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Dialogs: Talking about Diversity

Mexicans in the Midwest: A Family History

Mexicans in Detroit

My grandfather, José Santos Herrada was a stern man, proud, hard-working, and so patriotic that he did not trust the government at all. “What is your nationality?” he would ask everyone, including his grandchildren. It was a trick question. If you didn’t answer “American” you were immediately corrected. On winter Sundays in the 1960s and 70s he would take however many of his grandchildren he could gather up to visit the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts (in the summer he would take us for picnics on Belle Isle, an island park in the middle of the Detroit River, where we would eat tacos or tamales he made for us). At the museum, we would go directly to the murals, and he would explain the history and the layers of symbolism, or sometimes he would just be silent and allow us to soak in their beauty and the rich atmosphere of the room. Not being a very affectionate man, this is how he demonstrated his love for us. This bright and open space, loud with echoes and whispers of the past and present is a place of comfort and warm memories for me. It connects me to my family and our history.

In 1932 Mexican muralist Diego Rivera began a year-long project of painting Detroit Industry on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The 27 panel fresco, commissioned by Edsel Ford, depicts the inside of the Ford Rouge Plant as the artist saw it. In the mural, people of all races work side by side building automobiles, an industry at that time native to Detroit. Other panels illustrate technological advances in science and medicine, along with the bounties of the earth and the beginnings of life. It is one of the great treasures of the city and a tribute to the working class. Detroiters of every generation are familiar with it. Many of us have the images forever seared in our memories. In more ways than one, it is part of who I am and where I came from.

Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo spent that year in Detroit witnessing the dire conditions of the Depression: hunger, poverty, joblessness and homelessness. Despite this he was able to create this masterpiece, which I took for granted growing up, but am awed by it every time I see it.

In the years following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1914), Henry Ford sent recruiters throughout Mexico to bring workers on the promise of $5 per day to build cars in Detroit, which was big money compared to the devastated economy of post revolutionary Mexico. They came north to build a new life for themselves and their families. There were jobs for anyone who wanted to work and the Diaspora or "Mexico de afuera" flourished.

After the cut-off of Asians under the Immigration Act of 1917, agricultural employers began to look for alternative sources of cheap labor. The Act which excluded immigrants from China, Japan, India and the Philippines, also excluded idiots, feeble-minded persons, criminals, epileptics, insane persons, alcoholics, professional beggars, all persons mentally or physically defective, polygamists, and anarchists. Once it was decided by the agricultural industry that Mexicans were well suited to stoop labor (often referring to them as "peons"), the lobbyists used their influence to exempt Mexicans from the literacy test and from having to pay the eight dollar tax required of everyone else, allowing thousands of workers to cross the border to work seasonally and be sent home when the season ended. This is important to remember because many people who came to the U.S. around this time did not have or need documents. When the demand for their labor diminished, Mexicans, unlike other immigrants, could be easily deported back to their country of origin.

Soon after my grandparents married in 1918 they came to Detroit. My grandfather first worked on the railroad, but eventually took a job on the line at Ford Motor Company. José and Elisa set up house and began raising a family. By 1930 they had 6 children. They had no intention of returning to Mexico—they had nothing to return to. They were rural peasants and had come in pursuit of a better life.

<u>Repatriation</u>

The repatriation of Mexicans is one of the least known and most dramatic chapters in the history of the U.S. Latino community and an historic example of racial profiling. The Repatriation Program was enacted by the US Government in the early 1930s as an austerity measure after the Great Depression. The economic situation was used to justify massive deportations of Mexicans throughout the country. From 1929 to 1939, between 500,000 and one million Mexicans were "repatriated" to Mexico, despite the fact that most of them were children born in the US. Mexicans, mainly from California, Illinois, Texas, Colorado and Michigan were targeted. The American Federation of Labor clamored for protection of "American" jobs and joined sides with racists who were worried about the defilement of white America and who viewed Mexicans as undesirables. Social workers pressured families to return to Mexico and helped arrange for their trips. Repatriation targeted Mexicans in Detroit due to its heavy concentration of industry. Over 60% of these people were U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry, such as my father and his siblings who were all born in Detroit.

By the mid 1930s, the Mexican community in Detroit was largely diminished; it is believed that the City lost two thirds of its Mexican population during that time, regardless of citizenship status. Although not everyone returned to Mexico, those who chose to stay were clearly made to feel unwelcome. They were intimidated by the Welfare Department and the Church and pressured to go back, although some had never set foot in Mexico. Even Diego Rivera campaigned for people to return to their homeland in order to fulfill his political ideal: a vision where workers return to Mexico, establish co-operative farms and (for the people who were now trained in the automotive industry) worker-owned factories, creating a socialist society. Although there was a promise of social equality brought about by the Revolution, the country was even less equipped than the U.S. to handle the economic shortfalls caused by the Depression. There weren't enough resources to cope with the influx of repatriates. The land that people were promised for farming was arid. Starvation and disease were common.

Detroit was hit especially hard by the Depression. Five thousand homeless people sought shelter each night; 75% of Ford Rouge (the world's largest car factory) workers were laid off, my grandfather among them. Although he was determined to stay in the U.S. he and my

grandmother had to travel far from Detroit to Northern Michigan to find work. Their children were temporarily sent to Mexico to be cared for by their paternal grandmother. He sent money for their keep, but he found out later his mother had instead given it to the Catholic Church—making it his lifelong enemy.

It is still not known how many people reached Mexico. They boarded trains and buses, they drove cars and trucks, some even walked. There is documentation that many died along the way of illnesses due to the brutal journey. Interviews with my family have been very difficult to obtain because the memories are too painful to recount. My aunt said simply that upon their return, "We were never the same." In Mexico they were so poor they had no clothes to wear to school and were behind in their grade levels. They had little to eat and were malnourished and lacked access to medical care. My uncle nearly died of small pox. One of the smaller children, an aunt I never knew, did perish from a simple disease. My grandmother was so broken hearted she never talked about it to anyone. When the children returned to Detroit two years later, they no longer spoke English; they had to attend classes for the foreign born despite the fact that they were American born. My grandparents worried that they would be pressured again to leave or send their children away. They didn't know what to do to avoid it except to assimilate. They chose not to live near Mexicans, and urged their children to speak only English; just fit in and be quiet. Due to this constraint many Mexican-Americans do not speak Spanish. As adults, my father and his siblings chose not to marry Mexican-Americans. Their looks and their name, however, gave them away and they still endured bigotry and discrimination.

For many decades, and still today, it is difficult to get people to talk about the deportations and repatriation. In addition to the fear that it could happen again, there is a collective amnesia. This kept the fact of massive deportations of American born and Mexican citizens suppressed for eighty years. Indeed, those who were deported did not fully understand all the implications that would affect their family and community for generations to come. The children did not understand why they were sent to a foreign land. Through oral history interviews which I will discuss later, we have heard stories of children being removed from

school and sent with or without their parents to Mexico, exposed to disease and hunger, and upon arrival, finding conditions worse than they imagined, with famine, poverty and lack of basic medical care. The Depression was everywhere, not only in the U.S.

Telling the Story

In 2001 a group of people from Detroit, mostly relatives or descendants of repatriados, including myself and my sister (who has, unlike anyone else in my entire extended family, completely embraced her Mexican heritage, including Latinizing her first name and spending much of her time working with illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America), embarked on an oral history project. Calling ourselves Fronteras Norteñas, we researched and gathered documentation from government, labor, corporate and church archives and recorded interviews from whoever was willing to talk about it. Being the only trained archivist in the group made me a valuable asset to the project. I was able to track down sources of documentation and locate the right person to speak to.

Some people came forward to tell their stories, but for many, including my father and his older siblings, the shame of what happened to them as children remained a barrier; they are conspicuously absent from the historical record. Our group was awarded a grant from the City of Detroit to produce a 30-minute documentary film. *Los Repatriados: Exiles from the Promised Land*, is now being used in school curricula. It has been publicly screened in Detroit and around the country and broadcast on PBS. The records of our research have been deposited in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library.

In 2004 Fronteras Norteñas was invited to Mexico by Professor Fernando Alanis of El Colegio de San Luis who was working on the same project from south of the border, locating and interviewing people who had never returned to the U.S. after being repatriated, despite many of them having US citizenship. About 25 people including about 8 from my family traveled to San Luis Potosi, the birthplace of my grandmother. Neither my father nor any of his siblings who were sent to Mexico in 1930 chose to come. It is the last place in the world they would

want to visit—for the rest of us, it was the first time we had ever made such a trip. We also made a pilgrimage to Aguas Calientes, the birthplace of my grandfather. We have no relatives there that we know of; however, visiting the places I had heard stories of all my life was an emotional experience.

My grandfather was eventually called back to work at Ford, and retired in the 1960s with a good UAW pension. My father started working at Chrysler at the age of 16 in about 1944. Shortly after marrying my mother, he was drafted into the Army and served during the Korean War. He wrote to her every day, and she carefully saved all his letters. After being discharged, he returned to his job at Chrysler. Possessing a talent for drawing, he attended Chrysler Institute of Engineering and became a design engineer. Chrysler was the only auto company that allowed white collar workers to remain in the union, as long as they were not part of the management. He stayed there until retirement after 43 years with an excellent UAW pension. He was loyal to his union (Local 412) and passed up several offers of promotion to management because he firmly believed the union protected him from discrimination. The days of good autoworker jobs and UAW pensions are now over, but they allowed my family to rise to a middle class standard of living.

My father passed away on December 14, 2010 after a year-long battle with cancer. He was 82 and had been married to my mother for 59 ½ years. During that year I was very much a part of his care giving. Since his passing I have spent a lot of time reflecting on his life.

My mother came from poor farmers of Irish and German backgrounds. They too struggled for a better life for their children and their children's children. Emigrating from Europe to Canada they endured famines, economic hardships, political repression, disease, hunger and discrimination. My mother knew the racism my father faced and stood up to it whenever it presented itself. "I am married to a Mexican," she would say, if she ever heard anyone make a disparaging remark.

Throughout my life my father shared many memories, mostly good ones. Although he grew up very poor, he had a wonderful sense of humor and was able to laugh about some of his experiences. On occasion he also shared the bad memories, but it was clear this was difficult for

him. He went through life feeling the sorrow of being sent away from his parents at young age, and the humiliation his parents carried was conveyed to him like a genetic trait. He hid from his anguish yet it is carried from generation to generation. I don't know how one escapes it.

It is extremely humbling to think about what my parents and grandparents went through in order to make a better life for me. The hardships and the sacrifices they made seem almost Dickensian. They paid dearly for my slice of the American Dream. Their child-rearing was traditional; you work for what you want and make your own way in the world. I never considered asking them for anything beyond the bare minimum. When I was 12 and able to earn my own money, mostly from babysitting and odd jobs, my parents stopped buying my clothes. Because they worked hard and made sacrifices I had certain choices, not many, but certainly more than they did. They were willing to put me through college and were somewhat financially prepared to do so. I was not given much direction, but there was a general hope and expectation that I would achieve an easier life than they had. Instead I chose to work a series of crummy jobs until I understood why they wanted me to go to college. I applied for Pell Grants, worked full time and put myself through college and graduate school. They are very proud of me and satisfied with my achievements and that in turn makes me feel good about what I've done.

Nothing about my upbringing directed me towards any particular career path. But lately I wonder if my choice was subconsciously influenced by my family's desire to stay under the radar and not be noticed. That's my natural comfort zone, and one of the reasons I enjoy working in an archive. It is quiet work. People don't notice archivists. And it was due to my parent's sacrifices that the door was opened for me to discover archives. It is my good fortune to have found my calling in this profession. The world I now find myself in (research, scholarship, academia, archives), is far removed from the one into which I was born. Still, I will never lose sight of the obstacles my ancestors overcame.

I believe it is essential to share the stories of immigrants, but for many, the memories are heartbreaking. They are far more than lamentable tales; they are crushing events embodying the shame of poverty, illiteracy, humiliation, rejection, and fear, affecting

subsequent generations. I know archivists understand this in theory.

For my part, I am duty bound to examine my responsibility in bringing their hardships to light. I feel I must honor their noble efforts and sacrifices that secured—in contrast to their own—an immeasurably better life for those of us who are their offspring. However, I'm obliged to balance that imperative with a sensitivity that takes into account the long calcified walls of containment and instinct toward privacy that kept their shame from view.

Alas, history repeats itself. President Obama's administration has deported 400,000 immigrants since he took office. An untold number of families have been broken apart. And I have to ask if our own community of archivists has distinguished itself from this regrettable tradition. I struggle with the reality of the lack of diversity in our profession and wonder why it has been so difficult to achieve. I perceive a lack of initiative, and a tendency to ghettoize what few people of color there are among us. The only places where their voices are heard are within the confines of their roundtables, or through diversity committees. Why isn't there a place for archivists of color at the table? Why is the leadership in our profession singularly white?

Recently there has been a modicum of public acknowledgement of the hidden plight of Mexican Americans. In 2006 the State of California apologized for the repatriation; it was a start, but an apology so long overdue carries little weight. In a more significant action, Senator William Delgado (D-IL) introduced a Bill in 2009 requiring the history of the repatriation to be taught in the public schools in Illinois. The bill passed and is now Public Act 096-0629.

My family was not militant nor were they proponents of "Chicano Power". They were hard working, regular people who just wanted to be left alone to raise their family and live their lives. Earlier I mentioned that I don't attribute my career path to any particular familial or parental influence, but I can say now that my becoming an archivist has figured powerfully in my zeal to understand and preserve the authentic history of my own family and the repatriation. In my heart I realize this paper is in part a tribute to my father. His death was a tremendous loss to myself and my family and has, for the past several months, profoundly colored my world view.

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