down the mountains to the coast to deliver their goods. Although trains could be found in other parts of Mexico at the time, the highlands of Mascota and Santa Rosa were too remote and too rugged for train access.

Nepomucena Ponce, Francisco’s wife and my great-grandmother, also rose early in the dark to prepare breakfast for her husband. In the absence of electricity, she would light an *ocote*, a sap-filled kindling, or, if lucky a

kerosene lamp, and prepare the early morning meal of beans and tortillas for her husband to enjoy a bite before his long workday. Prepared foods were not a viable option for my great-grandparents because they couldn't afford them and those that were available for purchase from a regular commercial store required a long walk into town. All the victuals on the hacienda had to be made from scratch every day, and Nepomucena was responsible for all of the family's meals, of course, when she wasn't helping out at the hacienda owner's house. Everyone ate corn tortillas (flour tortillas were unknown in this region at this time) and making these by hand alone took many long hours beginning before daybreak. Francisco and Nepomucena lived almost entirely on beans and tortillas spiced with some hot chilis and meat on occasion. The diet was limited, and making tortillas was back aching work unto itself.

This was the life Grandma and her children left behind. And, as we've seen, they broke away from it to begin a new life in an alien land.

Registering Grandma Carlota's Birth

Like her own children, Grandma Carlota was born on the Hacienda Santa Rosa which stood inside the legal jurisdiction of the nearby city of Mascota, a *cabecera*. This means that Mascota functioned like a county seat with its authority extended far beyond the thousand or so dwellings that made up the town. Every important life event including death had to be registered at the *cabecera*. This is why Grandma's parents knew what was expected of them even though they lived on a backcountry plantation. So early on a September day in 1880, Nepomucena wrapped Carlota's newborn body in a rebozo and, tying it to her shoulders, proceeded to march alongside her husband about four hours over hill and vale to Mascota. There is no

doubt they informed their *patrón* about their plans. The new parents also understood they not only had to register Carlota's birth but to baptize her at the same time which meant presenting the newborn child to the parish priest so that he could inscribe her into the parish books along with their own names as parents, plus the godparents and two witnesses. All this took place on September 25, 1880.

Barefoot, most probably, and dressed in simple untinted cotton peasant clothes, Francisco and Nepomucena crossed the plaza from the church and entered the city offices also known as the *palacio municipal*. With whispered reverence, they asked to see the *presidente municipal* or mayor, Don Pedro Bermúdez. When he finally admitted them, they requested that their daughter be registered according to the law, to which he agreed after asking details about her birth. He then dictated to one of his secretaries the customary language, including the answers to his questions. Dressed in a long-sleeved cotton shirt fastened by sculpted bone buttons, tight riding pants trimmed with gaiters, and low-cut riding boots, Don Pedro dictated aloud. He declared under oath that Carlota was born two days earlier at five o'clock in the afternoon to her parents, whom he identified by name, plus two witnesses gathered from people standing nearby. This is how my grandmother's birth registration was thus entered in the records books and made official.^{vi} It's worth noting too that the mayor also identified Carlota's race because the birth entry indicates that the child's parents were *indígenas* or "Indians."

This detail informs us that Carlota's skin color or race, and everybody else's for that matter, was considered an important fact to record at the time. There is little doubt that our grandmother was a full-blooded Indian though culturally speaking she was mestizo, meaning that the life her family led was

now a blending of Spanish and Indian ways.^{vii} The mayor's assertion about their racial origin probably hinged on the prevailing knowledge of who did the work in the region's haciendas, so noting their general appearance and what their livelihood was, he must have said to himself, "These people are Indians and so is the child." I came across these details in the original civil registry records in Mascota.

Mascota in the Late 1800s

When my siblings and I were growing up in California in the 1950s, we came to view Mascota as my mother's hometown even though she too, like her own mother, was born on the Hacienda Santa Rosa a few miles away. Mascota, as we've seen, acted as the cultural urban hub of the region where the most important activities affecting the entire *cabecera* took place, like the recording of vital statistics. Mascota played a vital role in other ways.

For my siblings and I, Mascota and the region around it became our first mental window into Mexico. Thanks to the lore that Mom built up about it over the years, any discussion about Mexico prompted us to try to understand it in terms of whatever images of Mascota and its hinterland we might have held. Any references to Mascota also included Puerto Vallarta—down the mountain trails to the coast, as we'll see below, mother always visiting both places during her travels to Mexico. So let us examine Mascota some more since it meant so much to mother, and consequently to me and my brothers and sisters. My own children spent many hours playing in its parks and plazas in the 1970s, so maybe someday it will mean something to them too—and hopefully to their own children as well.

In the late 1800s, Mascota was the largest and most important community in the high mountain valleys east of Puerto Vallarta. As a

cabecera, government officials in Mascota were responsible for law and order not only in the town itself but also beyond the city limits—past the Hacienda Santa Rosa, all the way down to sandy beaches of Puerto Vallarta and even south to Tomatlán. All the little hamlets, haciendas, and ranchos in between, up and down the mountains owed jurisdiction to the officials in Mascota. Pedro Bermúdez, the man who registered Carlota’s birth, was more than just the town’s mayor; he was also the *Jefe Político* (political chief) of the entire county zone, and his word was law throughout. For example, the court archives in Mascota were filled with criminal cases, written on fading and cracking paper, revealing details about how the Mascotan policemen apprehended delinquents or criminals throughout the large area even if it took weeks or months and a lot of horseback riding. The population living in the town itself was reported at about six thousand when Carlota was born, and if you include the people living in the jurisdiction of the *cabecera*, or the surrounding villages, ranchos, and haciendas, the total population more than doubled.

Although no rail lines led to Mascota, tucked away in the mountains as it was, and no major highway lay nearby, evidence tells us that the town nonetheless reflected a strong connection to Guadalajara, the state capital, and to the rest of the world as well. In the late 1800s, for example, Mascota boasted a mayor and a city council all of whom held court in the local city hall where Carlota was registered and constructed with a certain provincial elegance. The important role of the *cabecera* was demonstrated by the fact alone that campesino families like Carlota’s, living on haciendas, tucked away in the surrounding mountain glens, felt it their civic and religious duty to walk for hours to register a child in Mascota as Francisco and Nepomucena did.

Mascota hosted other government officers. For example, it prided itself with a chief of police who was responsible for keeping the peace and applying the law, which included administering the local jail. State and federal tax collectors kept their respective offices in Mascota, and the local judge, representing the judicial power of the state, also retained his office there as his authority extended about a hundred miles down to the coast. Mascota also prided itself with having a full-time priest, the very one who baptized tiny Carlota, who was in charge of the spiritual health of the community and maintaining the integrity of the local church.

Mascota was also home to numerous professionals and many simple employees. The professional class included lawyers and doctors who studied for their licenses and obtained degrees in the state capital, Guadalajara, but also elsewhere in Mexico. They carried out their various professional duties in a manner consistent with the time. Schoolteachers were also assigned by the state office of education to bring enlightenment to young, mostly the well-to-do children of hacienda owners, professionals, or government employees. Campesino children and other “low-class” citizens were not so fortunate and did not attend school. My mother, for instance, didn’t go to school beyond second grade for this very reason. The rest of the population worked either as store employees or, for the most part, as agricultural workers or as peons like my ancestors, factory jobs being nonexistent in Mascota for the most part.

As in most other towns, merchants, big and small, played an important role, even in a mountain-fast community like Mascota. They imported wares from the outside and sold them to local buyers who could afford them. Ponciano Guzmán, a notable resident of Mascota who owned several haciendas, also owned *El Transvaal*, a store named after a region in South

Africa whose shelves were stocked with Spanish Madeira wine and Canadian Club whiskey. If a local townsman required fine crystal glasses, he could also buy them there.

Even though Mascota was surrounded by farms and mountains, one could say it held its head high because its inhabitants felt connected to Guadalajara. They also felt linked to the rest of Mexico and even Europe in some cases.

When I visited in the 1970s, I climbed a low mountain nearest the city to look down on the collage of whitewashed buildings covered with earthy red-tiled roofs. Cobblestoned streets crisscrossed the urban patchwork interspersed by trees that bore avocados, lemons, and bananas, and a rich green undergrowth in open lots. A shiny white spire surrounded by leafy plazas marked the tallest building—the church dedicated to *La Purísima Concepción*, the Immaculate Conception, one of the many versions of Mary in the Catholic world. Beyond these buildings and streets, the furry green mountains undulated out to the high-peaked horizon. As I peered from the mountaintop, I conjectured that Nepomucena must have observed very nearly the same vista that I did as she walked alongside Francisco back to Santa Rosa in 1880, lugging newly christened and duly registered Carlota on her back.

Grandma Growing Up

We only know a few facts about my grandmother's life growing up on the hacienda in the early 1900s. This is due to the fact that she didn't write any letters or memoirs nor was she written about in the newspapers. Except for a birth record or a death notice, a personal paper trail of this sort was nonexistent for my relatives because they were too poor to know how to

write. When they died, they didn't leave a will behind because there were no possessions to pass on. Traditional history tends to ignore poor folk for these reasons. However, drawing bits and pieces from her children, my mother and my two uncles, and from other background information, I offer a portrait of her, albeit a sketchy one at best.^{viii}

Our family lore informs us that Carlota grew up surrounded by family members—two brothers and three sisters in her immediate family. It seems her parents died when she was a child. We know for sure that Nepomucena died in 1884^{ix} when Carlota was four years old, and this is why my mother often recalled that Grandma Carlota referred to her eldest sister, Rafaela, as *Mamá Rafaela*. This confirms that Carlota had little or no memory of her own mother. She was the youngest child, and so Rafaela, her eldest sister, ten years her senior, became a mother substitute, thus *Mamá Rafaela*. If Nepomucena gave birth to a child on an average of every two years, then Rafaela, her first child, would have been born approximately in 1870, then Sotero in 1872, Sabino in 1874, Estanislao in 1876, Soledad^x in 1878, and Carlota in 1880, more or less. Nepomucena mostly likely maintained poor health throughout her life and could have easily been worn-out by the time Carlota came along.

Our family lore tells us that Carlota was raised on the Hacienda Santa Rosa by her older siblings for the most part, once Nepomucena died, especially by “Mamá Rafaela.” As the youngest, she was probably taken care of by all of her siblings in one way or another and influenced by their backcountry ways. It is safe to assume she grew up as a young campesino woman just like her elder sisters and became familiar with city life only after she abandoned the hacienda in her late thirties. She thus grew up in a rural area filled by mountains, small rivers, and creeks, and extensive fields of corn

and wheat. It can be affirmed that about three-quarters of all Mexicans at this time mostly knew about farmland and farm animals the way Carlota did, not of city life.

For Carlota and others in her family, the margin between being healthy and ill was always slim. If she got sick, there were no clinics or doctors to rely on because of the remote location coupled with the fact that they were only mere peasants. When ill, Rafaela and Carlota's other aunts would care for her by employing herbal medicines and other home remedies just as their Indian ancestors had done. It's possible that in dire emergencies, they might have turned to the hacienda owner's wife, Doña Victoria, for special assistance, but they too probably relied on home remedies most of the time. This hard experience in early life may explain why Carlota's grandchildren would remember her, many decades later in the United States, as a crusty and determined woman who lived by simply defined values and insisted on strict behavior—and getting her way. Grandma probably never traveled beyond the mountainous district of Santa Rosa-Mascota until she started her own family.

Although she hailed from a long line of *peones* who worked as resident day laborers on the hacienda working in the fields or with animals, they enjoyed moments of pleasure nonetheless. Their heavy work week was occasionally sweetened with the music they themselves created. Grandma recounted stories to her daughter about their love of music and the importance that music played in their lives. Family lore informs us, for example, that Sabino played the violin, Sotero strummed the guitar, and Carlota sang. Her cousins Lupe and Aurelio Peña, who would also venture to work in California years later as we'll see, played musical instruments and sang passionately as well. In their free time, when celebrating birthdays,

weddings, or even at funerals, they dusted off their rustic instruments and played and sang to bring some measure of joy into their hardworking lives, or, in some cases, mark a moment of sadness. My mother liked to recall the day when her own mother sang at a local cockfight accompanied by musicians like her uncles, a type of event that supposedly attracted scores of gamblers and fans alike. The memory always elicited pride because while my ancestors may have been mere peasants, they could also punctuate a community event like this artistically. When I lived in Mascota in the 1970s, I attended several cockfights myself and witnessed the very special nature of these events that continued to attract scores of gamblers, musicians, and aficionados alike.

The first thirty years of Grandma's life, 1880 –1910, coincided with one of the most dynamic periods in Mexican history. The country was governed by a man who forced the economy to boom as never before; this was Porfirio Díaz. His economic policies brought about the growth of commerce, agriculture, and new industries in a way not seen before. Many new textile factories appeared in different parts of Mexico, and old haciendas began growing new products while cities grew at a rapid pace. Between the time Grandma was born and the time she left Mascota for the US border, railroads sprouted across the country, they were spiked into the Mexican soil for thousands of miles. This included the rail line that would eventually take Grandma north to Nogales in the company of her two youngest children, where we first caught sight of them walking across the border at the start of this story.

These changes, however, occurred far away from Mascota. The ruggedness of the land enfolding the Hacienda Santa Rosa and nearby Mascota filtered out most of the progress mentioned above which I describe

elsewhere.^{xi} Grandma probably first heard of the new jobs that were being created and of the new railroads being built from the traveling salesmen who drifted into the backcountry ranchos and haciendas like Santa Rosa. Leading two or three mules packed with bags filled with brightly colored cloth, the newest buttons or mirrors, and other consumer goods that might have been for sale in the rustic stores of Mascota but not in Santa Rosa, these peddlers drifted in and out of mountain-fast communities introducing new-fangled products and stirring dreams of wonderful places far away.

Grandma began relating to men and having her own children during the Díaz years. In 1900, when she was twenty years old, she gave birth to Pascual Naranjo, the first of her three children. In 1902, she had her second son, Miguel Naranjo, and then my mother (Guadalupe) in 1905, when she was twenty-five years old. Indications are that my mother's father (my grandfather) was a backcountry peddler. It never ceased to cause us to scratch our heads and wonder what was going on when Mom would remind us that Grandma "was married to an older man [who lived on the hacienda]. He is the one who raised us," my mother wrote, "His name was Leonides Ponce," she would add. Mother also wrote this into her memoirs: mainly that in the days before they abandoned the Hacienda Santa Rosa to travel north to the US border, Leonides refused to join them because he was too old, he was supposed to have said.

This conjunction of men in Grandma's early life requires some examination. Let's pause to examine what we know about Grandma's "marriages" or relationships that produced her children. Why was my mother surnamed Brambila while her two brothers, my two maternal uncles, Naranjo? Why did my mother describe Grandma as being "married" on the

eve of her departure from Santa Rosa to a man named Leonides Ponce whom she left behind? Was Grandma a promiscuous woman?

While this book is not about the institution of matrimony, the information in the preceding paragraph requires an explanation of marriage in the context that my family faced in these early years and a closer look at my grandmother specifically.

My view is that there is much to suggest that marriage differs from culture to culture and era to era. Most modern-day Americans view marriage as a relatively stable relationship between a man and a woman who profess to love each other and whose union is blessed by the church or at least recognized by the government for the purpose of procreating a family. This at least has been a majority view although obtaining such a relationship has not always been within everybody's reach. My view is that this romantic outlook on marriage became more of a reality as the world modernized slowly. Not all families enjoyed the stability required to make marriage work over a lifetime. In the sweep of time, the well-to-do most likely enjoyed marriage as described above and the poorer people enjoyed it less.

This ideal view of marriage was not to be for Grandma Carlota. She was too poor. Her life, and that of her brothers and sisters, depended too much on the people who owned the land they lived on and controlled the jobs necessary to survive. The lords of the land dictated nearly everything, and our peasant ancestors enjoyed little control over their lives.

It stands to reason that when my grandmother was a young woman, she looked for a decent man with whom to share her life. Being part of a family of workers who lived on a plantation owned by others, she undoubtedly began looking for a man who might not only respond to her need for affection but also pull her up from the bottom, up the social scale at

least a peg, and perhaps even out from poverty. Like all parents, she wanted a better life for her children, and what better way when you're a poor peasant woman than to have a child by a man who is not a peasant so that he might help that child?

Cecilio Naranjo, Pascual and Miguel's father, represented this kind of man and so did the itinerant salesman, Concepción Brambila, my mother's biological father whose blurred photographic portrait she kept all her adult life, one revealing European features, Brambila being an Italian surname. Men of this kind enjoyed a great advantage over a peasant woman like Grandma because they possessed economic independence, comparatively speaking. They were not peasants beholden to the lord of the land. My mother's explanation of her own mother's situation fits into the thoughts I provide above:

I heard my mother say that when the boys' father [Cecilio Naranjo] left her (I don't believe they ever married), he got a hold of another woman named Rosa who gave him eight to ten children. This didn't satisfy him, so he had an affair with Rosa's sister who gave birth to a son named Camilo who now lives in Richmond, California. My mother was so distressed about this that when a stranger arrived on the hacienda, my father, Concepción Brambila, she lost out with him too. The least she could get out of it all was to work as a servant for the man who raised us, Leonides Ponce. He married her properly. He was a supervisor on the farm—I remember he was a plowman and a tenant farmer.^{xii}

As stated already, my mother remembered seeing her biological father only once and a pivotal experience at that. She remembered him asking Grandma Carlota for her, so he could raise my mother and give her a better life. We don't know what discussion they had, if any, leading up to this moment. We can only imagine. My mother told us about this moment in her

life many times as if she sensed that it represented a potentially important “if,” a possible turning point in her life.

Without engaging in a discussion of the culture of machismo here, which polluted almost all men in Mexico in these days, I believe it is evident that the relationship between Grandma and the fathers of her children were always an uphill battle due to the considerable class differences between them. Not being impoverished *peones* tied to a hacienda, these men took advantage of her need for affection and support and left her with the children that resulted from the brief liaisons that ended in tortured frustration.

The hardships of a single peasant woman raising three children on the hacienda under the conditions described in these pages demanded extraordinary measures, and Grandma did not hesitate. My mother recounted the story many times of how Grandma was forced to leave Mom by herself at the age of five because she had to serve in the owner’s house. This long-lasting neglect created “sores that covered my body,” Mother wrote, including “big bumps on my neck.” A pharmacist advised Grandma Carlota to feed her daughter properly, so she aimed at two birds at the same time. Somehow she bought a cow one day not only to provide milk for my mother but also to give her the opportunity to sell milk and cheese and presumably earn a few pennies. However, this grab at micro-commerce did not go over well with Don Manuel, the hacienda owner, because in his eyes, the cow was destructive. He claimed that it got loose too often and into places that caused a lot of trouble. Because of his accusations, Grandma felt forced to place the cow in a dairy ranch that required a long walk to get there, including crossing streams that ran high in the rainy season.

Another example of Grandma trying to assure her own income or a smidgen of it involved her son Pascual. He remembered his mother sending

him as a child to buy liquor, so she could resell it on the plantation, a story that my mother included in her memoirs. Country liquor, probably *aguardiente* or mescal, was not bottled in those days; it was sold in clay jars (*jarros*) instead and selling to minors was no problem. “This was the reason why he learned to drink early,” my mother explained. “He got thirsty [and opened the jar to drink], and sometimes he would fall asleep as a result. But I don’t personally remember these incidents at all,” she added. On other occasions, Grandma would make *gorditas de horno* (baked corn dough treats) and *semitas* (baked semisweet bread) to sell. Having scraped a few coins together, she was later able to order fresh baked bread from the nearby village of Cimarrón and sold it on the hacienda on pay days. Guadalupe wrote that she could also sew and make clothes, *calzones blancos* and *cotonos*—simple ones no doubt.^{xiii}

They lived from day to day with little aid; if the corn harvests suffered because of some pestilential blight, there was no social welfare agency that would send food to their table. There were many bad harvests in the backlands of Mexico, and the peasants would simply suffer and often die from starvation or malnutrition. My book *Life in Provincial Mexico* examines the frequent epidemics that swept Mexican communities before World War II, carrying away countless husbands and wives and other members of the families. People like my grandmother were lucky to share their life with another adult because they didn’t control their lives as much as we’d like to imagine.

Pascual Naranjo, Her First Son

My uncle is important to us not only because he was Grandma’s eldest son but also because his indomitable character pulled her and his sister and

brother out of Mexico and into the United States. The three persons who are described as crossing the US-Mexico border in 1922 did so because they were drawn out by Pascual. He was born on August 5, 1900; he always used to say, “I am as old as the [twentieth] century.”

Pascual’s father, Cecilio, lived near Santa Rosa in a mineral gulch known as Los Jiménez near the mountain village of Santo Domingo, a larger mining community nestled in the western sierras of Jalisco. This part of Mexico encloses many mining communities or *minerales* like Santo Domingo, where silver was dug out of the ground for hundreds of years. In the company of some of my children, I visited Copala, Sinaloa, a small *mineral* near Mazatlán in 2004 which I propose must have looked a lot like Los Jiménez. It was a village formed by twenty or thirty adobe dwellings held together by cobblestoned pathways leading to a small chapel and a tiny plaza and beyond the urban patch to dozens of small mine holes in the nearby mountains. Hanging from a mountainside, it hummed busily with men digging for silver. These villages attracted the tough guys who were willing to dig tunnels inside the earth in search of precious ores in order to make a living. This is where my uncle Pascual, already a headstrong boy at fourteen, started taking life lessons from his father. This was the “school” he attended because there weren’t any others for boys like him. Otherwise, my uncle’s destiny would have been to work with the other youngsters in the fields helping their families do the agricultural labor necessary to earn their keep as hacienda peons. Pascual didn’t quite fit this role.

He went to Santo Domingo long enough for my mother to remember visiting him there, the earliest memory she had of her brother. Did Grandma Carlota and Cecilio ever live together? Probably not. Did they fight with each other enough to lead to a separation? We don’t know what circumstances

sent Pascual to his father at this time. On yet another occasion, Guadalupe recalled a trip to the town of Cocula, farther to the southwest, to retrieve Pascual once again because he had traveled there with his father. My mother mentioned this trip many times as we were growing up, reminding us of how frightened she became about having to stop at night on the way to and from and how they had to light bonfires to keep the wild animals away. She must have been no older than five years old.

Pascual seemed to have realized quite early that he didn't want to remain very long on the hacienda where he was born. He made a mental note, for instance, that there were men who didn't have to work as hard as his peasant uncles and their hacienda friends. His aunt Estanislao's^{xiv} husband, Bernabé, "didn't like to do farmwork," Pascual remarked to me. "He became one of those individuals who bought and sold things . . . He actually made money that way during Lent," he said with a little awe.^{xv} That was quite different from the hacienda peons!

In any case, Pascual's mobility as a boy, made possible by his father's mining interests, foreshadowed the historic trip to the north that Grandma would make in search of her son.

Miguel Naranjo, Her Second Son

Grandma gave birth to a second son by Cecilio Naranjo and that was my uncle Miguel Naranjo. He was born on July 5, 1902 and, like his sister, also grew up on the hacienda within the family circle that provided human warmth to Grandma despite the poverty that hung over them all. As in the case of Pascual, Miguel's uncles (Sotero and Sabino) undoubtedly took it upon themselves to teach him how to become a farmworker and eventually develop into a country peasant or a *peón acasillado* in the age of Porfirio

Díaz. Miguel did not seem to outwardly resist this lifestyle. It was expected that, at about the age of nine or so, he too would begin donning the simple peasant wardrobe: white cotton shirt and trousers with a sash to keep them up, and, if lucky, wear sandals instead of going barefoot. Guadalupe remembered the derisive comments upper-class look-down-their-nose people would say to someone like her being *Indios de pata rajada* (Indians with cracked feet) employing the word *pata* used only for animals. My ancestors on this farm fell into this category even though they weren't complete *indios* as such. In this uniform, Miguel would assist in the planting of corn, or harvesting wheat, or even helping out with the farm animals. As he grew older, he had no choice but to work. Looking back on his childhood at age seventy-six, sitting in his comfortable middle-class home in San Fernando, California, he acknowledged these dire circumstances by simply saying that “my mother did not have the means to support us [and so] we lived quite poorly,” and he was always ready to do his part. He always did all he could do to support the family.

Miguel Naranjo didn't experience life in the mineral gulches the way his elder brother did. This may have been due, in part, to the fact that in those days, my tío Miguel was too young to be away from his mother, and so he consequently lived with her and his sister in Santa Rosa most of the time with some exceptions.

Miguel remembered going to school and that many of his friends did not. “My mother became enthused with the idea that we learn how to read, and so she enrolled us into the school in El Cimarrón [near the hacienda]. My sister and I went to school there.” He then added, “But soon the teacher went away and they closed the school.”^{xvi} As if to make up for this loss, Grandma placed them in school again—in Mascota with her elder sister

Estanislao (my mother referred to her as “*tía* Lau”). They never had any children, and so they insisted on helping Carlota out with her children, recognizing that her life on the hacienda was much tougher. Miguel was about six years old at the time and took notice of the fact that “[his] mother sacrificed a lot to keep us there.” She walked between Santa Rosa and Mascota “every Sunday, a distance of about ten miles, to bring us food and in that way helped our aunt [by lessening the load of keeping us]. This lasted about a year and a half.” Naturally, Aunt Lau developed a relationship with the children, especially Miguel. At one point, Aunt Lau didn’t want to give up Miguel, and she and her sister argued over it, consequently. As if to side with his Aunt Lau, Pascual observed that there just wasn’t enough food in his mother’s house in Santa Rosa. He remembered the struggle his mother went through with Aunt Lau over who would raise Miguel, but eventually Carlota got her way and Miguel returned to live with his mother on the hacienda, while Pascual and Guadalupe stayed a little longer with their aunt Lau in Mascota. Miguel was distraught over the fact that he was taken away from school. Even though he was expected to become a *peón*, Miguel liked school nevertheless. He remembered details about school with a certain fondness:

In school, we learned to spell using the *silabario* [a spelling book] that taught us to identify the letters and then to put them together. We also studied numbers. The teacher would also instruct us on how to make silk and then teach us a little bit of the history of Mexico. It wasn’t a whole lot because it was just first grade. On Thursdays, we had to take lessons in Catholic doctrine at church which was nearby. Our teacher was a young woman who was very smart. At ten in the morning we went out for recess . . . We played games like putting a boy on his hands and knees, and we would jump over him. We also played a game known as *la roña*, in which somebody touched you and you were “it,” then you had to touch somebody else, and so on. There were no sports. It was too small there.

Even if Miguel had been older, he still might not have chosen to leave his mother to live with his father, the way Pascual did, for two reasons. One reason was that of the three children, Miguel seemed to have been the most concerned about his mother's dire situation and wanting to help out. Pascual openly recognized the poverty that surrounded them, but this only spurred him to get away quickly and find his own way, especially after he got into trouble. Guadalupe was too young and overtaken by her own growing up and discovery about the world. Despite Miguel's tender age, he began working to help his mother and family quite willingly.

He was assigned by the plantation owner to help get the hacienda's milled flour to market. He was told to assist the hacienda mule drivers, leading a team of fifteen to twenty mules, to make deliveries to designated transshipment points down in the big valley or out on the coast. They customarily made such deliveries traveling west over mountain trails to Puerto Vallarta and Salina Cruz just farther north on the coast. From there the flour was placed on small ships to be sold in Tepic, in the neighboring state to the north. They also made deliveries eastward through the wooded sierras to Ameca, where the sacks of flour were loaded onto trains headed to Guadalajara. The muleteers would bring sugar, salt, or clothing on the way back to the hacienda.

Little Miguel's main task was to help load the animals and walk in front of the lead mule to make sure it kept moving forward at all times. The muleteers, friends of the family, would keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't have to lift heavy loads or get hurt in any way. Still, it was a big experience and responsibility for nine-year-old Miguel on these trips that easily lasted three to four days one way. As an old man looking back on his

childhood experiences, he marveled at the fact this is the way he began discovering the world outside the hacienda.

No matter what, Miguel's delivery trips were filled with their ups and downs. For example, he remembered arriving in Ameca one day, located about fifty miles southeast of Santa Rosa, when a community celebration was in progress. Ameca, at 23, 457 inhabitants in 1910,^{xvii} was considered a giant city in comparison to the Hacienda Santa Rosa. The fact was that the Ameca festival attracted lots of people and,

. . . there were many booths selling fresh drinks, fruit, and so on—and they also had music. I remember seeing a *tarima* [a wooden dance floor] where people danced *sones* [regional music] which were very popular. One day I saw a man and woman get on the *tarima* and do a zapateado together [a quick dance step]. The man would really get into it with a lot of verve and then stop, and the woman would continue stamping her feet with the music and then the man would take over. I thought it was such a special thing because I had never seen anything like that in Santa Rosa when they laid down the *tarima* because it was just this one fellow who would dance. But the guy in Ameca, he really knew how to move! Ameca was quite a place!

On the other hand, Miguel also remembered being robbed on one of these mule driving trips. The hacienda muleteers, including the owner's brother, had just made a delivery of flour in Tepic and were on their way back through a wooded mountain trail carrying the money from the sale. Miguel was out in front of the mule team, coaxing the lead mule ahead, when two men suddenly appeared through the brush, pointing a rifle at him and barking at him to stop and get down from his mount. When several of the muleteers caught up with little Miguel, three more robbers appeared and demanded the mule drivers to put up their hands and reveal the location of the money. "We know you're carrying money! Which bag do you have it in?"

they shouted. Young Miguel was terrified by this time, especially when one of the bandits threatened to hang him from a tree if he didn't tell them where the money was. When the hacienda owner's brother finally showed up, he too was pistol-whipped. Succumbing to the threats and physical abuse, the owner's brother handed the cash over to the outlaws. The bandits then tied up all of the muleteers, including the owner's brother and our little Miguel, against some nearby trees and fled. Six hours went by without a single sign of help or rescue. Finally, Chenco, one of the muleteers, untied himself and then freed Miguel who helped unfasten the rest of the men.

My uncle never forgot this incident. Miguel remembered asking Don Manuel for a different kind of job and got rebuffed. His mother must have petitioned that he be relieved of these duties, and after much coaxing, the landowner relented. He assigned young Miguel to help the field hands plow the land with oxen. Miguel spent several years doing field work. "I worked on the hacienda for a long time," he remembered, "weekdays and weekends and the boss never raised my pay." He felt he did the work of a grown man, but the landlord never paid him what he expected, and this discrimination rubbed him wrong. He noted that "This ended when we left the hacienda to come here [the United States]." Even though Miguel was a gentle soul, a stark contrast from his impulsive elder brother, he still knew he deserved better in life.

Miguel's gentleness marked him even as an older man when I knew him. My siblings and I remember him as a good-hearted, soft-spoken family man to the very last day of his life in San Fernando. His mother adored him, and his sister favored him for his gentility, the opposite of Pascual's testy gruffness. We don't know the relationship that Miguel had with his father; he never mentioned him in his interviews.

Guadalupe Gil, Her Daughter

My mother was Grandma's third child, born on November 22, 1905, also on the Hacienda Santa Rosa, when Grandma was twenty-five years old. She was registered as Francisca which her birth records confirm, and why she was called Guadalupe for her entire life was never fully explained to us. Nevertheless, we know that the local priest, Rev. Salvador Palafox, filled out the baptismal register on December 10 of that year, noting at the same time that she was the illegitimate daughter of Carlota and Concepción Brambila, and for this reason her birth inscription was entered into a register for "natural children," meaning illegitimate. The church kept track of such distinctions.^{xviii}

As we've noted already, Mother's father was a traveling merchant pulling a pack of mules who supplied the backcountry villages and hacienda communities like Santa Rosa with cloth and trinkets from the outside world. He also asked to take Mother so that he could raise her properly "because he was a man of commerce and had the wherewithal to do [so]." These words were burnt into Mom's memory as well as the fact that Grandma refused.

Like her brothers, Miguel especially, Guadalupe also guarded fond experiences living with her aunt Lau. As stated above, she and her two brothers were able to leave the hacienda to go live in Mascota for a time to attend school when she was about seven, or about 1912. Mom later recognized how lucky she was to be able to attend classes, and this is why she remembered her student days in Mascota with great tenderness. Her brief time in school helped her establish a reading habit that stayed with her most of her adult life. I remember her putting on her glasses to read the Sunday supplements of *La Opinión*, the leading Spanish-language newspaper

published in Los Angeles, and when she visited me in Seattle, she often asked for a book written in Spanish containing interviews of famous men who took part in the Mexican Revolution.^{xix} She would sit and read quietly for long periods of time and then fall asleep.

Like her brother Miguel, Guadalupe clearly remembered that it was better living with her aunt Lau in Mascota than on the plantation. At age eighty-seven, she noted that Aunt Lau, who lived with her husband, was comfortable enough to own beds and other furniture. “[She] had everything,” my mother recalled with a mixture of pride and amazement. The word *everything* in this context reveals more about the bareness in Grandma’s peasant adobe home in Santa Rosa than whatever meager furniture her aunt Lau might have possessed jointly with her husband. In her memoirs, written at her kitchen table in San Fernando about seventy-five years later after leaving Mascota, Mom noted that her aunt, whom she also called Nina Lau, died in 1914 and, consequently, she had to return to the hacienda. We can presume that she left reluctantly and probably complained about not being able to attend school because her mother soon placed her in a one-room schoolhouse in a village called Cimarrón Chico near the hacienda. The boys, who didn’t attend school for as long as Mom did, returned to Santa Rosa, and Pascual eventually went to live with his father in the mining town Santo Domingo already mentioned. Miguel stayed with his mother and presumably helped his uncles do their farm work.

While Mother learned to read and write in school, she also began learning the ways of men early on. One day the boys’ father, Cecilio, sent a message to Grandma Carlota advising her to take Pascual back to Mascota because “he was in danger.” Though a mere lad, Pascual had been seeing a girl in Los Jiménez, the mining village. According to our family lore, he

found out that she had an affair with Cecilio's boss and so this enraged my teenage uncle. He apparently beat her in a way that led to her death later and this alarmed his father enough to dispatch a note to Carlota. Obviously, Cecilio feared his boss would get even with young Pascual.

The trip to Los Jiménez taught Mom some early lessons about macho men. One was that an older man could engage a much younger, moneyless woman especially if the man had power and influence. Another is that a young man's jealousy could lead to a lot of trouble. Whatever the details might have been, my mother never forgot going to Los Jiménez with her mother and Sotero, Grandma's elder brother. She also remembered having to stay a week in the mining town because Pascual refused to leave.

A Time of Revolution

Mother also notes in her memoirs that the journey back to Mascota was unforgettably frightening. They ran across some of the many armed men who roamed the countryside as a result of the revolution unleashed in 1910. At one point, they were stopped by a squad of armed men who, at a distance, shouted at them, "*Quién vive* (who's there)?" Sotero, my mother's uncle, yelled back, "*Es gente buena!* (We are friendly folks)." They were thereupon allowed to pass according to our family lore. As they descended into a valley, they again met up with more horsemen carrying weapons, one of whom yelled at Pascual, "Put her on my horse. She's tired of walking already," referring to my twelve-year-old mother. Mom wrote that her elder brother either dismissed the horseman or somehow talked him out of the idea, and my mother's group kept on marching along the country path they were following. Hours later, they arrived at a hut also surrounded by armed fighters on horseback. They stopped to try to get a meal, but a man quietly

warned them against it, and so my mother and her relatives fled into the night. About five in the morning, they arrived at another town where they finally slept, but not before learning that some of the soldiers they had seen earlier belonged to a mounted squadron of armed revolutionaries known as the Zamoras. The next day, my relatives finally arrived in Santa Rosa, safe and sound. My mother also recalled that on another occasion, when her brother Miguel traveled with them, they came across dead men hanging from trees. We heard these stories many times when we were growing up in San Fernando.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 endured until about 1920 depending on where you were living in the country. In the briefest terms, the revolution came about because Mexico was beginning to modernize, albeit in a very simple way, but enough to reveal many backward practices most noticeable in the rural areas, as we've seen regarding the farmworkers or *peones* in Mascota who were sold, along with the machinery, buildings, and cattle as part of an estate. The rich lived well, and the workers were condemned to laboring, practically to death. Many revolutionary leaders wanted to change this among other things, and so they rose up against the established order. The Catholic Church and its scores of priests and bishops across the Mexican landscape supported the old ways and generally preached against revolutionary change. While the conditions in Mascota may have been quite poor, the situation in southern Mexico was worse.

When revolutionary leaders like Francisco Madero and Pancho Villa demonstrated in 1910 that ordinary people could rise up against the ruling class and resist their oppression, many loutish and vulgar men also arose like dry leaves in a windstorm. This made it very difficult to distinguish between the good and the bad. In the fight for power, the poor suffered the most

because they were oppressed by the ruling class as well as by the revolutionists, who used scare tactics to force people into submission. This is why my mother never viewed revolutionaries in a positive way even though some history books heaped praise on them.

Was the Mexican Revolution good or bad? The question is debatable, but one clear result was the end of the big haciendas filled with *peones* like our ancestors. The Hacienda Santa Rosa, for example, was taken over by the government in the 1930s, broken up into small plots known as *ejidos*, and these were given to landless individuals who became known as *ejido* holders or *ejidatarios*.^{xx} In essence, they could now farm their own land and profit from their hard work or lose from their mistakes or ignorance.

Our Santa Rosa relatives who stayed behind, or did not emigrate, received farmland near Mascota, though not from Santa Rosa itself. They received land parcels from the Hacienda de Galope now called ex-Hacienda Galope. This is why Mom began her visits there, decades after she left Santa Rosa as a little girl; our relatives possessed *ejidos* there. I visited Galope many times in the 1970s and so did my children. Breaking up the old haciendas turned out to be one of the unmistakable results of the Mexican Revolution. Advocates of dismembering haciendas were known as *agraristas* (agrarians) and they raised a national storm with their militancy in the 1920s and 1930s. My uncle Pascual became an *agrarista* as we'll see in Chapter 13. How the small farmers who received this land fared decades later and how the government treated them is another story entirely.^{xxi}

Another controversial outcome of the revolution of 1910 was the beginning of a government-backed effort to strip the Catholic Church of its power. This process reached an alarming intensity in the late 1920s when many religious conservatives organized antigovernment rebellions. The

tension slowly receded as time went by, culminating in a severe reduction of church power in Mexico.^{xxii}

The revolution affected most everyone in the country. It certainly upset my mother whose earliest memories were colored with frightening images. The revolution cast my Pascual adrift as well. Mother wrote the following:

There was a lot of revolution at this time. There were men who belonged to Pancho Villa and those who belonged to Venustiano Carranza . . . The revolutionaries would come to a farm and . . . take young girls with them against their wills. In the meantime, they would seize a granary, where corn was stored, and feed their horses. They would even throw it on the ground! They were always hungry and demanded food. My mother would sell it to them. Sometimes we would have to hide in the woods at the foot of a mountain [to avoid the armed men].

Pascual Gets into Trouble

Pascual's return to Santa Rosa from the mining towns was not well received in these troubled times because Don Manuel, the hacienda owner, didn't trust him, young as he was. How can we better understand this lack of trust between a man of means like Don Manuel and a teenager like Pascual, a son of the boss's peons?

The answer to this question lies hidden in the complex relationship between peasants, like my ancestors, and their lord of the manor. If he didn't like one of his farmworkers, then that worker found himself at great risk. Campesinos couldn't appeal to a policeman because lawmen at this time only enforced the interests of the land owners. For all practical purposes, there was no law campesinos could appeal to at this time.

Pascual, about fourteen years, served as an apprentice farmhand when he wasn't living with his father. In 1974, he recalled some of the skills he

brought to the table in those days: “I knew the trails and pathways because I had already helped lead mule teams belonging to *el señor Merino*.” As we’ve seen already, in the absence of roads, cars, and trucks, all merchandise, big and small, was transported on mule back from big cities or railroad stations to backcountry towns and farms like Mascota and the Hacienda Santa Rosa. “I knew these trails like I knew the creases of my hand,” he added. He had seen mules, loaded with bags of silver ore, trekking along narrow mountain paths overstepping the edge and losing their footing. Loaded with bags of ore, their bodies would break rolling down the mountainside as they somersaulted with their heavy load crushing them on the way down. Young as he was, Pascual grew up around farm work, but what made him different was that he already knew what life was like away from the farm—he knew the life of independent miners who toiled in mountain communities like his father.

The hacienda owner had greater reason to distrust my uncle. He had joined up with a local military brigade near his father’s mining town on a whim. He did this to get back at his father who whipped him for drinking with a buddy and not reporting for work on a Monday morning. He recalled getting up the next day and enlisting and never laying eyes on his father again.

How could Pascual, a mere lad, join the military just like that? At about the time that Pascual joined up, 1914, the people who had risen in revolt led by Madero and Villa, as already mentioned, were bearing down on the government, and it needed every warm body that came its way. This probably explains why Pascual was able to join and get assigned to the cavalry, as he claims, even though he was just a mere teenager. He quickly learned about guns, a skill that would prove to be quite relevant.

Prior to his departure from the hacienda for good, Don Manuel asked Pascual to accompany him on a special assignment to a nearby hacienda called El Rincón de Mirandilla, which he also owned. Before the trip, Don Manuel quizzed Pascual about his familiarity with firearms. Pascual remembered many years later that the plantation owner asked him to break down a German-made Mauser rifle, which Pascual did quickly without question. Don Manuel might have rubbed his chin with growing concern, but whether his trust in Pascual was affected or not, he took out two Winchester.30-30s and gave one to Pascual and they both rode off to El Rincón. Upon arrival, Don Manuel ferreted out a local worker who was giving him a lot of trouble. The owner thereupon threw a rope over a tree branch and placed a noose around the man's neck. He instructed Pascual, who held the end of the rope, to slowly raise the man off the ground in order to force him to disclose certain information. My uncle never forgot the power that Don Manuel possessed over that poor and helpless man.

In my interview, my uncle summarized the situation with the land owner:

He had come to dislike me a lot. He thought I would turn his peasants against him. He thought that I was an *agrarista* even though I didn't know anything about that stuff at the time. And, that was it! He came to hate me, and I didn't know how to patch things up!

Coupled with the fact that there was "little to eat" at home and that he simply "wanted to roam freely," Pascual decided to go away on his own. "I was too big [to be hanging around the hacienda]. I didn't have an alternative!" Thus, he left his father behind in the mineral gulch and walked away from his family and the hacienda as well.

Chapter 2
The Young Rebel Goes North
(1914–1921)

• **Pascual Becomes a Soldier** • **Pascual
Crosses into the United States** • **Pascual
Begins Work on the Railroad**

AT ABOUT SEVEN in the morning of May 2, 1914, young Pascual stepped out from the adobe shack on the hacienda that he had long known as his mother’s house and walked away with a heavy heart. He was leaving and not coming back. He hiked about two hours down to his aunt Lau’s home in Mascota, where he had spent pleasurable days as a boy, to bid her good-bye, he remembered. He also stopped at his cousin Felipa’s home to eat a snack, “*unos tacos*,” he said, and bid them farewell too. Felipa was Grandma Carlota’s grandniece, and as an adult, she would move down to Puerto Vallarta, where her son Leonardo the singing baker, would take residence and host me and my siblings many times.

Knowing the mountain pathways, Pascual climbed down all day from the cool pine forests of the Mascota valley toward the sea, descending as the rising heat of the tropical coast covered him with perspiration. At the end of the day and after constantly trekking down slopes and stepping over rills, he came upon a house whose occupants were preparing the evening meal. “I only had seven cents in my pocket,” he recalled, but after introducing himself and explaining where he was headed, they fed him and let him sleep in one of the corners of the property. He woke up early the next day and continued

stepping downhill, finally strolling into Puerto Vallarta by way of the cemetery at about nine in the morning. “Vallarta was a scrawny village in those days,” Pascual recalled. “It might have had approximately five hundred houses at the most,” he added. And, as he would soon be reminded, Puerto Vallarta might not have been anything more than a seaside village at this time, but it also functioned as a regional port. Agricultural products like corn and tobacco were brought down to it from the surrounding ranchos and haciendas and placed on small ships to be transported and sold up and down the coast, at various ports including Manzanillo and Mazatlán. As a mule driver’s assistant, he knew all this well.

The first thing Pascual did in Puerto Vallarta was look for one of his uncles, Rafael Ramos, married to Emilia, one of his aunt Rafaela’s daughters. Even in those days people from Mascota and the surrounding area traveled down to Vallarta in search of adventure or opportunity even as they do today. Pascual, however, was unable to find his uncle but remained in Vallarta nonetheless, sleeping on the beach about a block or two away from the main plaza. “If the night was cold, I would cover myself with sand and stay warm that way,” he recalled.

About a week later, Pascual noticed a man leading a herd of burros over the cobblestoned streets of Vallarta, all carrying a load of one thing or another. Having had ample experience helping out with mule teams, young Pascual approached the man and asked if he could be of help to him. The man warned him about getting hurt by the animals, but Pascual explained that he knew how to work with draft animals—he knew how to load them, tie them, and lead them anywhere, he told the man. Convinced that this lad knew what he was talking about, the man offered Pascual seventy-five Mexican cents per day, plus meals, to transport tobacco for him. The tobacco

leaves could be picked up at a place called La Boquita at a nearby river, and they were to be unloaded in town. Our dark-skinned teenager from Santa Rosa thus got the job of transporting tobacco on the backs of burros, and if he didn't move tobacco from one place to another, he transferred beans or corn. This went on for about a week or so.

When a medium-sized ship docked offshore to take a load of beans and corn, Pascual managed to talk with the captain and ask him to take him as a passenger to Mazatlán. He told the captain that he had left his mother in Mazatlán and was now trying to return to her. Pascual had overheard residents of Navidad, a mining community near Santa Rosa, talking about their travel north to work: some near Mazatlán, and other places like El Tigre, farther up north near Los Mochis. People who worked in the mines carried money in their pockets, and he wanted to be one of them.

The captain consented to take Pascual to Mazatlán but only as an apprentice seaman. My uncle learned to work on a hundred-foot-long cargo ship named *Maria de la Luz* (Mary of the Light). Alongside eleven other seamen, he helped load sacks of corn and beans on board, carrying them on his back from dockside up to the boat and walking on wooden planks and down a ladder to the hold where the sacks were stacked. When unloading, Pascual helped carry the bags up the ladder and onto the docks. In between ports, out at sea, he was responsible for pumping water out of the hold and making sure that the cargo remained dry. He also helped open and close sails, and when time permitted, he played cards and engaged in other betting games. The world was quickly opening up to him.

Pascual worked this way for several weeks, including some time spent rudderless at sea. The coaster ship sailed south to Manzanillo to deliver goods from Puerto Vallarta, and then returned to Vallarta to deliver products

from the southern port. Afterward, the ship sailed north to the one of the oldest Mexican ports on the Pacific, San Blas, Nayarit, and made a delivery there. The *Maria de la Luz* then sailed north to Mazatlán, but its engine conked out, and the men on board couldn't fix it. So, they unfolded the sails, and the wind blew them out to sea for about fifteen days. "A northerly wind dragged us far out, very far! Only God knows how far we went out to sea! Normally, it took about three days to sail from Vallarta to Mazatlán," Pascual remembered. But after much work and worry, they finally regained control of their direction and sailed back to Mazatlán.

As they were coming into port, the ship's captain reassured Pascual that he would now be able to rejoin his mother. The runaway teenager replied, "Well, yes, but look at me! I don't have any clothes!" Indeed, young Pascual probably wore most of the clothes he owned when he left the hacienda, and if he packed anything, he could probably fold it into a knapsack carried on his shoulders. By the time he arrived in Mazatlán, he may have been dressed in rags, which might have been fine while working at sea, but wouldn't do in this well-known port town. He remembered that the captain surprised him by offering him a pair of pants and a shirt. When he told me this, he searched his memory some more and said that the captain might have offered him a few coins, too, as payment for his work aboard the ship.

The port city of Mazatlán was still small and relatively young when my uncle discovered it in 1914, walking off the cargo boat with a new shirt and pants and a couple of coins in his pocket. Unlike the cities of interior Mexico, Mazatlán grew up much later—later than Mascota, and at least 150 years later than the cities around Guadalajara. Except for a bedraggled community of Indians and *pardos* or mulattoes who lived in a handful of wooden shacks

and served whatever ship happened to stop, it was a wild outpost in the early 1700s, when Mascota was supposedly founded. Mazatlán didn't begin to look like a civilized town until the early 1800s.^{xxiii} Much of northern Mexico was practically empty at the time except for numerous bands of semi sedentary Indians constantly threatening scattered Spanish outposts.

When my uncle arrived in Mazatlán in 1914, it probably reminded him of Mascota except for the fact that it was somewhat bigger and it stood on a small peninsula buffeted by the ocean breeze. Its population was just slightly larger, about ten thousand, and its urban footprint appeared to be the size of Mascota's. Old maps reveal that Mazatlán's town extension in the late 1800s was no greater than the small peninsula on which the port began, so I surmise that when Pascual arrived, wearing his new pants and shirts, the limits of the city had not extended much more.^{xxiv} The two bluffs that shielded the old center now known as the Olas Altas district are still visible today, and they continue to separate what is now the core of the old city from the pounding surf that crashes on the western side—Pascual's coaster loaded with staples from the south probably disembarked on the southern edge of the peninsula as other vessels continue to do so at the present time. The modern hotel district that now fills up with American tourists on the beaches north of the peninsula was populated at this time only by swaying palm trees and lizards of many stripes.

The couple of coins that young Pascual put in his pocket after he landed in Mazatlán didn't last long. He took stock of his new situation once again and proceeded to make the most of it by looking for a job and soon found one at the *mercado*, the open market in Mazatlán. The energy of the place and the allure of fruits and vegetables piled high amidst stalls filled with freshly butchered meat convinced him to hang around long enough to observe where

the food came from and where it went. And so he noticed that horse-drawn carts brought it from the nearby rail station where boxcars arrived loaded with foodstuffs and other provisions. He placed himself first at the station and then at the *mercado* and quickly began to help one man here or another there with the loading and unloading of crates and boxes. This eventually earned him a nickel from one fellow and a dime from another. “There was always something to do. One guy left and another arrived, and I would offer to help. I did pretty well, actually. This helped me stick around Mazatlán for about five or six months.”

Pascual worked hard in Mazatlán, and he lived hard too, apparently. This is where he contracted syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that can make a man sterile. He admitted flat-out in one of our interviews that he was syphilitic and that he had been admitted into a hospital in Mazatlán where he was treated by a “Chinese” doctor; he also remembered that “Chinese” vendors were very active in the city. This explanation throws light on the fact that despite having had several women, who each in turn shared his home for many years at a time, he never had children.

Pascual Becomes a Soldier

After leaving the hospital, my uncle decided it was time to go north to the US border, and so he joined a soldier’s family in order to do this. In the middle of the great revolution discussed in the previous chapter, Mazatlán was constantly in flux because it was a major railroad hub and an important transit point between Guadalajara and the US border. Hundreds of thousands of people traveled by train at this time, especially federal soldiers and their families who were often obligated, when there was no other room, to ride atop of the railroad cars—on the roofs! As previously explained,

significant battles took place in the northern states. Amidst this hustle and bustle that came to Mazatlán due to the fighting, Pascual conceived another plan to keep on traveling. He approached a soldier traveling with his family and, explaining that he might be taken off the train because he was a single male, asked the soldier if he could join them posing as a family member and thus travel north. The soldier ultimately accepted the young man's proposition, and, climbing to the rooftop of one of the railroad cars, they all rode out of Mazatlán together. Miguel, his younger brother, would do the same a handful of years later and my father too.

Soon after the train left the city station, a band of revolutionary Yaqui Indians attacked it much like in the old Western movies. Many of the leaders of the revolution were men of the north—often miners and owners of big haciendas—who had learned to share the region with important Indian communities that had lived there from time immemorial, including the fierce and hardy Yaquis. These Indians played an important role in the revolution because they allied themselves with leaders like Pancho Villa. Thus, we find that my uncle's train chugged to a stop because the tracks had been burned red-hot and bent out of shape to effectively halt any movement. This provided the horse-riding Yaquis an opportunity to make good with an attack on the train filled with federal soldiers whom Villa was fighting including our young Pascual.

As the bullets began flying through the air and smashing into the walls of the railroad cars, an army lieutenant approached my teen age uncle and his "family" offering weapons. He gave Pascual a rifle and a canvas bag filled with 150 cartridges. He advised Pascual and his family, "Don't let them kill you without defending yourselves!" My uncle enjoyed himself bringing these old memories to the forefront of his mind.

The battle continued, and the Indian horsemen kept shooting at the train. Many men and women were killed. “As it turned out,” Pascual recalled, “we didn’t defeat them, but they didn’t wipe us out, either.” The soldiers on the train managed to mount machine guns on the railroad cars and soon began mowing down many attackers, ultimately defending the train and fending off the Yaqui revolutionaries who began retreating. Taking advantage of this lull, the soldiers reheated and straightened out the rails, and eventually, the train was able to continue its way to the desert city of Hermosillo, many hours north of Mazatlán. Young Pascual had become a soldier by default. This battle took place sometime in 1915 or early 1916.

When they arrived in Hermosillo, at an old barracks building, he and the others were fed and given some money and a blue uniform to wear. My *tío* remembered that blue was the color of the *carrancistas*, the name given to the soldiers loyal to Venustiano Carranza who had proclaimed himself first chief of the constitutionalist forces which my uncle mislabels “government troops.”^{xxv} According to him, no one bothered to write down any details about boyish recruits like Pascual other than their name. Nothing was recorded about who the parents were or where anyone came from.

My uncle also dredged up recollections about the officer in charge. He said he might have been a colonel, but he was sure his name was Joaquín Amaro, “whom they used to call *el rajado* or ‘the guy with a scar’ because he had a long scar on one of his ears.” Worthy of note is the fact that this officer’s name didn’t mean anything else to my uncle, not at this time nor later. As it turns out, a full-blooded Indian from Michoacán by that name did in fact become famous for fighting fearless Pancho Villa like few other military commanders could, even orchestrating his assassination many years later. And, he “perforated his earlobe,” writes one of his biographers, “in order to

wear a gold earring” as a way of standing out from everybody else.^{xxvi} Amaro would later rise to become a famous general who not only survived the revolution but also became a very influential secretary of war. My uncle never learned this.

In these campsites, Pascual learned that women, wives, or girlfriends traveled with their men, the soldiers. “Some men traveled with their wives—some traveled with women who were not their wives! They were called *galletas* or *soldaderas*,^{xxvii} and if their man was killed, they would continue marching along with the troops and band up with some other guy!” If the chance arose, he added, they would advance to the next town to scrounge for food and make tortillas to have a meal ready when their man arrived. “And the ball would keep on rolling!”

My uncle found a friend in these days. Circulating amidst the hordes of men, women, and children, and soldiers on horseback or on foot, Pascual crossed paths with an older man who asked him for his name. He explained that he reminded him of his son who had been killed in a recent fracas. Perhaps looking for protection and guidance, our teenager kept close to this man who acted paternally toward him amidst the chaos of war, looking after him and advising him about the ways of a soldier. They spent many weeks together in the camp and out in the shooting fields. They were sent together on special assignments. “I came to feel close to him,” Pascual admitted, he who had become averse to close relationships, “because he took care of me.” But in an attack against Villa, the old man was killed in action. Sixteen-year-old Pascual didn’t see this but later learned what had happened from a buddy who did. “I felt very sad,” he admitted. But he also expressed comfort from the fact that many other people looked out for him as well—after all, he was just a kid.

Colonel Joaquín Amaro apparently kept most of his soldiers quartered in Hermosillo for many weeks, including our teenager from Mascota. Pancho Villa had pulled his troops out of that area and Pascual's fighting group was not chosen to chase after them. Originally from Chihuahua, a nearby state, Villa had decided to take refuge in its high mountains. And so, Amaro sent soldiers after him—but not Pascual. He was assigned to form part of a clique of apprentice fighters who didn't get to go chase Villa and they became restless.

Slightly older than our pathfinder, they informed Pascual that they were going to disappear—they planned to desert. They had all been assigned to guarding the horses placed in a large corral at night. One of them told Pascual that they were going to slip away in the darkness and head north to the US border—and take the saddles and other mountings they were using with them as well—and that he should go ahead and move the horses in the morning according to previous instructions. In this way no one would suspect they were missing right away. “You think I'm going to stay here? I'm going, too!” Pascual protested, and he sneaked off as well that night.

He may have decided to go to the United States while still in Mascota because he had already heard talk about how you could earn money “up north.” “I knew that people from Navidad and Cimarrón traveled to the United States to work in the mines up there,” Pascual remembered as an old man, referring to some small towns near Santa Rosa. People in Mascota also knew there were jobs in the Miami copper mines of Arizona in the early 1900s. “This is why I said, ‘Heck no, I'm not staying’ when the guys said ‘We're leaving.’ I answered, ‘I'm going too!’” His fellow soldiers retorted, “You're too young! No one is going to give you a job! Besides, they'll catch you, so you'd better stay!” Pascual didn't stay, and he tagged along with his

older fellow soldiers. They all crossed the border into the United States without realizing it. It was 1917.

Pascual Crosses into the United States

The small band of young, ragtag militiamen came upon scattered houses in an arid spot known locally as Calabazas, south of Tucson. This is desert country accented by tall organ-pipe cactus, fiery ocotillo, greenish paloverde trees, and other arid shrubbery. In telling me his story, my uncle remembered that a Mexican woman intercepted them and called out, “Hey, where do you think you’re going? There’s a detachment of American soldiers around the bend, and they’re going to catch you and send you back! Don’t go any further!”

The runaway fighters took her advice and then explained to her that they didn’t want to continue fighting any more, and so she invited them to take cover in her corral behind the house. While they were resting, her husband showed up and learned what was going on and agreed, “They could have shot at you.” This Spanish-speaking couple seems to have been well aware of what was going on south of the nearby border and may have seen other men running away from the conflict and seeking places to hide on American soil. The man advised them to bury their uniforms, guns, and ammunition and continue heading north. Pascual’s companions apparently took the man’s advice about hiding their military equipment and kept going north from the border while my uncle managed to stay behind with the couple who had intercepted them in the first place. His traveling alone and being younger than the others may have contributed to this arrangement.

They helped him find a job in a nearby farming area called Amadoville (probably present-day Amado, Arizona, thirty miles north of Nogales), and

soon he found himself sitting at the dining table with the family that sharecropped corn, watermelon, and beans for the Nogales market. My uncle became impressed at the fact that they ate three regular meals a day at appointed times—and they ate plenty, too. “So different from back home!” he mused. It was here that he also discovered the giant-sized northern flour tortillas which came hot off the griddle with every meal as opposed to the smaller corn tortillas from Santa Rosa and Mascota. Like so many other Mexican immigrants to the United States, young Pascual also took a crash course doing farm work on a commercial scale here when he accompanied Pedro, one of the farmer’s sons, to remove a high weed from the growing cornstalks the next day. Pascual didn’t mind the hard work, and he stayed here about three and a half months.

While residing on the edges of Tucson, our young migrant from Santa Rosa went from one job to another. On one occasion, he became an assistant to a firewood merchant whose wife was blind. Getting paid a dollar a day, he first spent most of his time caring for the small farm or rancho where they all lived and soon after began driving a wagon pulled by five horses loaded with firewood to sell in Nogales. His job as a teamster involved driving the firewood load to the border town, dumping it there, and returning the next day for a new load. His route paralleled the main highway out of Nogales, and he recalled taking extra care not to get in the way of the new-fangled horseless carriages that sped back and forth on the highway. Pascual grew restless within a short time. He also felt that the blind woman was beginning to feel “romantic” about him. Instead of getting into trouble with her husband, Pascual decided to move on. “I’d better get out of here! Enough with this situation!” he swore as he marched away.

He found a job about twenty miles away, clearing the desert of mesquite trees to plant guayule, a shrub native to this area whose bark contained latex rubber. Using a plow and even a Caterpillar tractor to dig out the desert plants and trees, he and other workers would clear city block-sized sections in order to plant guayule bushes. His fellow army renegades had found a job there too, and so it must have been a pleasant surprise to come upon them if for no other reason than that they were fellow compatriots in a foreign land. Pascual may not have known it at the time, but he and his fellow deserters were taking part in an experiment to end US dependence on expensive foreign rubber.^{xxviii}

Pascual met his first significant mistress, Rosario, at the guayule plantation, and she merits a mention here not only because she hung around with him for about a year or two, but also because he never really forgot her even though he enjoyed about five long-term relationships with other women during the course of his lifetime. I personally knew his last two life-mates, Salvadora and Ester, both *güeras* (light-skinned Mexicans) who happened to look very much alike. Fifty-seven years later, he labeled Rosario a “tough and wicked woman.” In his recorded memoirs, he never used her surname. His characterization of Rosario is difficult to interpret by hindsight since I didn’t ask why he called her “wicked.” It is clear that she was not a shrinking violet beholden to her man’s every whim. Single immigrant women had to be tough indeed. “She was one of those who always got what she needed, knew how to go to the commissary and stock up. She knew her way around,” he added. Mentioning his first significant female partner here also reminds us that Mexican immigration to the United States, which began in earnest when my uncle arrived, always included both men and women from the start.

Pascual Begins Work on the Railroad

Our itinerant young worker didn't stay long tearing chaparral and mesquite trees from the water-thirsty ground because he soon discovered the great need for railroad workers in America in those days.

Traveling by train in 1917 was the principal mode for covering long distances because stagecoaches pulled by horses had long given way to the "iron horse," and it was too early for the mass production of automobiles—cars were still in their infancy. Henry Ford's Model T was only nine years old when Pascual planted guayule plants in Southern Arizona, and Ford's managers were still tinkering with the best way to manufacture the biggest number of cars without sacrificing quality.

Trains, on the other hand, were time-tested. American railroads had spread from east to west forty years earlier, in the 1870s, and thus constituted the most civilized form of long-distance transportation for people and the most efficient way to ship goods. By the time my uncle began looking for work in Southern Arizona, the US railroad network was about forty-five years old and had spread from the East Coast all the way to Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington State. More than a hundred railroad companies had consolidated through the late 1800s into a handful of the most important ones, and by 1900 the Southern Pacific Railroad Company was "the world's largest transportation company with ten thousand miles of railroad line."^{xxix} It linked New Orleans to Tucson to Los Angeles to Portland.

Collis P. Huntington, the infamous owner of the Southern Pacific, needed workers to keep his trains moving. Strong men were needed not only to move the heavy rails but also to pound them with giant hammers into the ground, and then later maintain them because they would wear out or loosen or, in certain cases, they would need to be extended to new corners of the

country. The need to perform this work made it vital to have plenty of recruits. While much of the track laying was done earlier by Chinese, Irish, Italians, and Greeks, as early as 1907, Mexican workers began to command respect for their ability to work long hours laying down track and otherwise help keep trains flowing steadily. A well-known investigator of the time wrote that “there was not a single instance in which the men in actual touch with railroad labor did not give the Mexican preference over either Japanese or Greeks.” They worked hard and didn’t create as much trouble as the others.^{xxx} When Pascual and thousands of other Mexicans were cast about by the Mexican Revolution, landing in distant places like the US-Mexican border, the railroad system was thirsty for men like him. In fact, Mexicans from Jalisco were among the leading suppliers of workers when Pascual arrived in the United States.^{xxxii}

Pascual’s first railroad job in the Tucson area was to work as an *aguador*, the person who refills the steam engines with water. Although it was one of the less grueling and less complicated positions, it provided him the opportunity to inquire about other jobs available in connection to the railroad and to learn how the entire railroad system worked. He discovered, for instance, that he could keep an eye on a certain blackboard in one of the railroad offices near his work that announced the *renganches* of Mexicans who were hauled away from the border to places up north where they were needed (*renganche* is a term used at this time for gangs of Mexican workers contracted and transported by railroad companies to do track work). One day, he saw an announcement of a *renganche* coming to Tucson from El Paso, Texas, which acted as a funnel for Mexicans displaced by the tumult of the revolution. In old age, Pascual looked back on this scene and concluded

that, “These men appeared dazed to me. They didn’t know where to turn or where to go. They were hungry and lacked many things.”

“I inquired about the next *renganche*,” Pascual remembered, and learned that one was headed to California and Oregon at the very moment he deciphered the scrawl on the chalkboard. He didn’t need to know English because every train official he had met so far spoke Spanish, some were Anglos others were Mexican Americans—they were contracted by the railroad company to gather the workers and ship them where they were needed. He thus hurried home and announced to Rosario that a train was headed their way, and he wanted to be on it. “I just learned about a *renganche* that’s on its way, and I know we are going to join it. I want you to be ready so we can go! I’m going to get the details now.” He soon learned all he had to do was board the train, speak with the man in charge, and get on the *renganche* list.

When the train arrived from El Paso, he noticed that it was pulling about eight cars filled with workers. As a result of his inquiries, he and about thirty other men were placed on the *renganche* list and told they would soon ship out. He went home one more time and exclaimed to Rosario, “We’ve done it! We’re in for it! Let’s see where in the hell we wind-up!” Within hours, they clambered aboard and took their seats, and the train bolted forward, gaining speed and heading northwest over the sandy desert. My uncle had thus become a *renganchado*.

The steam-driven locomotive pulling Pascual and his fellow Mexicans traveled for four days with occasional stops in the Arizona wilderness until they reached Los Angeles. At these stopovers, if more workers were not brought on board, vans loaded with food would arrive to be distributed to the dazzled and hungry train passengers. “At mealtime, I saw two vans arrive

with food, one with five legs of beef. From another we got potatoes, beans, and all kinds of food! They had coffee, pies—all the stuff! We filled our plates and walked back to where we were seated.”

In Los Angeles, a city of half a million in 1917,^{xxxii} they stopped for about half a day and then, without waiting for any stragglers who might have gone out to explore, resumed north until they reached Northern California. Here they began dropping off groups of recruits in the middle of the forested mountains. Our young vagabond and his girlfriend knew the train was headed for Oregon and recalled being dropped off in Truckee, at almost six thousand feet above sea level, which he mistakenly placed in Oregon. The presence of timber-covered ridges with snowy peaks in this part of Sierra Nevada, so different from home, may have induced him to believe he was a farther north. It was May, and the daytime temperatures were still quite cold in comparison to Santa Rosa.

The recruiters for the Southern Pacific dropped Pascual and his girlfriend off at the railroad section station in Truckee, California, along with eight other men. Truckee had become a rail town by this time, a remote one to be sure, later described as a “a major operations center in the High Sierra” in part because millions of dollars had already been invested about fifty years earlier in this area to connect a rail line linking Sacramento with Omaha. Truckee became part of the historic transcontinental rail line laid down in 1869 with the Last Spike being driven on May 10 of that year in Promontory, Utah. The rails were laid over the Sierra Nevada across Truckee linking up with Reno and the rest of Nevada, thus joining the eastern half of the nation with the western half.^{xxxiii}

Pascual arrived in Truckee in 1917 with Rosario just a few weeks after the United States declared war against Germany. The country was beginning

to prepare for what would turn out to be a major global war, and so the government immediately asked the nation's railroad companies to help it coordinate rail operations in order to ensure that the war effort could be launched as soon as possible. This may explain the frenzied need for railroad workers that year and why Pascual saw so many Mexicans being loaded aboard trains in Nogales and taken into the interior. To be sure, millions of dollars were spent "for road extensions, additions, and betterments" at this time, including "double tracking," and this meant a lot of work for laborers like my uncle. Railroad company officials allegedly endowed the Truckee railroad center not only with the latest in railroad construction materials but also with industry-setting health facilities for its officers and employees, including a clinic and a pharmacy. All of this was part of the Southern Pacific Company's "early expansion and systematization of employee health care . . . to reduce employee turnover and cope with severe injuries common in railroad work."^{xxxiv}

On the personal level, Pascual had some serious problems with his girlfriend here. They arose in part due to the fact that the ratio between men and women at the work camp was woefully off-balance—Pascual claims that he was one of two men in the work camp who brought a woman as part of the family, and although Pascual and Rosario were not married, they were apparently viewed as a couple. This contributed to one of many violent moments in Pascual's life. He and his girlfriend lived in a one-room apartment near the work site in the midst of other units filled with single men. On a morning that Rosario claimed she was not feeling well, Pascual stepped into the cooking corner of their room to fix his lunch when he suddenly heard a scratching noise on the nearest window which happened to be painted over. Not being able to see clearly through the windowpane, he

went outside and found a young man standing by it. An intuitive understanding of what might have been going on seems to have been instantaneous in our Pascual. The young fellow was stalking Rosario, and she may not have been resisting his advances too much.

Still able to recall the details of this incident decades later, my uncle flashed back on the fact that the young fellow told Pascual right off, “Come out of there.” Pascual didn’t hesitate, remembering that his opponent was ready with a brickbat in hand which he arced over Pascual’s head, knocking him to the ground. Feeling dazed from the blow, my uncle couldn’t get up right away since the assailant, who was wearing heavy work boots, began kicking him. Pascual recalled that the attacker shouted furiously at him while he merely kept quiet guarding himself against the blows that rained down upon him. Finally, a neighbor, who also had a woman in the house, came out with a gun, threatening to shoot the young attacker who then ceased the assault and paced away. Rosario, who had come out of the room to witness the violence, went back in.

Pascual claims he told her, “Look at what you’ve gotten us into! We’re not part of the revolutionary bands anymore! Things are very different here. We have to behave differently here!” He inferred that Rosario may have been a *soldadera*.

She replied by saying, “He’s been doing that for a long time. He comes and calls for me, but I don’t respond. There’ve been times he even wanted to barge in, but I put a bolt on the door or I just don’t go out!”

“That’s what you say,” Pascual answered. “But I don’t believe you. I know you very well already.”

Pascual remembered her sassy reply: “Well, whatever!” Upon hearing these words and still enraged from the fight, he knocked her onto the bed

then took a knife and walked out in search of his aggressor—but didn't find him. Although later in the day, the two men worked near each other; they didn't fight again; still the incident burned into my uncle's psyche. He decided he was nearly finished with doing railroad work in Truckee, but there was one more important incident that affected his stay in the sierras this time around.

This one put him over the edge, ready to move to Fresno which somebody recommended to him. "This bizarre thing happened to me there," he said, referring to Truckee. "I don't know whether it was the change of scenery or perhaps I was already getting sick. I'll be damned if I know what it was!" His work in Truckee required the use of self-propelled rail cart which inexplicably turned over, accidentally knocking him into an adjacent ravine. The machine hit him hard enough to put him out cold. "I believe I was unconscious for about a minute—maybe even less—before I came to. I got back on my feet, climbed back to where I was, and discovered the guys [his fellow workers] were all looking at me. I told them, 'You should have come to help me.'" His sense of self-composure prevented him from demanding to know more about why no one rushed down to attend to him. He may have instantly reminded himself that he was all alone in a foreign country and occupied the bottom rung of the social totem pole, and appealing for help was too much to ask. In all fairness, the supervisor and his fellow workers may have been either stupefied or confused about what to do but Pascual seems to have interpreted their inaction as a sign of disregard. If Truckee had been invested by the railroad company with special facilities to reduce injuries or deaths to the hundreds of men who worked on the rail lines, Pascual's experience didn't seem to profit by it.

The Anglo supervisor who spoke some Spanish finally asked him whether he was all right and whether anything hurt. Pascual pointed to his lower abdomen and, in fact, later concluded he had hurt his appendix somehow. The boss told him that if he wanted to, he would write a report and then send him to a nearby company “hospital” to be looked over. But his girlfriend would not be able to accompany him, he added. She would have to stay.

Pascual seems to have reached a turning point upon hearing this. “I’ll be goddamned!” he said to himself. He dismissed the offer to get checked and walked to a nearby creek. Sitting down, he took his shoes off and cooled his feet in the mountain water. “I threw water on my face and that was the moment I began to think about my mother.” It had been about four years since he had left and not seen her. Pascual wrote to his mother that evening.

A few days later, our young immigrant informed his supervisor that he wasn’t feeling good and wanted to change jobs. The boss replied that it was against the rules for a contracted *renganche* worker to leave his job before it was finished, but Pascual pressed him by stating that he wanted to go to Fresno to look for work—he had heard that there were jobs there and doctors to attend to him if something should develop from the fall. The boss relented, saying that he would send an order for Pascual to pick up his check at the Fresno railroad office, and this is the way Pascual and Rosario landed in Fresno, California, for the first time.

Arriving there in at the beginning of 1918 without a job seems to have become unsettling to Pascual. First, his relationship with Rosario came to an end, finally. Within a couple of weeks of their arrival from the camps in the sierra, she reconnected with some people she knew and obtained a job in a restaurant where men like Pascual congregated for a meal. This facilitated

their eventual split, which further threw Pascual into a spin. These were lean days for him, too, because he remembers having to hock a woolen mackinaw jacket which he wore up in the mountain encampments and held dear. He also found it necessary to avoid running into Rosario, so he went searching for a job in Bakersfield, later returned to Fresno, and subsequently got in touch with another railroad supervisor who ultimately gave him a job with the Santa Fe Railroad, once again. The winter months thus gave way to spring as he worked to lay railroad ties on the main line between Fresno and Bakersfield.

Not feeling obligated to return home to a girlfriend as before, he spent many of his evenings and weekends at the gambling tables that came alive in the railroad camps and in the taverns nearby. He remembers losing so much sometimes that he bet his clothes and blankets. At times, our young *émigré* couldn't even take a girl on a date because he had no money. *Era el vicio de jugar*, he recalled calmly many years later in order to explain his penury at this time. He meant it was the gambling vice that brought him woes. He would even borrow from friends to be able to place a bet. A friend from El Paso who occasionally counseled him got angry one time about his addiction to gambling. It didn't help at all that his luck would sometimes change. One weekend, he won about \$600, and "it allowed [him] to get even with things." He went to Fresno, where he bought some new clothes.

On this trip, he met the woman who would become his next significant partner and, in this way, provide us with a name that would become part of our family lore: Cleofas. My uncle remembered that they met at a Fresno laundry shop where she worked. One aspect of her singularity in our family memory is that she was older than my uncle by about twenty years. "She was a big woman," he remembered, and she had a family with her. "She loved

life,” he added with appreciation—*estaba llena de vida*. She may have helped to wean Pascual away from his gambling ways to some extent because his wantonness seemed to have reached a high point up at about the time he met her. Her own manner suggests she was cut from the same traditional cloth as Carlota and Guadalupe. Obviously, a Mexican immigrant just like Pascual, we don’t know the story of how she turned up in Fresno at this time. My mother and grandmother usually referred to her with a certain touch of respect. Was she a mother substitute for young Pascual, especially after a difficult relationship with Rosario?

In one of two photographs fastened into one of our family photo albums, she stands tall in her whitish dress with an ankle-length hem as she pauses next to my grandmother, Carlota, and holds on to a ten-year-old girl while someone takes the photograph (the girl was identified as her granddaughter). In both photos, she wears a turban-style hat that reflects a touch of dignity as she looks straight at the camera. Summoning his memory, Pascual said that they agreed to create a new life together (*hacer una vida nueva*) on New Year’s Day of 1921, approximately.

This is about the time that my father, Bernabé Gil, entered the picture. He and Pascual met in the Fresno area perhaps as early as 1919, the year Bernabé was supposed to have entered the United States. How my dad turned up in Fresno is unknown, but surely the story was like Pascual’s and the others on my mother’s side of the family: he left his hometown in Michoacán, as we’ll see below, looking for a job—and the railroad lines led the way. Fresno was already one of the central destinations for workers seeking agricultural employment at the time. Pascual told me that he met my father in *blaqueston* (Blackston?) near Fresno and that they worked together many times even before he met my mother.

In summary, the reader may now come to appreciate my uncle's path finding trajectory. Young as he was, he broke away from an atmosphere of subjugation in Santa Rosa. Fearing that Don Manuel, the owner of the hacienda, would hurt him if not kill him for demonstrating a sense of self-reliance considered by the plantation owner to be menacing and which my uncle didn't even realize he was projecting, Pascual abandoned his family and took flight. He inevitably headed north where opportunities beckoned. Despite the flame of revolution that was exerting a pull on other young men, he ultimately ended up in California working in projects designed to unleash the economic capacity of the Golden State. My father would follow a similar and independent path as we'll see later in these pages. In any case, Pascual's flight from Santa Rosa to Fresno in its various stages represents the first step that would introduce the rest of my family to California and ultimately settle in San Fernando.

Introduction

ⁱ In Spanish, Gil is pronounced "hheel," but most of us in the family accepted the English pronunciation with a hard G. The surname Gil is traceable to northern Spain at the time of the wars against the Moors; nevertheless, our family never embraced any related heraldic icons nor did any one pursue any Iberian connections. See information on the surname in, *La Academia de Apellidos* (Barcelona), <http://www.surnames.org/empresa.htm>, accessed May 26, 2011.

ⁱⁱ In the Mexican manner, which employs first name(s) + patronymic + matronymic, their names would be as follows:

Carlota Hernández Ponce
Guadalupe Brambila Hernández de Gil
Bernabé Gil Negrete
Pascual Naranjo Hernández
Miguel Naranjo Hernández

ⁱⁱⁱ Three siblings died before I could interview them: Miguel (Mike), Enrique (Rick), and Marta (Martha).

Chapter 1 Peasants One and All

^{iv} The Hacienda Santa Rosa is one of the many plantations that are included in a study I did of this region. This research was poured into my doctoral thesis later rewritten into *Life in Provincial Mexico: National and Regional History Seen from Mascota, Jalisco, 1867–1972*. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1983).

See the Spanish translation, *Mascota, 1867–1972*. (Guadalajara: Gobierno de Jalisco, Secretaría General Unidad Editorial, 1988).

^v Kennedy, Diana. *The Art of Mexican Cooking: Traditional Mexican Cooking for Aficionados* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), p. 3. Kennedy built her career by living in Mexico's back country in the 1960s and observing and capturing invaluable details about food preparation in the traditional Mexican style.

^{vi} Acta de Nacimiento, 1880, entry of September 25, 1880, in the Registro Civil de Mascota, Jalisco.

^{vii} Aztec or any other central Mexican Indian cultural connections were weak in Jalisco. See a discussion of the cultural evolution of Indian cultures in Jalisco in *Historia de Jalisco. Tomo I. Desde los tiempos prehistóricos hasta el signo xvii* (Guadalajara: Gobierno de Jalisco, Secretaría General Unidad Editorial), 1980, pp. 124-126.

^{viii} Despite the fact that Guadalupe Gil attended primary school for about two years only, she dedicated herself in her last decades to recording her memoirs by hand with clear determination—she made sure I came into their possession. Her grammar and punctuation is all her own and her spelling reveals limited schooling. This did not stop her from recording her memories because she wrote three documents with similar information. Her memory observed a defined sequence of events which can be appreciated in each of the three manuscripts. I remember many of these same stories and situations from many years of their being repeated to me and my siblings. It is possible she forgot she had written the first or the second manuscript when she started up the third. I entitled each one by employing the first word or string of words she wrote. Thus she wrote “Pues Acerca del Modo de Mantenerse,” to which I added ‘Adición A,’” “Recuerdos de mi niñez, como en el año 1916,” and “Recuerdos.” Any words or thoughts attributed to her are taken from these primary sources unless otherwise noted. See more details in the bibliography.

^{ix} The cause of her death was recorded as *reumas* or rheumatism. I recorded this fact in handwritten field notes I made in the 1970s based on the local Registro Civil (“I RPP, Reg Civ Data”). Registered causes of death were highly inaccurate in the nineteenth century. See “Reported Causes of Death” in my *Life in Provincial Mexico*, pp. 88–89.

^x Soledad was Rosendo Peña's mother. He was my ninety-year old uncle who still rode about fifteen miles from his *ejido* farm into Mascota every Sunday on an old mule to visit his daughter, Pilar, when I lived there. He was married to Trinidad Peña, and they lived in the ex-Hacienda Galope. The hacienda had been owned by Jesús Fernández, reputedly the father of the famous screen star of the 1950s, Esther Fernández. Pilar would give Rosendo sugar, salt, and other staples to take back to his *ejido* with him. I interviewed Rosendo in 1972 and talked with him many times in those days.

^{xi} *Life in Provincial Mexico*. There are many other history books written about this vibrant and controversial period in Mexican history.

^{xii} Guadalupe Gil, “Pues Acerca del Modo de Mantenerse, ‘Adición A:’” handwritten manuscript, 5pp.

^{xiii} *Ibid*.

^{xiv} Lau is an abbreviation of Estanislao, a Gothic-origin name. Aunt (or *Tía*) Lau was Carlota's older sister.

^{xv} Naranjo, Pascual. Interviews recorded on tape by the author beginning August 19, 1974, San Fernando, California. Any words or thoughts attributed to him are taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

^{xvi} Naranjo, Miguel. Interviews recorded on tape by the author beginning May 3, 1978, San Fernando, California. Any words or thoughts attributed to him are taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

^{xvii} Secretaría de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística, *Estadísticas sociales del Porfiriato, 1877–1910* (México: 1956), p. 10.

^{xviii} Mother obtained two typed copies of her birth record in 1967, one dated October 31 and the other December 5. The first copy was copied out of the register in typewritten form by Rev. Ignacio Valdez and the second copy was by Rev. J. Jesús Santiago. Both copies are in the possession of the author.

^{xix} James W. Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie's *Mexico visto en el siglo XX: Entrevistas de historia oral* (Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Investigaciones Económicas, 1969).

^{xx} See an early discussion of *ejidos* in Frank Tannenbaum's *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (New York: Knopf, 1956). Also see Gil's *Life in Provincial Mexico*, pp. 151–154.

^{xxi} The official party later known as the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) organized the nation's peasants into voting blocs that were managed by party leaders. While the regime established government agencies charged with assisting *ejidatarios*, corruption and mismanagement hobbled the results. See for example, Merilee S. Grindle's *Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico: A Case Study in Public Policy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977).

^{xxii} See David C. Bailey's *Viva Cristo Rey! The Cristero Rebellion and the Church–State Conflict in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas, 1974).

Chapter 2 The Young Rebel Goes North

^{xxiii} Diccionario Porrúa. *Historia, Biografía, y Geografía de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1995).

^{xxiv} See for example the map on p. 60 in Sergio López Sánchez's *El Teatro Angela Peralta de Mazatlán: Del Desahucio a la Resurrección* (Mazatlán: Ayuntamiento de Mazatlán, 2004).

^{xxv} Venustiano Carranza served as the unifying leader of several armed groups that rebelled against the Díaz government and later against Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. He became president of Mexico in 1917.

^{xxvi} Loyo Camacho, Martha Beatriz. *Joaquín Amaro y el proceso de institucionalización del ejército mexicano, 1917-1931* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004, p. 22.

^{xxvii} These were terms used by the rank and file. *Galleta* is the feminine version of *gallo* or rooster. An aggressive man may be called a *gallo*. *Soldadera* is a feminine twist to the Spanish word for soldier, *soldado*.

^{xxviii} *New York Times*, January 9, 1921 ("Seek to Grow Guayule: Domestication of Wild Rubber Plant Expected to Cut Prices."). Agricultural Research Center. US Department of Agriculture. Arid Lands Publications, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9A03E5DE153CE533A2575AC0A9679C946095D6CF>, October 2006. At the time of this writing, guayule was also being tested as a possible source for latex to make gloves and for biofuel.

^{xxix} Orsı, Richard J. *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the West, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 33.

^{xxx} These are the controversial findings of one of the earliest observers of Mexican Americans in the United States; Victor S. Clark, "Mexican Labor in the United States," *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor*, No. 78 (Washington DC: 1908); pp. 466-521 as quoted in Charles Wollenberg, "Working on El Traque: The Pacific Electric Strike of 1903," in Norris Hundley Jr. (ed.), *The Chicano* (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1975), p. 99.

^{xxxi} Wollenberg, p. 99.

^{xxxii} In 1920, the number was actually 576,673. See Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in 1920, Vol. I, Population, 1920* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1921), p. 82.

^{xxxiii} Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum Seventy-Five Years of Progress. An Historical Sketch of the Southern Pacific 1869-1944 [with [Historical Map of Southern Pacific's Rail Lines](#)] by Erle Heath Editor, *The Southern Pacific Bulletin* (Transcribed and annotated by [Bruce C. Cooper](#)) http://cpr.org/Museum/SP_1869-1944/index.html#Map, accessed November 30, 2011.

^{xxxiv} Orsı, p. 27.