

A time when all the young men disappeared

Aurora Estrada Orozco recalls the manpower shortage in the Texas Valley; later, townspeople going to the train station to greet the blind and crippled who survived WWII

By DESIRÉE MATA

Aurora Estrada Orozco was only about 4 years old when she came to the United States due to the unrest in Mexico. Her father, Lorenzo Estrada, worked as a bookkeeper at an American gold, silver, and coal mining company in Serralvo, Nuevo Leon, until Pancho Villa's men started sabotaging production. The company, known to Mrs. Orozco only as "La Fundacion," decided to leave and offered Mr. Estrada a position in Mercedes, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley.

"We were very happy because we were coming to the United States," Mrs. Orozco said.

Mrs. Orozco clearly remembers the culture shock she went through when arriving in the U.S.

"In Mexico we were living better but then we came to the U.S. and we had to start all over and we didn't know how to speak English," she said. They were living in a ranch where her older brothers and sisters worked picking cotton. She started going to an American school, but

did not understand a word of English then. Her parents then placed her in a private Mexican school run by America Acosta until she knew how to read and write in Spanish. Then it would be easier to learn English.

When she was 9 years old and in second grade, she transferred to North Ward Elementary. But even then, the only time she used English was at school — at home and in her neighborhood, only Spanish was spoken.

“We wouldn’t speak English anymore until the next day when we came back to school,” Mrs. Orozco said. “We were living like in Mexico.”

Mrs. Orozco clearly remembers the discrimination she suffered at school. She and her group of Mexican friends would sit in a corner of the cafeteria because they were ashamed.

“The whites would make fun of us because we were eating taquitos,” Mrs. Orozco said. They took their homemade lunches because they did not get the free tickets that white children received to eat at the school cafeteria. “They would give tickets to the whites,” Mrs. Orozco explained, “so we took our taquitos.” Mrs. Orozco never learned why they only gave tickets to the white children.

During the Depression, young Aurora’s family, like most others, had financial problems. She and her brothers and sisters had to start working when they were very young. Mrs. Orozco started picking cotton with her father when she was 10.

“Even the white people from the northern states used to come down to the Valley and they used to come the neighborhood . . . asking for food,” she recalled. Mrs. Orozco recalls her family giving food, but only that. Mrs. Orozco said that the people in Mercedes called them *trampas* because they jumped on trains and came asking for food in the Mexican barrios.

It was a time when most people did not have telephones. People found out what was happening by listening to the radio. Aurora Estrada was 21 when the war started. She remembers her father told everybody to gather around the radio that they had in the living room to listen to Roosevelt talk about it. Pretty soon people knew young men would be called to serve.

“They called my brother and they called my cousin to go to war,” Mrs. Orozco said. The Army also called her sister’s husband, Lauro Galvan, who went to the Pacific. Her brother, Roberto, fought in the Battle of the Bulge as an Army infantryman and her cousin, Amador Sanchez, was an Army medic stationed at a hospital in England.

Roberto Estrada, Aurora’s elder brother, told her about his experiences in the battlefield even though he did not like to talk about it.

“They were crying and praying, they were waiting to cross the river,” Mrs. Orozco said. “They knew that the Germans were there on the other side.”

She said he was 45 miles away from Berlin when the war ended. He brought home the boots that he used throughout the war and told her that “sometimes they were full of blood, he said, sometimes they were full of mud, but he just kept them on.”

He was awarded a Silver Star for saving another soldier’s life.

During the war, people in Mercedes often went to the train station to say goodbye to the boys who were leaving.

“We didn’t have fiestas anymore,” Mrs. Orozco said; the townspeople cried often and the Christmas holidays were sad. The Brownsville Herald was the newspaper that published the names of men who were wounded or dead; local people were constantly reading it. In Mercedes, the first war dead was Miguel Gonzalez, a neighbor of Mrs. Orozco’s, who died at “la invasion.” It was the first military funeral that the small town had seen.

Mrs. Orozco also talked about the rationing.

“You couldn’t buy leather shoes,” she said. The government wanted people to save the leather for the soldiers. She said they would go to Mexico and buy “huaraches” instead. They also did not have butter at that time, so oleo margarine was introduced. They also could not find sugar in Mercedes, so they went to Mexico to buy that and other supplies.

Since there were not enough men in Mercedes to do all the work that had to be done, Mrs. Orozco and her sisters began working in various jobs. Among the jobs available were making buttons from seashells and stitching uniforms for the military.

She also said that men from Mexico started coming in.

“They were illegal, but they let them stay anyway because there was so much work and there was nobody to do it,” she said.

Mrs. Orozco said that wartime made a difference for her and other women. Whereas before the war, it was considered a disgrace for women to work outside of the home, it became the norm during the war years. Mrs. Orozco said that during the war, she and her sisters were allowed to date, but there were no men to date. One store in Mercedes had male manikins and the owner of the store said that girls went there to look at the manikins — so they could remember what boys looked like.

After the war was over, Mrs. Orozco said that people went to the train station once again to greet their boys.

“Some of them were crippled, some of them were blind and some of them would have one arm,” Mrs. Orozco said. But people were glad the men were coming back alive.

In 1949, Mrs. Orozco met her husband, Primitivo Orozco Vega, an immigrant from Guadalajara, Mexico, at Our Lad of Mercy’s Jamaica Dance, a Mexican fiesta.

While together, both Mrs. Orozco and her husband faced discrimination. At one point, the couple sat in the white section of a movie theater. When she learned later about the segregated seating arrangement, she shrugged it off — it was ridiculous.

“My money is as good as their money,” Mrs. Orozco reasoned.

Another time, Mrs. Orozco and her husband needed \$150 to buy supplies for his shoemaking shop. Responding to a newspaper ad, Mrs. Orozco visited a man who made short-term loans. But the man, an Anglo, told her that he could not lend them the money because he did not lend money to Mexicans or blacks because “they didn’t know how to pay.” She responded that he should have specified that in his ad. The man did not like her tone of voice.

Her answer: “Maybe I was the one who had to come and talk to you like that.”

When she left to her husband’s workplace, the man called and told her that he was going to lend them the money. They’ve become close friends since then.

“You have to speak out in these little towns,” Mrs. Orozco said.

The Orozcós had four girls and two sons, all college graduates. Her husband died on October 4, 1989.

(Mrs. Orozco was interviewed at Mexic-Arte Museum by Desirée Mata on Oct. 17, 2003, in Austin, Texas.)