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You Can’t Be Mexican: You Talk Just Like Me

Frank S. Mendez

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FRANK S. MENDEZ
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Foreword

John J. Grabowski, Series Editor

The story of immigration to and migration within America is one in which history and heritage are in constant competition. Because the recounting of coming “here” from some other place is so central to many of our lives or family histories, that saga becomes part of our heritage. Heritage, as David Lowenthal argues in his book The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History, is different from history in that it represents more of what we want to believe about ourselves than what actually happened.

The dynamic tension between heritage and history forms the foundation of Voices of Diversity, a new series of publications by the Kent State University Press. Voices of Diversity will republish, in English translation, existing memoirs and accounts of immigrant and migrant life in northeastern Ohio. It will also publish new first-person works relating to this topic. Frank Menendez’s autobiographical account, You Can’t Be Mexican: You Talk Just Like Me, is the first volume in this series.

Like any other memoir, this volume might, at initial glance, be considered an exercise in heritage rather than history, as it recounts what the author chooses to or is able to recall. Yet within the field of immigration history, the best autobiographies can serve as an antidote to the general aura of heritage that now tinges the American immigrant story. Personal accounts often provide a reality check to the pleasant generalities that tend to form the image of what we wish to believe about immigrants. They can challenge our concepts about family solidarity and the immigrant work ethic, and revise our image of the “good old immigrant neighborhood.”
You Can’t Be Mexican does provide alternative views of such facets of immigrant life, but it also serves as what one might call a corrective to broader issues. Most importantly, it prompts us to think more carefully about our vision of the “ethnic heritage” of the industrial Midwest. There is a tendency to believe that the human fuel for the incredible industrial expansion around the Great Lakes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came from Europe, particularly from eastern and southern Europe. Indeed, the Paul Bunyan of the steel mills was named Joe Magarac—a brawny fictional character from central Europe. One could argue that the ascription of a European immigrant character to the mills and factories of mid-America became stronger as the industrial era of the Great Lakes waned. Today, three generations distant from the great European immigration at the turn of the century, the descendants of those immigrants tend to celebrate their families’ contribution to industrial America. It is a mark of pride, in some ways every bit as potent as the pioneer heritage claimed by earlier generations of Americans. The opening of the museum at Ellis Island (the main gateway for the great European immigration) in 1990 signified the national acceptance of and pride in the European industrial migration to the United States. One could argue that today Ellis Island assumes the same mythical importance for these Americans as Plymouth Rock did one hundred years earlier for those who came from different European shores.

Certainly, the bulk of the labor in industrial mid-America was European or African in origin. However, Frank Mendez reminds us that the history of the region is more diverse. Mendez tells us that industrial communities such as Lorain were more polyglot than we tend to remember. He also tells us other things that somehow get lost in the way we view immigrant heritage. Yes, his parents worked the fields. That fits the image we have of Mexican immigrants. But they also came to the mills and factories of the Midwest. Many contemporary Americans find this surprising—just as surprising as the fact that Chicago had one of the largest Mexican populations in North America in the 1920s. Mexican immigrants picked crops, but they also made steel in Lorain and Gary and Chicago and built automobiles in Detroit. Certainly the surge in Chicano and Latino historical studies in the past three decades has filled out this story in the corridors of academe, but in the corridors of Midwestern heritage it is not a widely recognized story. For many Americans, Mexicans are “new” immigrants confined in large part to the service industries of America. They are not totally so now, nor were they in the past that is described in this memoir.
Frank Mendez opens his memoir with a powerful family tale about the manner in which his father escaped the violence of the great Mexican Revolution. Here again relating a personal heritage serves as a means to illuminate history and to bring a fresh perspective with which to view generalizations about immigration. Natividad Mendez fled one of the largest and most violent revolutions in the Americas in the twentieth century—a decade-long revolt that cost tens of thousands of lives and forever changed the nation of Mexico. It was not unlike the revolts, famines, wars, and persecutions that set many Europeans in motion—events that are forever fixed in the popular and scholarly story of that phenomenon. In an era when some are tempted to see Mexicans solely as economic migrants, Frank Mendez causes us to reexamine a popular image and, perhaps, to become more curious about a nearby but largely unknown aspect of a shared continental history.

In these and other ways, You Can’t Be Mexican opens new perspectives on the immigrant history of northeastern Ohio and challenges readers to think again about how we choose to characterize a region, a period of time, and a group of people. That is one of its values. However, its chief value remains in the fact that it is a memoir in which the story of one family, and one individual, Frank Mendez, is played out against a backdrop of local, national, and international events. As individuals interested, likely as not, in our own histories and heritages, we identify with the story he relates and become involved and concerned with some of the key issues of the immigrant. As Frank Mendez moves from field to town, from school to the military, and then to a career, we, like he, are prompted to look closely at how we have decided to see ourselves in a region, nation, and world layered with diverse identities and to ask how our heritage fits into that region’s history.
It was September 1946, and I had recently completed a tour of active duty in the United States Marine Corps. Before starting college classes, I accompanied my father on a trip from my hometown in Ohio to his birthplace in Michoacán, Mexico.

We were met at the Los Reyes train station by a cousin who led us on horseback over the mountain trail to the village of Zirosto. After several days of meeting and mixing with members of the extended family, we gathered one evening in the “living area” of the simple tin-roofed house in which my father had been born. My uncle, Tío Marcos, held the group spellbound by recounting details of the departure of his brother, Natividad, or Nati, for the United States thirty years earlier.

“Nati, ayúdame,” he said. “Help me out with details that I am not aware of or do not remember.”

Together they carried the story of my father’s emigration from Mexico to Texas.

“Nati, Nati, Despierta! Wake up! The Zapatistas are coming! Go, Go!” His sister shouted. “They know you are with the government, and they have shot a soldier in one of the upper villages.”

The undisguised fear in her voice did not need to be accompanied by her terror-driven words or her agitated shaking of Natividad’s spindly bunk. The civil defense militiaman knew at once that he was in danger of being shot by Emiliano Zapata’s approaching guerrilleros. Panic-stricken, he launched
himself from the scrap-cloth quilt mattress, and dashed barefooted across the hard-packed dirt floor of the adobe hut toward the Z-braced wood-slat rear door where his mother stood. She was crying, quietly playing her rehearsed role, leaning tremulously against the open door, holding out his worn leather huaraches, handwoven cotton trousers, and long-sleeved blouse.

“Coje! Take them, mi amor;” she sobbed.

He snatched his clothes out of her hands, dodged her ad-libbed attempted embrace, and shot into the moonlit night of a Mexican mountain village of the early twentieth century.

He barely heard the last words she was ever to address to him: “Vaya con Dios, mi’jo. Te quiero.”

Racing along the beaten footpath leading to the steep declivity that formed the rear boundary of the lot, he created a modern dance movement—hop, hop, one foot into a huarache; hop, hop, the other foot into the other huarache; hop, hop, one leg into a trouser leg; hop, hop, his other leg into the other trouser leg; stride, stride, an arm into a blouse sleeve; stride, stride, the other arm into the other sleeve; stride, stride, his head into the blouse opening. Bang! Bang! The movement ended as bullets whizzed by him, and he tripped over the lot’s edge, tumbling downward, arms and legs flailing, unable to arrest his fall by digging his fingers into the toeholds he had carved into the dry arroyo’s sloping bank.

He cried out, “Ay, Mamá. Adiós, Mamacita. Te quiero!”

In that split second, fear had yielded to guilt. His state of absolution ended as his body slammed into the pebble-strewn dirt bed of the arroyo. The dazed twenty-year-old picked himself up, and took some tentative steps. Discovering no apparent broken bones, Natividad started running, bouncing off the passageway’s winding walls, motivated by gunshots and bullets striking the arroyo’s bed and walls behind him.

The shooting stopped on a guerrillero’s shout: “Mierda! Se escapó. Shit! He got away. We’ll never find him. We don’t know the territory.”

His spirits lifting, Natividad continued his narrow escape through familiar territory, working his way out of the arroyo several miles in the downstream direction. At daybreak he felt confident that the guerrilleros would not spend much time and effort searching for an insignificant militiaman of the lowest rank, one who had been forced into the local militia in compliance with the government’s policy of drafting young men in every village under its jurisdiction into local defense units. They received little training and were forced to acquire their own weapons, often obsolete rifles and pistols more
dangerous to the shooter than to the intended target. He knew he could not return to his home in Zirosto as long as the revolutionaries controlled that part of the State of Michoacán.

As Uncle Marcos continued the story, I silently vowed to do research on the State of Michoacán and the Mexican migrant experience (an intention that, like those of more than a few twenty-year-olds, was delayed for several decades).

Much of Michoacán lies in the altiplanicie, the high-altitude intermountain plateau bounded by the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range on the west, the Sierra Madre del Sur chain on the south, the Sierra Madre Oriental range (a prolongation of the American Rockies separated by the Rio Grande Valley) on the east, and the Anáhuac Cordillera running between the western and eastern Sierra Madres. Zirosto is located in the Anáhuac Cordillera, a range consisting of numerous active volcanoes (including the well-known Popocatépetl and the younger Paricutín, which came into existence in 1943 when molten lava began to ooze from a fissure in a cornfield near Paricutín, a neighboring village of Zirosto).

At this point, my father took over the story.

As the sun peeked over the nearby mountaintop, spreading its warm brightness, he climbed a large boulder to get a better view of what lay ahead and looked toward Los Reyes, the closest town with rail and bus connections to El Norte. It lay more than a hard day’s walk on the horse trail connecting the town with the higher mountain villages. He had walked down that path before, accompanied by other Zirosto men on their northward journey to and across the Río Bravo del Norte, seeking stoop labor jobs in the betabel, the sugar beet fields of the American Midwest.

He reviewed his situation. “No puedo regresar a mi casa. I cannot return to Zirosto, and I have no relatives or close friends outside the village with whom I can wait out the revolution. I have to consider the hazardous trip to Texas with no money and no companions to join for an increased measure of protection. I am aware of what awaits me if I choose to travel to the United States.”

He had returned from his previous trip to the United States after the betabel growing season, with more pesos (in dollars) than he could have earned in one year at a full-time job in Mexico. But he had no desire to return to the betabel next season, or ever again. If he were to return to the United States it would be to seek other work. He started out for Los Reyes, not sure that he had made the right decision.
The trail ran along a ridgeline formed by an ancient lava flow, flattened by eons of exposure to erosive elements and now overgrown by sparse vegetation. From time to time he scurried off the trail into the underbrush or hid behind the hump of a raised shoulder whenever he heard approaching horses or the faint sound of voices in the distance.

Crouching low, he thought, “Caramba, they’re still looking for me.”

He calmed down after confirming that it was not the guerrilleros on the trail. As the sun rose higher toward noon and the countryside assumed corresponding elevated temperatures, he rested at a gurgling artesian spring to drink the refreshing water and reflect on the coming trip to El Estado de Tejas. He would have to walk long distances, sometimes hopping a ride by clinging to the top cargo rail of a lumbering, overcrowded bus, his toes supporting his weight by resting on the lower side molding of the rickety transport vehicle. Other times he would trot alongside a train leaving the station, awaiting the instant when the conductor’s helpers were momentarily distracted by trying to prevent other ticketless men from climbing aboard. He remembered how he jumped on the lower step, simultaneously grabbed the vertical handlebar, and squeezed past the guards, disappearing into the packed interior.

He arose from the stream bank and continued the long walk to Los Reyes. At the town’s edge he stopped at a farmhouse and approached a man standing at the gate.

“Buenos días,” said Nati. “I’m not a Zapatista. I’m on my way to los Estados Unidos, and I have not eaten since yesterday. Can you spare me a little food and some old clothes?”

“Buenos días,” said the farmer. “You don’t look like a Zapatista. We can offer you a taco and an old shirt. We have nothing more to give. We are very poor.”

At another house, he received a taco of refried beans, some well-worn clothes, and an old straw sombrero, distorted from its original shape by the sun and rain. He had observed those same humane gestures in Zirosto—the unhesitant sharing by poor Mexican families of their meager resources with the less fortunate. He was confident that these kind acts by impoverished peons would be duplicated several times on the way to the Rio Grande.

Undaunted, Natividad headed for the Los Reyes train station.
and the four other children were relieved that Natividad was still alive, but we were not sure if he would ever return.

The family knew that life in Zirosto for a young man, as in most Mexican villages of the times, did not offer any real opportunities for him to rise above the socioeconomic level to which he was born. One tended to remain throughout his lifetime in that same class. The evening of his departure was the last time my father’s parents were ever to see their oldest child.

I learned that there had been only a handful of letters between my father and his family in those years of his absence. His sisters had informed him of the death of his parents from natural causes. He had never discussed his parents or siblings with me, and I did not ask him about them, not even during our long train ride to Mexico.

For the next ten days my uncle, my father, and I talked about the family, the town, the area, and the living conditions of the local population. We walked the mountain trails while I envisioned what it was like growing up in Zirosto. Over the next fifty years, my memories of the visit resurfaced as I assembled family records and other documents and listened to personal stories by and about migrant farm workers.

Zirosto was little more than a wide horse trail separating clusters of adobe huts with straw-thatched roofs and some houses with wood slatted walls and tin roofs. (As in every village, there were exceptions. A handful of latifundistas, absentee land owners, maintained beautifully landscaped mansions as vacation homes to which they came to rest from their stressful exertions in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, or Mexico, Distrito Federal.) Its inhabitants, mostly mestizo peons tending agricultural fields for latifundistas, had few material goods. To eke out a frugal existence they had to work backyard plots of maíz and other vegetables to supplement a necessarily monotonous diet of chicken, frijoles, tortillas, corn tamales, and cornbread.

Birthdays and weddings featured music, drinking, and feasting on various dishes of meat tamales, enchiladas, tostadas, chicken, beef, and pork. Life in Zirosto for the average resident was difficult but tolerable, as evidenced by centuries of acceptance of these conditions with essentially no change in lifestyle.

Zirosto was a racial microcosm of the country. Mestizos were in the majority, as they were throughout Mexico four centuries after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. The other groups were the purebred Indian descendants of pre-Cortez natives and a much smaller group that traced its unmixed lineage to the Spanish grandees of the colonial era, which ended in the early 1800s.
Although the *mestizo raza* originated in the early 1500s, generations in later centuries continued to receive infusions of Spanish and Indian blood. By the late nineteenth century some *mestizo* brothers, sisters, and first cousins varied in appearance from the classic cinnamon-hued skin, brown eyes, and black-hair types, to the light skin, light-colored eyes, and auburn to blonde hair of the Iberians, with some individuals exhibiting facial characteristics of both groups.

By the twentieth century sociologists had established the subsets, *mestizo-indio* and *mestizo-blanco*. The Mendez-Ynojosa family was a good example of Mexican *mestizo* descent. Unique or predominant Indian characteristics were not observable in their facial or body types. Skin hues were light to slightly cinnamon, and natural hair color varied from light brown to black. A casual observer could stereotype them into the *mestizo-blanco* category without the necessity of a scientific basis to support that classification.

My father and his brother were of the same general appearance, only slightly cinnamon in skin color, and facial features that would have placed them among the conquistadors of the 1500s, despite their dark hair and brown eyes (and a voluntary absence of beards). Their sisters could easily have “passed” for descendants of Spanish grandees in body shape, hair, and skin color.

Formal schooling for Mexican children in outlying villages was generally not available. The Mendez siblings, like their friends and neighbors, learned to read and write the Spanish language at infrequent, informal classes conducted by itinerant teachers who may have had a formal education at a school in a larger town. The adult Natividad’s education could be considered the equivalent of that of a public school third grader.

The Mendez children led a hard life, working the agricultural fields alongside adults, gathering and cutting branches for fuel from outlying forest areas, and taking on one-time tasks for a few *centavos* whenever the opportunity arose. The limits on their diet (nutritional value of food, selectivity, and volume) prevented full development of body types. Natividad at full growth weighed no more than 120 pounds, with a height of five feet, five inches. Although he was part of a youthful group with a swelling sense of frustration that chafed at the limitations of life in a Mexican village, he had attempted an escape but found that the harder life of the *betabel* was not an acceptable solution.