

English teacher recalls days in the fields

By Kristin Delaplane

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Marcus Lopez is the son of Mexican migrant farm laborers. He now teaches English at Solano Community College. He graduated from the University of Santa Clara. He also studied at University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University.

"My father, Pete Cordova Lopez, came from Torreon, Mexico, in about 1910 or so. He went up and down the San Joaquin Valley doing farm work.

"My mother, Angelina Guerrero Garcia, came from Guanajuato, Mexico, with her mother and father, Juana and Soledad Garcia. They came into Texas through Juarez. My grandmother told me that when they crossed the Mexican border, they were not allowed to cross on the bridge because they were "too dirty." They did not want Mexicans soiling the bridge.

"They said, 'You can cross by going in the river.' She told me how humiliating it was, because when they got into the United States, they were asked to take off all their clothes to be deloused. Of course, they didn't separate the men and the women. From there they went to the southern part of California and started doing migrant farm work.

"My father met my mother in about 1915, 1916. They got married about 1921. I was born in 1934. In about 1935, my mother's family moved to the Santa Clara Valley. I used to stay with my grandmother during the summer and work with them. That family was working in the Santa Clara Valley, up to the Vaca Valley and all the way down to Los Banos.

"When I was born, my father sort of stopped going up and down Highway 99. He bought a house in Orange Cove, a town of about 300 people. He thought it was better if we stayed in one area. He felt we might even end up going to school. The primary crop there was oranges, but there were also grapes and figs. From there he used to go to Los Banos for cotton, for example.

"As kids, we were farmed out a lot. You go with your aunt, with your uncle, with your grandmother. That was one reason why many Mexican families had large families. It was a built-in work force for them. I worked with my grandparents on my father's side and with my parents from Bakersfield all the way to Sacramento. When I was 6, 7, 8 years old, I was working in the grape fields with my grandmother, my mother's mother. My job was to seek out wasp nests in the grapevines. Once I discovered them,

somebody came with smoke and drove out the wasps so that the grapes could be picked.

"Picking fruits and vegetables, you don't wait for the sun to come up. You pick when it's raining. Whether it is cold or hot. The food needs to be picked otherwise it is going to rot.

"I lived in tents in the grape fields, because the farmers usually didn't provide any kind of housing. If they did it was pretty shoddy. Some places had outhouses, but no shower facilities. Either the farmer had some water outlets or we used to go to a gas station. The cooking was done on oil stoves, self-contained. My mother or grandmother fixed beans, rice and some meat. For breakfast it was eggs with chorizo and tortillas. They made tortillas every day at least twice a day. My mother would not dare give my father morning tortillas for the evening meal. There was no such thing. She used to get up at 4 or 5 o'clock and make tortillas.

"Then we'd take tortillas to the field with us for lunch. A lot of the time I would bring my tortilla filled with peanut butter. Or beans, meat or cheese.

"Probably the best benefit of being a farm worker is you always got the best fruit and vegetables and ate as much as you wanted. If it was grapes, we ate a lot of grapes. Peaches. Pears. Carrots. Tomatoes.

"Now there were some places where they provided pretty good housing, but the farmers used to charge you. They would occasionally provide food. They also provided transportation to the work site, but they'd charge you. It was like a company-owned store. If you were not careful, by the time payday came around you didn't have very much. It was very easy to only come out even, or sometimes in the negative. That's why we bought our own facilities - a tent, cook our own food, get our own water, and we had a car to get to the work site.

"I started school when I was almost 7 years old. I did not know any English and the teachers didn't know any Spanish, so they put me in the back of the classroom with crayons. Because of my limited English, I was put in the retarded group. That's the way it was done. You don't know English, you must be retarded.

"In 1945, I was 11 years old and we were in Orange Cove. My father could see that living in that area was not good for his children. We'd been going up and down from Los Banos to as far as Santa Clara Valley where my father's mother and my mother's mother were both living. He said, 'Let's move up to Sunnyvale.'

"We moved to downtown Sunnyvale and lived with my mother's mother there. We

lived under pretty primitive conditions, to say the least. Our family lived in the garage with a dirt floor. We all slept in the same bed, two parents and four kids.

My father started working in the fields there and, of course, I went with him Saturdays and Sundays when I wasn't in school to pick turnips and carrots. After I worked maybe 20 or 30 hours in one week, my father would give me a dollar.

"At 14 years old I quit school and went to work in the fields full-time. I was a migrant farm worker on my own from 14 to about 18. This was in the '50s. I was picking cherries at 75 cents a bucket, carrots at 10 cents a box and turnips at 10 cents a box. Onions, we picked by the sack. On a good eight to 10-hour day, I used to make about \$5. Some people that were faster than I was could make sometimes \$8 a day.

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"There was a sense of community. These camps were their own little communities. Most everybody knew everybody, because they were on the circuit. We were all in the same boat.

"It was really the outside community, the white community that we didn't interact with. The ones who owned the ranches - the bosses - they were the ones who paid us and we were the workers.

"Other groups worked in the fields. There were a lot of Filipinos. We got along with them pretty well. We were doing the same kind of work. We weren't overly friendly, but there wasn't any animosity.

"In the mid-'50s, when I was 18 or 19, my uncle, who worked in a cannery said, 'How would you like to work in a cannery?' They paid better. It was a union. You got breaks. If you worked over eight hours, you got overtime pay.

"In 1954, I got a job in the pickle plant in Mountain View. The pickle plant was probably the biggest turning point for me. I was about 21 years old and I became a forklift operator, which paid more money.

"That's when I met Brian. Brian was this "gringo," who was working there, whereas most of us were Mexican doing the physical work. The only other white people were the foreman and the boss. Brian was a frail-looking person. I said, 'I'll give him two weeks. He won't make it.' But he did. He used to sit by himself eating his bag lunch and reading.

"I took him home one time. In his apartment there were books everywhere. I asked him why he was working with us poor folk. He said, 'I was going to Stanford to get a degree

in anthropology and I wanted to be with the real people.' I didn't know what anthropology was, but I'm figuring this guy is nuts. I'm going through his books - Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Socrates. He said, 'If you want to borrow any books, just take the one you want.' Well, I'm no dummy. I picked the thinnest book. It turned out to be 'Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity.' I bought a dictionary and had to look up about every other word. I started devouring every book he had. It was a world of words. This was quite a luxury even though I didn't understand most of the stuff I was reading.

"With my buddies, we used to get paid Friday and be in a drunken stupor most of the weekend. That was our life.

"Brian's was a different world. His friends would come over to his house - professors from Stanford, graduate students, bookstore owners. Some were Communists. Some Socialists. Joan Baez was his girlfriend for a short period of time.

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"I was in the military from 1957 to 1959 and when I got out, I went back to the pickle plant. After three months, I got offered a job in Oakland working as a shipping and receiving clerk. I got fired and went to work for Safeway. I also got fired from that job. I had not worked with the public before.

"I wanted to meet some nice women and someone said, 'Go to college.' I enrolled in a community college. I took an English class and a sociology class - whatever that was. I was taken in by education. Eight years later I had an associate's degree. Nobody in the whole family that had ever gone to college; I was the first.

"I was offered a job to work at a college as an English-Spanish teacher. I worked there for 10 years. I spent 2 1/2 more years getting my bachelor's degree and then four years at a graduate school to get my master's degree. Today I teach English composition at Solano Community College. When I go to work traveling up Rockville Road in the summer and I see those Mexican families out there picking prunes, I say to myself, 'That's me out there.' "

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