

A DRAFT

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MY UNCLE CROSSED THE BORDER WITHOUT DOCUMENTS

By Carlos B. Gil



Figure 1 Miguel Naranjo at 45

MY UNCLE finally arrived at the Mexican border town of Nogales, intent on crossing over to the United States. Like countless others, Miguel located the central plaza and “met a young man very much like me,” he told me one afternoon when I interviewed him many years later. They discovered mutual interests in stepping over the line and agreed to do it together the next day. “They allowed people to cross,” he explained to me with a touch of sheepiness recognizing that he really knew he was not supposed to. “I don't know whether that was good or bad to cross illegally,” he offered.

He talked it over with his mother (Carlota, my grandmother) who had also traveled with him to the border from central Mexico but was not crossing at that time. “Once on the other side I’m going to get a job and I’ll send you money,” he assured her. It was 1922 and he was 20 years old and

he was her favorite son. They had shared a lot already, just in traveling to the border, so she agreed to let him go, reluctantly. She knew she could count on him and she also knew that she wouldn't be left alone; her daughter, my mother, Guadalupe, stood by her side, only 17 years-old.

I interviewed my *tío* (uncle) as part of an oral history assignment at UCLA in the late 1970s and I also questioned other members of my family, recording their answers and finally writing a book about our family immigration experience. It's entitled, *We Became Mexican American: How Our Immigrant Family Survived to Pursue the American Dream*, and in it we share fragments of our collective lives beginning in the 1920s, when we were a small family, all the way to the 1970s when we, the children, grew up.

Resuming my *tío*'s story, he and his friend crossed the border at night, staying away from the main road going north toward Tucson. There were few if any fences marking the boundary in those days, and the U.S. border guards tended to stay posted inside their office cubicles at the main official crossings. Miguel searched his memory and added,

We guided ourselves by watching for automobile traffic part of the time and watching for the trains too. We walked half the night and slept under a bridge. The next day we arose and continued following the railroad track. The ground was full of brush and trees in some areas, and bare in others.

Indeed, walking north on the desert floor, flanking the railroad track that partly parallels the old Nogales-Tucson road, and now the new Interstate 19, they stepped past groves of gnarly mesquite. They also walked around

clumps of ocotillo and cylindrical cholla cactus, as many scaly and luminous reptiles slithered away from them in their trudge north. Unknowingly, they ambled past the crumbling Tumacacori missions built in the 1690's by the Pimas, under the direction of Father Kino, and paced not too far away from the ruins of the old Spanish fort known as the Presidio de Tubac, erected to ward off unfriendly Indians 170 years earlier, now decaying.

In the coolness of the morning, about thirty-five miles south of Tucson, near present day Green Valley, they landed a ride. A Mexican man in a truck stopped and said to them, "You're lucky. You've gone past the most dangerous part of the road, so I'll take you into Tucson." Miguel and his buddy thanked the man from the bottom of their hearts when he dropped them off right in the middle of Tucson. He would be the first of many Good Samaritans driving a vehicle along the immigrant trail and willing to help my pioneering ancestors.

Not having eaten a proper meal since Nogales, they were able to put a few Mexican and American coins together and bravely entered a small café. Like many eating establishments in Tucson today, the waitresses spoke Spanish—lucky for our young explorers—but the fare was American. This is how my uncle and his fellow adventurer gulped down their first meal in the United States, a plateful of pancakes, a new type of breakfast for them. "That's what we ate!" he said with giddy delight, subtly drawing a contrast with more substantial fare. "It was our first American meal! It was good too!" he noted cheerfully.

Like so much of northern Mexico, Tucson also looked and felt different to Miguel. Its dry, sunny climate and its diverse blend of desert-hardened people stimulated him in a way he didn't forget. He tried putting it into words when we spoke: "We noted a different atmosphere," he told me,

“different even from Nogales. There were a lot of people on the street—Mexicans and Americans—the town just looked different in my eyes.”

The opportunity to work did not wait long, however. This is what he said:

Afterward, we went to the *placita* [the Tucson town square] and a Mexican man came to us and said, “I need about thirty-five men to work on the railroad! I need to take them to the State of Oregon, so anyone wanting to go only has to give me their name.” I talked with my friend and we decided to get on the list. The man didn’t ask for documents, just our names. He told us to go to a certain hotel while he finished gathering the rest of the men he needed and from there we would leave that night.

Like his older brother, Pascual, who crossed the border five years earlier, Miguel and his vagabond friend joined the legions of men contracted on the spot at the border. These were the *enganchados* [the hooked ones], a word the men themselves must have made up because I don’t doubt they felt hooked up, literally. To be sure, they stood for America’s great thirst for workers in these years, especially in the West. The fact is that my uncle and his buddy helped fill that day’s need for thirty-five more railroad workers—part of the thousands enlisted at the border this way.

Miguel and his friend gathered at the appointed Tucson hotel at 6 p.m. where they met the contractor who had jotted down their names at the plaza. He directed them to the train where chow was waiting and it wasn’t very long before Miguel and his companion, and others, made a beeline for the food tables loaded with canned tuna, bread and a variety of other rations.

“They fed us,” my tío observed in a satisfied way, and the enganchados were soon on their way, into the interior of the United States. They knew little about where they were going and even less about what they would find. But America needed them.

How can we fully appreciate why a young fellow, like Miguel, would want to cross a desert on foot with little or no food or water, not knowing where he would wind up? He never fully explained it to his children, and I did not ask him exactly. But, as with other migrants over time, I believe the answer lies in the larger context of their lives, as in my uncle’s larger migration story.

First, the family had to stay together. His brother, Pascual, had forged the route five years earlier, as I describe in my book. In a grammarless letter he bid the rest of the family to follow him. Leave the *hacienda* (plantation) because the landowner will want to rape Guadalupe, sooner or later, he had written. Carlota knew fully well about such things and so she agreed and cast aside enormous hurdles to pull her fourteen year-old daughter away and, along with Miguel, join Pascual in the new land called California and thus keep the family together. This was the biggest pulling factor.



Figure 2 Miguel employed at an ice plant in Bakersfield.

The Mexican Revolution also played a part in the decision to emigrate, though less directly in young Miguel's willingness to journey on foot to a strange new land. The great tumult that became the Revolution of 1910 arose when he was eight years old and it did not simmer down until he landed in California. His older brother, however, was swept up in the turmoil that induced armed horsemen across the land destroying anything in sight, government buildings, churches and farms, though in the end the great rebellion brought major changes to the country. In any case, Pascual was the kind who would join the fight and thus found himself on the Arizona border, as a result, chasing after revolutionaries. One day he threw away his rifle and abandoned his horse and walked to Tucson. He too was conscripted to work on American railroad tracks.

Miguel finally met up with his brother in Fresno, a happy occasion, without a doubt. He held many jobs; he worked as a miner in the sierras

above Fresno, at an ice plant in Bakersfield, in the orange groves of the San Fernando Valley, alongside my father, and in his later years landscaping green areas alongside California's busy highways. He settled in the City of San Fernando where he married. Together, with his wife, they had twelve children whom he adamantly supported with singular self-respect and by the skin of his teeth. He never faltered. He was steady and dignified. He died there at the age of 92.

Miguel's story counts as part of the larger saga of my family's immigration from Mexico to the United States in the 1920's. It's the story of my ancestors, peasants all, pulling up stakes from their rustic adobe shack and literally trudging over jungle slopes, sleeping on beaches, crossing the arid U.S.-Mexican border, working at odd jobs and finally arriving in southern California years later, where my siblings and I would come to this world. Our story fits perfectly into America's mosaic of workers arriving, eager to lean hard into a job and add their energy on behalf of a thriving society. Our chronicle is part of the little known south-to-north version of immigrants coming to America, instead of the better known east-to-west, Europe-to-America.



Is Miguel's story unique to its time, with little or no application today? You will note the title of this article and agree that crossing the U.S.–Mexican border without documents is still a reality today. People do it by the thousands each month because they too are responding to the pulling effects of U.S. jobs. They come because they are available to them, on farms, in non-union construction jobs, in meat packing plants, and so on. The Mexican economy has grown enormously since the days of my uncle but the folks who cannot yet find a niche opt to travel to the U.S. to find employment. In the 1920's and 1930's job agents awaited them at the border, like Miguel informed me, as did the rest of my immigrant forefathers. My grandma and my mom also signed up with their own job agents who intercepted them after stepping on U.S. soil no more than a hundred yards and so did thousands of other Mexican job seekers at the time.

America's economy still functions as a titanic magnet attracting the loose filaments south of the border; it has been a decisive factor in Mexican immigration, and it will not stop tomorrow. A Trumpian wall will not cancel the magnet.

Why did I write *We Became Mexican American*? I owed it to them, my *viejos*, my old folks, because they self-consciously shared their memories with me about coming to America. Not only did they want to help me complete my university training, since the interviews constituted a part of a class assignment, they also wanted me to know what they experienced, and they wanted others to learn through me. They wanted to leave a legacy

of their struggle to become part of America. I am so glad I rose to the challenge.

