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## Mexican Dreams, American Reality: One Family's Journey

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

# MEXICAN DREAMS, AMERICAN REALITY: ONE FAMILY'S JOURNEY

by Robert C. Dash

The immigration of large numbers of Mexicans to the United States over the past century has been prompted by structural linkages and profound economic inequalities between the two countries, and has been sustained by social networks which weave together communities of origin with "receiving" communities. Several complex national and international developments--among them, the restructuring and globalization into Mexico of U.S. productive sectors, and the increasingly tenuous economic situation of millions of rural Mexicans--will ensure the continued northward movement of hundreds of thousand, perhaps millions, of rural Mexicans through the end of this decade. Often eclipsed by the scale of Mexican immigration and frequently obscured by the recurring social, cultural, and political backlash to it in the United States, are the very human stories that accompany Mexican immigrants.

Studies of immigration to the United States have tended to focus on either macro-level trends in the political economies of the sending and receiving societies or on micro-level factors which influence the decisions of individuals to relocate (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991); and women's experiences have generally been considered less important than those of male immigrants (Brettel and Simon, 1986). This essay, however, focuses on a Mexican family, in its rural community of origin and after its immigration to the United States, as the mediating unit between the macro- and micro-level dimensions of immigration; and it draws on the biographic accounts of a mother and her daughter in an ef-

fort to recover and reconstruct their family's experiences. The biographic material and photographs (collected in 1993 and 1994) come from Francisca (Panchita) Fernández, who was born in 1918 the youngest of five children to Alejandra García and Enedino Fernández, in Canelas, Durango; and her daughter, Irma Fernández, who was born in Canelas in 1944. The essay concentrates on the period from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Canelas, Durango, is located in one of the most sparsely populated and isolated regions of north-central Mexico, in a high valley in the Sierra Madre Occidental on the western side of the continental divide. Although light aircraft began infrequent flights into Canelas in the early 1940s, horseback was the only effective mode of transportation in and out of the area until the mid-1950s. Even today Canelas is linked to the outside world (via Topia to the north) by only a single serpentine, unimproved road that hangs from mountains with elevations in the three thousand meter range.

In 1601 the Portuguese Captain Mateo Canelas was commissioned by the *Audiencia de Guadalajara* to put down the revolt of several thousand Acaxees, a revolt that had been touched off by the maltreatment they received at the hands of the Spanish while working in the silver mines at Topia. In the course of this action, Canelas founded the *pueblo* that was to bear his name (Gamiz, 1978). Silver mining was Canelas' principal economic activity during the colonial period, but it ceased to be profitable with the playing out of the most accessible deposits. The population of Canelas now sustains itself

largely by self-sufficient agriculture--raising cattle, growing wheat, maize, truck crops and coffee, and taking advantage of the area's abundant temperate and tropical fruits (*guayaba, chirimoya, limes and oranges, bananas, aguacate, mango, zapote, apricots, and apples*)--and emigration.

**Panchita Fernández:** *There were 800 people in Canelas, it wasn't deserving of the title of a town. The*



The first motor vehicles arrive in Canelas in 1957. The electrical lines signaled the advent of electricity in the early 1950s. A small water-powered generator provided two hours of electricity to the plaza each night during the week, four hours on Saturday and Sunday nights (Photographer unknown, photo postcard)



*cabecera municipio was located in Tamazula or Topia. Topia always had very large mines, it still produces silver. Tamazula was a larger town on the border between Durango and Sinoloa. It had more productive land and was also connected directly to Culiacan by land route where trucks could come and go. It wasn't possible to cultivate on a large scale in Canelas because it was mountainous, with no irrigated land, and was dependent on rainfall. People left to find a more productive way of life. Family on both sides went to Culiacan or Durango, places where they could educate themselves and work. Those who stayed participated in local affairs--government, the local orchestra, in different businesses. My father [Enedino Fernández] participated in the local government, he was sometimes the secretary or the treasurer. He also had a general goods store.*

In the following passage, Irma Fernández, the second oldest of Panchita's five children, describes the family as the center of a web of personal relationships in Canelas. She also expresses a strong attachment to Canelas' land, rivers, and mountains, and she unequivocally associates this clear *sense of place* with her expectations regarding proper personal comportment. "Being from Canelas" refers not only to one's ties to that specific *pueblito*, but also has to do with how one is expected to conduct oneself, wherever one might be.

**Irma Fernández:** *We were a very poor family, but not having a lot of clothes didn't bother me, having to go to the stream to get water or wash clothes didn't bother me; in our home we all shared in the work. As a small child being hungry bothered me... My grandmother on my mother's side of the family, Alejandra García, had lived all her life in Canelas and was used to having a lot of space to cultivate flowers and food, to allow her animals to roam. It rained a lot, there were streams*

*and rivers, spring water that was very delicious to drink. Our house was made of adobe, was ample and spacious and had been in the family for generations. It had a lot of history... The cultural life revolved around the school, the activities consisted of songs, stories and dances. There was a lot of storytelling even among the children, kind of a passing down of myths having to do with Canelas, or fairy stories and other stories... There were certain values and morals that people lived by, although not everyone followed them. You treat people respectfully, behave with modesty, speak properly. When people are hungry, you feed them, share what you have. Everyone collaborates in the work.*

Facile generalizations about the Mexican family as a patriarchal, hierarchal institution distorts the many widely varying arrangements that exist. The following text illustrates the influence on Irma of the very independent women in her family and of other women in Canelas. The expectations that she learned regarding what women were capable of, and what was demanded of them, contradict the prevalent image of Mexican women as dependent and subservient. Her words remind us of the distinction between the status and role of women in practice as opposed to their status and role at the level of ideology (Brettel and Simon, 1986; for a study which focuses on gendered power relations within Mexican migrant households, see Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992).

**Irma Fernández:** *My grandmother [Alejandra] was a very strong woman, she worked with her father from the time she was very young, plowing the fields and helping to run the farm. She was the curandera in town, she somehow had learned about herbal remedies and some of them were quite sophisticated. So the people in town would come to her to be healed. My mother was selected from a very young age to participate in the government's*



**Alejandra García at the age of 23 years and her sister Hermelinda, 1904.**

*effort to teach literacy to the rural population. So I grew up knowing that women could do pretty much what they wanted. My mother's advice was always "que nos prepararemos y nos educarnos para no tener depender de nadie". After I was in the United States I heard all about machismo. It was confusing to me, I began to think that my opportunities as a woman had come to me because I came to the United States. In retrospect, it wasn't really true. I remember las hermanas García [in Canelas] who rode horseback, wore guns, and together ran a large ranch with cattle and fruit trees. They "wore the pants" literally, gave orders to the men and to the women and, at the same time, were very feminine. To me they were just regular women.*

In 1933, at the age of 15 years, Panchita joined the teaching corps that had been established by the Mexican government in an effort to combat illiteracy and the commanding influence of the Catholic Church in rural Mexico. Panchita remained



a rural teacher until 1949. Her words below are significantly at odds with the popular image of the "typical" Mexican immigrant as being unskilled, illiterate and uninterested in formal education. Irma also recalls the esteem with which the rural population viewed education, both as an ideal and for how it could be used to improve the lives of people.

**Panchita Fernández:** *José Vasconcelos, the Secretary of Education under the government of President Elias Calles, had the idea to take graduates of the sixth grade, mostly of the ages of 13-15, to go to even the most remote places to teach people to read, write and to count, and to teach them the difference between fanaticism and religion [a reference to the cristero movement of the late 1920s]. It was a very effective campaign; we helped small towns and rancherias to take advantage of education--not only the children but the adults. From the sixth grade, the*



**Panchita Fernández, ca. 1943.**

*highest grade level available in Canelas, I left to represent our town. The schools had three hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon, and with the adults we worked from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. I was a country teacher for 17 years...My motive to emigrate [in 1949] was to educate my children, it was not to stay in the United States permanently. The idea was that the children would become educated and then return to Mexico where they would be better off in terms of job opportunity.*

**Irma Fernández:** *In both my grandmother's and my mother's generations la educación y aprender was stressed, and knowledgeable men and women were well regarded if they contributed and if they led upstanding moral lives. Women who chose to [pursue education] should and could receive support...I remember that [after immigrating to the United States in 1955] the counselors, when it came time to decide what I should do after high school, asked me what my mother and father did--my mother was [then] a sewing machine operator and my step-father was a sheet metal mechanic. I was told that I ought to go to work in a factory. What my grandmother and mother raised us with was that the endeavor is what is important, it is fulfilling your destino. My mother encouraged [all of her children] to study hard so that we could go to the university. So even though my counselor said that I would probably fail, I thought that what's important is that I try.)*

While immigrants from the state of Durango first arrived in California in the late 1840s, worked the mines of Nevada and Arizona in the late 1850s, and entered the mines of Colorado in the 1860s (Corwin, 1978), the enduring roots of the flow of immigrants from the state were planted when the *Porfiriato* capitalist modernization project at the beginning of the twentieth century denied the rural population little or no access to land or to mining jobs (Cardoso, 1980). Pushed out of the



**Panchita's brothers at the time of their father's death in 1923 -- José, 17 (left) and Enedino, 13.**

state by the degenerating economic situation, and by the revolutionary upheaval beginning in 1910, immigrants from Durango were also drawn to the U.S. Southwest by economic inducements in agriculture and mining. Facilitating the stream of immigrants, a direct rail connection tied the city of Durango to the northern border in 1910 (Cardoso, 1980); and a rail line to southern California, completed in 1923, resulted in a shift of the major immigrant stream away from Texas and New Mexico (Jones, 1984). Growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States characterized the late 1920s and culminated in the widespread repatriation of Mexicans beginning in 1929. Nevertheless, emigration from Canelas continued through this period, as Panchita recounts below the emigration of the first member of her family in 1927.

**Panchita Fernández:** *People from other pueblos came through Canelas as a stocking-up point on their way north through the Sonoran desert. My mother had a very small shop where these people would buy*





**Panchita's brother Enedino in 1927, just prior to immigrating to the United States.**

things for the trip. My brother, Enedino [then 17 years old], came to the United States with four other men from Tepehuanaes and Santiago Papasquiario [both in the same region as Canelas] in 1927. He went back in 1936 and got my sister Epitachia [Tacha, then 22 years old]. Despite the Great Depression in the United States, there were substantial numbers of people coming and going between Canelas and the United States, motivated by the opportunity to work there and by the lack of work in Mexico. Generally, they went to California, via Sinaloa, Sonora, and Mexicali. My brother worked in Arizona and New Mexico, but established himself in Los Angeles. While he did many different jobs, he worked on the railroads for several years.

Panchita followed Enedino and Tacha to the United States in 1949, entering without legal documents. The following excerpt points to the family as an important and central mediating unit in the process of

Mexican immigration. It also testifies to some of the difficulties that rural Mexican immigrants experience as they move from a cultural milieu that is characterized by a dense, complex, and extended familial web of personal relationships to a setting in which their experiences are largely configured by the "job nexus."

**Panchita Fernández:** *Canelas was very small, we treated each other like family and there was continuous cooperation. That is what surprised me here and what I missed. There was something unattractive about life in the United States. Here one never knows if a neighbor is in the hospital, one only knows when the neighbor is dead. It is very sad to live in that kind of isolation...When I came here I lived with my sister Tacha. I started working a month after I arrived in clothing manufacturing. I found the job through my brother Enedino, whose comadre's daughter worked in the same shop. Ark Manufacturing Company made high quality men's clothes. The minimum was 75 cents per hour if you didn't make more doing piece work, plus 7 cents more for belonging to the union. Most of the women were Jews and Mexicanas. People treated each other very well. The owners were Jews, who would come and do the work of people who were absent. At the time, one didn't hear about racism. Many of the workers were Mexican and they were very good workers. Our only defect was that we were paid Thursday and on Friday some of workers were absent. The owners decided that they would pay us on Fridays, so if some of the workers didn't come on Saturday that wasn't as important. I worked there seven years, then I had spinal surgery, and then I returned for two more years. After a second surgery I went to a non-union shop for a short time, and then I went to work at Laguna, located at Washington and Hill.*

Irma recalls that "Even as a small child I remember hearing the names

of young men who had gone to *el norte*. So we knew about the United States, that the streets were paved with gold, it was very easy to make a living and everything worked beautifully." She relates below her excitement about leaving Canelas in 1952, and her difficulty adjusting to her stay in Tijuana until 1955. The reader gets an appreciation for how the complex network of family, relatives and friends (Massey et al., 1987: Chapter 6), that extends from Canelas across northern Mexico to the border and then into Southern California, has facilitated and sustained a common immigrant stream.

**Irma Fernández:** *My Grandmother Alejandra, my two sisters [Rosa Delia and Estela] and I flew out of Canelas in 1952 on a two-passenger plane to Culiacan, Sinaloa. I remember seeing automobiles for the very first time and being worried about traffic. From Culiacan we took the train to Tijuana and, for us children, there were the marvels of*



**Alejandra García in Tijuana, ca. 1951.**



technology, the novelty of the new experiences. When we arrived to Tijuana, we wanted to come across legally, unlike my mother. So we could not join her for three [more] years. My mother had left Canelas when I was five and I didn't live with her again until I was eleven, so it was a very prolonged, difficult separation. Tijuana at that time lived off of U.S. servicemen who went down there to girlie shows and the casinos, and I remember being shocked, finding it very degrading... There was a kind of underground railroad serving migrants from Canelas to the United States. We came to Tijuana because there were townspeople living there, and the ethos of Canelas was that wherever townspeople went, since we were like family, we were received like family. We lodged with friends of my mother until we found a small rental shack, also with townspeople, in what was then the river bed. The one-room shacks were put together with cardboard and disassembled crates, had no running water and a communal toilet that stank. It hardly ever rained, but when it did the river swelled and



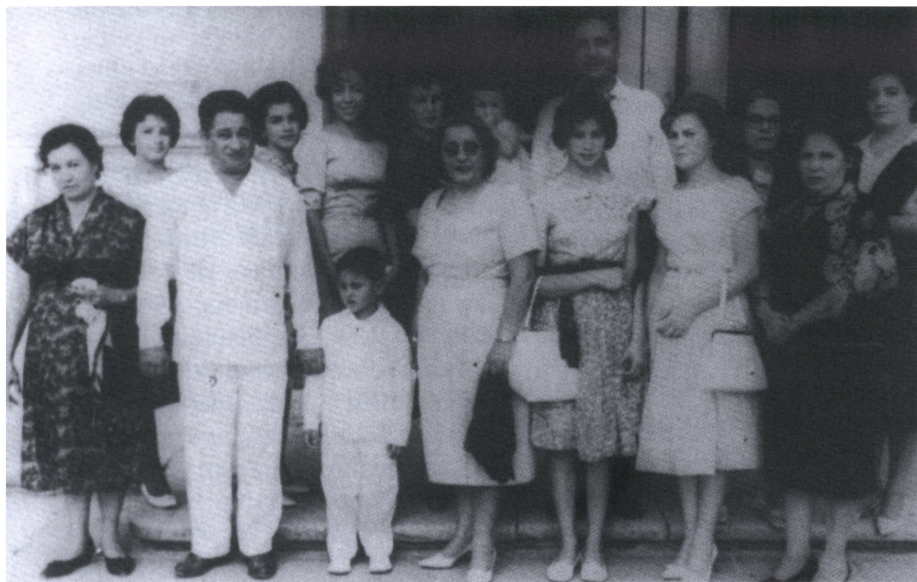
**Panchita with her husband Horacio Rosales (right), at the Hollywood Palladium, a highly popular Latin musical venue in Los Angeles in 1954.**

swept away a lot of the shacks... In 1955 we came to El Sereno, in East Los Angeles, to live with my mother.

A perplexing, sometimes intractable and often painful challenge facing *los recién llegados de México* was how to reconcile conflicting cultural identities (and political and economic interests) with Mexican

Americans. This challenge was compounded by the heterogeneity within both groups. It was only in the 1960s, with the nascent Chicano movement, that the first sustained, broad-based effort emerged to build consensus between the two communities over common concerns, especially the issue of immigration (See Gutiérrez, 1995, for an excellent historical interpretation of the interaction between Mexicans and Mexican Americans/Chicanos over the issue of immigration). A glimpse of the social and cultural gulf that sometimes separated Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the 1950s is communicated in the following excerpt. In this passage, Irma also recounts her early recognition of the ignorance and the racism directed toward Mexicans and Mexican Americas by the dominant society.

**Irma Fernández:** *The elementary school [in East Los Angeles], Ger-vois Avenue School, where I started [in 1955] was mostly Anglo. Teachers sat me next to the few Chicanitos, thinking that we could speak to each other. To my distress, the Chicano children, who looked like the children I had left in Tijuana and Canelas, didn't speak more than one or two words of Spanish. I soon tran-*



**Irma Fernández (second from right, front row) at the baptism of her brother Carlos (third from left, front), in Culiacan, Sinaloa in 1958. Irma's other siblings are Rosa Delia (third from left, back), Norma (being held by Panchita, fourth from the left, back) and Estela (third from right, front).**



sferred to Wilson Junior High School. Again, because the Spanish language was frowned upon, second and third generation Chicano children didn't know how to speak it and didn't want to associate with Mexicans. All of los recién llegados were called "TJ's" [an abbreviated form of "Tijuana" that was used derisively to refer to Mexicans]. I found distressful and puzzling that they had difficulty identifying with lo mexicano--at that time I didn't know that historically the United States had both welcomed and oppressed the Mexican population. My mother never made an effort to strip us of our identity or language, even though the advice that she was given was that she should speak only English with us. There must have been a stubborn streak in me that, even though I learned English rather quickly, I insisted on keeping my Spanish. Because I crossed the border with a level of literacy it helped me to survive the transition...We heard much about what it meant to be Mexican. Through the media and in school, I began to form an impression that all bad things came from being a Mexican and all good things came from being in the United States. It was very hard for me to hear comments like "Mexicans commit so many crimes," "Mexicans drop out," "Mexicans do this and that..." I made friends with immigrants from other Latin American countries--Argentina, Ecuador--where Spanish was spoken, with a tradition of [Spanish-language] music and dancing. It was okay to be Mexican with Argentines because they didn't know that much about us anyway. [That way] I was able to keep part of my latina identity.

The dramatic emergence of the Chicano movement in the 1960s created a new Chicano and Mexican identity in U.S. society (Ybarra-

Frausto, 1994). Politicized by the Chicano movement and after earning a graduate degree, Irma has been practicing social work in Chicano and Mexican communities for the past two decades. (Metaphorically) completing the circle, she currently works with Mexican migrant families in an educational setting in the Pacific Northwest. Panchita still resides in El Sereno.

Current efforts in several states and at the national level to restrict immigration, and to limit or deny access by immigrants to public social services, are grounded in a fundamental confusion about and an intense hostility toward alternative cultural and political projects in the United States. One appropriate response to the growing anti-immigrant fervor is to recover the rich, neglected memories of immigrants, and to use those memories to configure a "utopian cartography [where] hybridity becomes the dominant culture" (Gómez-Peña, 1993: 59).

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