

LOOKING BACK

In one of the vignettes in his book Y no se lo Trago la Tierra, Tomas Rivera wrote about migrant workers who were talking about there being work in Utah. Evidently none of them had been to Utah and some wondered where it might be. Someone said that he had heard that it was close to Japan. One might expect that uneducated migrant workers would not have a very precise geographical view of the world. The vignette, however, reminded me of a cover for The New Yorker done many years ago by, I believe, Mr. Steinberg. In that cover Mr. Steinberg, I believe, attempted to present a New Yorker's view of the world, which as you might expect, is rather myopic. In that particular cover of the magazine, 9th and 10th Avenue loom large, followed by the Hudson River and Jersey. Off in the distance are places like Chicago, Texas and Mexico. Much farther away are California, Japan, Russia and China.

Like the migrant workers, what is within our everyday experience looms large and familiar, what is not is rather vague and distant.

Nosotros los mejicanos hemos sufrido mucho. It has been difficult to adjust to a society that has not wanted you as a person or as one who had something to contribute to the general welfare.

I have never doubted that our history, our heritage was important, nor that we had something to contribute to society. But many people have had serious doubts about this, and have hastened to tell us about them. For example, our native language (la lingua en que mamamos, as the late Dr. Sanchez used to say), has not always been held in high regard, and even after we have suppressed it or forgotten it and mastered the dominant language we may be told: "But you speak with an accent!" Of course everyone speaks with an accent. But ludicrous as these statements are many of us are persuaded to learn unaccented English by imitating the speech patterns of some of our

untarnished leaders, such as Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson, James Carter or Henry Kissinger, to mention a few.

This talk is not going to be a litany of injustices or oppressions, rather I have been asked to present "a memoir, as much an intimate Charla as you can make it." I'm not at all certain what this means but let me try.

Before we inaugurate a Tomas Rivera Center dedicated to policy studies a number of very important things have had to change. The most important change is that which has occurred in us. We are people, equal to everyone. From a very negative self-image we have moved to a very positive self-image. We are no longer ashamed of accented English, brown skin, uneducated parents, etc.

Scholars are providing us with research; books are being published; history is being rewritten; and novels, Teatros, films bring us delight and self-awareness. Everyday we learn a little more about our heritage and we like it.

Foundations are supporting us. Presses are printing our endeavors. Government agencies look at our proposals, sometimes favorably. Even the Immigration and Naturalization Service established an advisory committee to learn a little from our experiences.

The Census Bureau which used to call us Mexicans, sometimes Caucasians, later Spanish-surnamed, Spanish-speaking, people of Spanish origin and now Hispanic, has responded well to committee advice and hopefully will continue to do so. We are received politely at NIH, NIMH, NSF and the National Endowment for the Humanities. We are recruited to universities as students and professors. Some of us even get tenure. I am optimistic.

At the end of World War II, the so-called G.I. Bill of Rights, in my opinion, was the most important agent of educational change for the Mejicano population. For the first time in history we started going to college in significant numbers. To be sure, some small colleges, such as Adams State College of Colorado and Highlands University of Las Vegas, New Mexico, had high enrollments of Mejicanos before 1946; but it is my impression that universities such as Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and California were not attracting students from this population, which had been well established in those states for many, many years prior to 1946.

The establishment of Chicano studies programs in the 1960s, albeit under extreme pressure from the Chicano community, increased the awareness of the academy to their policies of benign neglect. Many people argue that Chicano studies is not a legitimate field of study because it is not a discipline. But tell me, where or what is the discipline in business administration, nursing, military science, computer science, statistics or citrus fruit management? Clearly these are moot or meaningless arguments. The establishment of disciplines has been arbitrary and most fields of study borrow from many disciplines as do "studies" programs, be they American studies, Latin American studies, Russian studies, women's studies, or Chicano studies. Chicano studies helped make the academy accessible to the Mejicano population; we entered the university either as students, researchers or professors, this time through the front door. We had been here before as janitors, groundskeepers, and dishwashers. Scholarly work concerning this population received a tremendous boost in such fields as history, literature, race relations, immigration, U.S.-Mexico border studies and political economy, to mention only a few fields. Publication of the scholarly work followed, slowly at first and then it gained momentum. Today, major publishers and

university presses from prestigious universities are quite willing to publish this material probably because it sells well and the work is solid.

Within the Chicano movement something else occurred which has had tremendous influence in our lives, and this is what Paul Ylvisaker, formerly of the Ford Foundation, called institution building. The National Council of La Raza is one such institution. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (M.A.L.D.E.F.) is another. Other examples are The Congressional Hispanic Caucus, The National Hispanic Scholarship Fund, Chicano Artists Association, Chicano Press Association and even Hispanics in Philanthropy. These institutions bring people together who have similar interests and provide a support system for the individuals involved as well as a power base for the battle ahead. Of the hundreds of institutions which have been established, most, in my opinion, have been quite "successful."

It should be said that many persons of good will who are not Chicanos have helped us establish ourselves in this society. This should be acknowledged, with thanks.

The above success, rapid as it has been, has been costly, as such success is for most groups who attempt to enter the mainstream of a dominant society. The price we have to pay, in pathological terms, is high rates of divorce, alcoholism, cardiac disease and diseases related to stress. Is it worth it? I really don't know.

My own activities as a scholar-activist began in the mid 1940s after graduation from college. Helen Peterson from Denver, Colorado, Bernard Valdez then living in northern New Mexico, and I, then living in San Luis, Colorado, attempted to organize Community Service Clubs. In the short run we were generally unsuccessful; in the long run we may have sown some seeds that brought fruition much later.

At that time Mr. Valdez was Director of the Taos County Cooperative Health Association. Some of us attempted to organize a similar health association in San Luis, Colorado. Although the Castilla County Cooperative Health Association is still functioning, we, who organized it, failed miserably after the first year.* As everyone knows, leadership requires followership. I may have been born to be a leader, but my problem seemed to be to find anyone dumb enough to follow me.

Having been on the faculty of Adams State College since 1944 with responsibilities primarily in San Luis, Colorado, helping direct the San Luis Institute of Arts and Crafts (a community college which no longer exists), while teaching on the main campus in Alamos, Colorado, we introduced, about 1953, a Chicano course called "A History of the Spanish-speaking People."

Around 1964 Paul Ylvisaker of the Ford Foundation arranged for me to go to New York and consult with his staff concerning possible programs relating to the Mexican-American population. Toward the end of a very intensive day I suggested to Paul that I couldn't speak for the population and why didn't he convene a number of persons to kick around some ideas? He was most agreeable.

That summer, while a visiting professor at UCLA, Herman Gallegos, and Jackson (Ruth) Chance (who was executive director of the Rosenberg Foundation) came to see me in Los Angeles. It so happened that a trustee of the foundation, Mr. Charles de Young Elkus, had passed away and a memorial should be established in his honor. Their idea was to commission me to get some writers and do a book on the conditions under which Mexican-Americans lived in this country. The result was La Raza: Forgotten Americans.

* For an analysis of this organizational venture see Saunders, Lyle and J. Samora, "A Medical Care Program in a Colorado Community," Health, Culture and Community, Benjamin Paul (ed.). Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1955.

In the process of putting together the book Herman Gallegos and I agreed to hold an editorial conference to discuss the papers. The hidden agenda, however, was to invite representatives of the Ford Foundation to listen to problems and pleas. To this end we invited other Mexican-Americans to the meeting who were not writing chapters for the book: Eugene A. Marin, Arizona; Dr. Ernesto Galarza, Martin Ortiz, Leandro P. Soto, Eduardo Quevedo and Eugene Gonzales, all of California; Bernard Valdez, Colorado; and Albert Pena, Jr., Texas. Paul Ylvisaker and Lyle Saunders attended from the Ford Foundation in New York. The Rosenberg Foundation, through the efforts of Ruth Chance, graciously paid all of the expenses of the two-day conference held in San Francisco, which included a stenographic recording of the entire conference.

One outcome of the conference was the appointment by the Ford Foundation of Mr. Herman Gallegos and Dr. Ernesto Galarza as consultants to help develop a plan whereby the Ford Foundation and other agencies might assist the Mexican-American population. Galarza and Gallegos met monthly with Samora over a two-year period. A report was submitted to the Ford Foundation. This report was later published by McNally & Loftin, Publishers, as Mexican-Americans in the Southwest by Ernesto Galarza, Herman Gallegos, and Julian Samora, 1969.

Another result of the two-year study was the establishment of the Southwest Council of La Raza with funds made available by the Ford Foundation. This regional organization later became a national organization with offices in Washington, D.C. It is now known as the National Council of La Raza.

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