

Topic: My friend's life and struggles on her journey to California.

Abstract: My friend was born and raised in Oaxaca. Her family was extremely poor but worked together for survival. Both her parents worked provide the family's basic necessities. The process of cultivating the mountains for food and way of traveling the great distance to the mountains. Marriage and wedding ceremony included the whole town along with the bride and groom. How different life is living in Gilroy, California with her husband and child.

Keywords: life in Oaxaca, mountains and their importance, life struggles and cultural traditions, marriage proposal and planning and ceremonies, hardships, travel to California, life in Gilroy.

MY FRIEND'S JOURNEY FROM OAXACA TO GILROY, CALIFORNIA

My friend was born in San Juan Bautista Sola de Vega, Oaxaca, Oaxaca. She lived with her parents in Oaxaca and came to California after she married her husband. She was not a crybaby and was a happy child. She is the fourth out of nine siblings; there are five boys and 4 girls.

When her parents got married they went to live on her grandparents land. She lived with her parents and nine brothers and sisters in a one bedroom house with no windows just a door. The parents along with the nine children all slept together in the room. The house had a tin roof and the walls were made up of a certain type of plant wrapped up around a bamboo stick and placed in a circle leaning on each other. This little house did protect them a little from the weather. As you slept at during the rainy season the rain water would fall on you while you slept and wind would flow throughout the house. The plants would dry out and become brittle and break fairly quickly so her Dad had to constantly replace them. In the middle of the room was a ring of rocks which

they would use to cook on. The rocks prevent the pan from touching the fire so her mom could cook for the family. When you were cooking in the house you had to be careful there were no sparks because if there was the house would burn down. Her parents could not build a home out of wood because they did not have a chain saw to cut the trees in the forest and enough animals to carry the materials back to where they were living. They lived on their grandparents land for about three and half years before her father could buy their own land.

Once her father bought their own land he built a bigger house which now had two rooms, a kitchen and one bedroom. The family had to walk to their new residence and it took around twenty minutes to get to their new place. The majority of the items they carried and the mules carried the rest. The last items were taken by who ever took the animals out to eat the pasture. On their way back they would leave the items at the new house.

Their new house had an aluminum roof with thin planks of wood around it. The rain did not come in the house but the wind would still go thru spaces in the wall. The house did not have windows only a front door which was kept locked at all times once the sun went down. Her parents locked the door out of concern someone intoxicated would accidentally walk into their residence. They did not have any toys and entertained themselves by wrapping old rags into body shapes and would play dolls and other games with their older siblings.

Her family did not have running water or a restroom. They would walk for about one half hour to the local creek to retrieve water. They had to be careful because there were a lot of little rocks on the path to the creek and it was usually cold and muddy. One

time when she was three years old she went with her father to draw water at the creek. On the way back she tripped and spilled the water she was carrying. She began to cry and would not stop because she had no water to take home. Her father did not want her to cry so he poured some of his water in her container. She stopped crying and was very happy and walked home with her father. Even though she was very young she already knew how important it was to save and not waste and to be a contributing member of the family.

The mountains belong to the whole town and her parents would plant crops in the mountains to support the family. Her parents did not have to buy the land in the mountain to grow the crops. The custom is you when you arrive at the mountain you walked around the land and choose the spot you wanted to use to plant. Next the father along with the older siblings would help to clear the land in preparation for planting. Since it is in the mountain it has lots of trees and weeds. Once the land was clear you have to put a barb wire fence around the land. There are two reasons why you need to do this first so the next person will know that plot is taken and the second is so the animals won't eat your crop. There is no limit on the size of land you could plant on. You can share it with others if you are not going to use the whole plot of land. Since it is fenced in you can allow other families to plant their crop. Half the land would be your crops and the other half to the other family. The families worked together as a community to make things easier for everyone. They would never sell the crops because this was the food they needed for the family to survive. The type of crops they would plant in the mountain was wheat, sugar cane, milpa, sorgo, beans, and corn. Her parents would buy or trade for the seeds they needed to plant for the survival of their family. Other families

who did not have the money to buy seeds or mules to carry their seeds would unite with other families and they would share the work of preparing the land and planting the seeds. They did not have to water the crop because all planting would be completed before the rain season. The rain would water the crops and the trees around the area kept the land moist and fertile so the crops would grow by themselves.

Normally women and young girls will not go to the mountains to work just the males. It would take at least four hours of walking to reach the mountains. Since you had to walk and carry everything you needed her father and brothers would stay up to a month at time. Her mother would make tortillas for the trip and once the tortillas ran out the men would come back home. Her father had a couple of mules and they would carry all the tools and seeds they need for planting.

While up in the mountains working and preparing the land everyone would sleep on the ground at night. Her father would just put up a thin nylon cover and they would lay under this and sleep, they did not have tents or sleeping bags. They always had to be careful because of the dangerous poisonous snakes.

Once the crops were planted her father would chop the wood from the trees into bundles and load up the mules with the wood cargo. Once he arrived at home they would keep some of the wood for the family to use for cooking and the rest her mother would sell. Her mother would sell the wood to the local restaurants and businesses. Her parents took jobs in the town to earn the money so they could move out of town and plant their own crops for their family because it is was cheaper to live this way. Her father got a job as a construction worker, and her mother a cook at a taco stand, her parents would make food and sell it for profit like tamales, corn on the cob, or what ever else they could

quickly trade or sell. Once they had enough money they bought the material to put up a fence around the lot their father had picked to plant the crop.

At home they would have their vegetable and herb garden. Also at their home they would plant crops in the little space of land they had around their home. If they needed more land because they had more seeds they would just ask any neighbor who did not have seed if they could plant their seed on their land. The neighbor would agree because they both would share the crop once it was ready to pick.

Her older sister would watch the younger children while the father would go up to the mountains to plant beans, calavastas, potatoes, chili, and cayota. Her mother would help by working odd jobs like washing clothes by hand at the creek, peel corn off the cob to help out with the expenses of raising a family. Her mother did not always receive money for her work she would accept whatever they gave her. My friend remembers when her mother finish peeling the corn off the cob the lady gave her bananas as payment.

One time her father was having a lot of stomach pain. Her father went to see a healing doctor. The healing doctor told him his problems were due to a scare he had and he gave him some potion to drink and it made him well. Her parents never went or took them to medical doctors they always went with the healing doctor. She still holds her traditional ways because one day when her daughter fell down while playing they took her to a healing doctor in San Jose not to a medical doctor. I told her she should take her to a medical doctor and both parents disagreed and said their child had fever because she hit her back when she fell. Another time outside the porch there were a bunch of ants and she was worried because she said this meant someone was envious of them and she wanted the healing doctor to anoint their residence.

Her parents had three pigs, two goats, twenty chickens, one bull and a cow. The animals only ate what was in the pasture because they could not afford to buy grain so someone always had to take them out to the pasture to eat and bring them back to the house.

Her older siblings did not attend any type of school because there was no school or school teacher in their town. My friend did attend school and went up to junior high because she went to school in another town. She would have to walk to school and this would take approximately one half hour. Her older sibling would take the animals out to pasture and would leave her at school. Once the animals ate they would pick her up from school and walk her back home. As got older she would walk to school by herself.

Many times while her parents were gone they had no food to eat. So her older siblings would pick some herbs and make a soup. They would add salt and garlic to the water to give it some flavor. They were very poor and many times would just eat the mangos off the tree for nourishment. Her god parents would give the children clothes.

The town had religious festivals during the year. They had one on January 12, Festival of Virgin de Guadalupe, March 19, Festival of Santo de San Jose, June 24, Festival of San Juan Bautista, December 24, Festival of Nacimiento de Jesus.

The mayodormos would host the festival. The mayodormos was the family who would host the festival and provide everything, the food and music etc. The mayodormos would invite guest to come the night before. The guest would bring items needed for the festival and help prepare for the festival. All this was down on a volunteer basis. If there was no mayodormo then the whole village would host the festival.

When they were at the Festival of Santo de San Jose my friend and her husband met and liked each other. He lived in town and so when she was sent to town to buy items needed for the household her and brothers would stand around talking to him. Eventually they fell in love and he asked her to marry him. She accepted his proposal and he was very happy. He wanted to give her a better life and take care of her. He told her he was planning to come to California and make some money and would come back for her and take her with him. He chose Gilroy, California because a friend of his told him he had a job for him. He was in California for five years before he went back. When he went back he asked her if she still wanted to marry him and she responded yes, so he told her to tell her parents he would be over the next day to talk with them.

She did not tell her father because she was scared and was unsure if he would really come. She only shared this information with her mother. The custom is when a young man asked for your hand he comes with his parents and the chigole (legal witness). The next morning she saw him walking to the house with his parents and the chigole. She ran and told her mother they were walking to the house and her father was not home he had gone out to chop wood. The father not being home would be an insult and a show that he was not accepting the marriage proposal for his daughter's hand. Her mother came out and explained to them her husband did not know because they did not tell them and he would be home later. Her future in-laws were very upset along with the chigole. The mother invited them in to eat and continued to apologize for her husband not being present. They would not enter the home and said they would return the next morning.

The next morning her future husband, his parents and the chigole came back. Her father greeted them and invited them inside the house, they accepted and sat down. Her

fiancé asked for her hand and her father sent her brother to call her. Once she was in the room he asked her in front of everyone if this was true and if she agreed to the marriage. She was told her father yes she had accepted his proposal of marriage. Her father and the chigole asked him if he was sure he wanted to get married and that life would not be easy. Marriage has it ups and downs and is not always happy. Also right now she might looks beautiful to him but as life passes she will also change as she has children and he might not have enough money to buy her make up. He thanked them for their advice and words of wisdom and stated he was ready for the marriage. Her father did not want the marriage to happy quickly he wanted them to attend the marriage classes offered at the local Catholic Church. The date of the marriage was agreed by both sets of parents and the chigole.

Once the agreement has taken place both sets of parents pay for the wedding gown and the groom buys the rings and his clothes. Before the marriage there is a celebration called the “platicas” or “Dia del Bendicion” this usually takes place at the bride’s house. All the guests are invited and the groom’s parents are in charge of this celebration. The guests bring bread, chocolate, chili spices for mole, live turkeys. All the food is put inside of baskets which are bought by the bride’s parents. On one of the tables there is altar with a saint on it. Surrounding the alter on the table are lots of On red and white flowers. There were two chairs in front of this table which did not face the table but the backs of the chair were to the table. After all the guests have entered and placed their food in the baskets they sit down. The couple have to sit on the two chairs and look at the crowd and they announce they will be getting married and everyone decides on a date, place and where reception will take place for the marriage. Once the

“platicas” are finished everyone drinks chocolate and eat bread. The “padrino” of the bride asked for the groom to come stay at his house. The groom is expected to go to the “padrino’s” house so he could kill the chickens and the bride and groom can make the chili sauce for the mole. Once the mole is cooked they put it into small containers and both the groom and bride go walking around delivering it to their families, friends and guests who will be attending the wedding. This is done one month before the day of the wedding.

One day before the wedding everyone who received mole would come to the bride’s home and help make the preparations for the wedding. The bride does not do anything except wait for the guest to come and receive her wedding gifts. The future in-laws come and ask to take the bride to their house to eat, dance the turkey dance. While at the in-laws the men dance around with the dead turkeys like if they are dancing with a girl. The “padrino” sends a young girl to comb/dress the bride for the marriage ceremony. Once the marriage ceremony is over all the guests including the bride and groom go back to the bride’s house and pick up the gifts and dishes she has received as gifts. Everyone, including the band picks up a dish and they all dance around with them as the band plays music. Next they all go to the groom’s house and have the wedding reception. Upon entering the reception the newlyweds are covered confetti and rice by all the guests. The reception is usually over by 8:00 p.m.

They spent the first week of marriage at his parent’s home and then came to California. His mother was crying and crying because she did not want them to leave. My friend told her husband she would stay with his parents and he could come back to California by himself. He said no he did not want to be alone he wanted his wife with

him. They left and it took two days and two nights of driving to reach Altar Sonora. Once they reached Altar Sonora they met the coyote and he told them to jump in the bed of the truck. They jumped in the truck along with the rest of the group. The driver was driving very fast and it was dark they had to keep their heads down because the branches of the trees would slap them on the face as they drove. Once they got off the truck they had to walk in the desert for two nights and one day. They would only take fifteen minutes breaks from walking and slept on the ground once they stopped walking. They had to walk very fast and only had some water, dried meat and toasted tortillas with them to eat. When they arrived at a bridge they were told to leave everything there on the creek side. As she looked around she saw the Virgin Mary statue sitting on a brick altar. Also she said where ever she looked there was backpacks, clothes, toothpaste, soap, perfume, vitamins, lotions just tossed around. They were very thirsty but were not allowed to enter the creek because they did not know how deep it was and it was dirty. They were told to get into a van and lay flat on their stomach one person on top of the others. The two women were told to lay on top of the men so they would not be hurt. Her husband laid next to her on top of one of the men. This was to prevent the immigration officers from seeing them in the van. Once they reached Arizona they were brought to an apartment, given food and told to take a shower. After one by one they exited the apartment and entered another van and this time were told to sit on the seats. The radio was playing and they were all happy and excited because they made it across. Once they entered California the immigration officer stopped them and they were all arrested including the driver. The driver told them to hide any money they had and only give them their wallets with as little money as possible. She had hid \$1,000.00 pesos in

her husband's collar of his coat and the immigration officer found this and took it away from them. The driver had lots of America dollars and told her to hide his wallet. She put the fat wallet with all the American dollars under the bottom of her bra. When the immigration officer asked her if she had money she told him her husband did and she just gave them her Mexican identification card. They asked her for her parent's names and took her fingerprints. They also did this to her husband and then send them to Tijuana, Mexico without giving them their money back. Once they arrived in Tijuana her husband called his sister who lived in Gilroy. She gave him the number of a woman who crossed people at the border. They met the woman and agreed on a price. She took them to her hotel room where there were many beautiful girls who were well groomed and very attractive. They were instructed to get into the trunk of the car and one of the beautiful girls drove it across the border. The inside of the trunk was very hot and cramped because there were three of them in the small trunk of the car. They were instructed not to move or make any noise. My friend said she felt like the car was going very fast and thirty minutes later they arrived in San Ysidro. Once in San Ysidro they were taken to a big house and told to get out the trunk. They went inside the house and sat down. Inside the house were lots of people sitting and talking. As they were sitting down someone came into the room and called out their names. They got up and were met by another person. This person asked them what part of California where they wanting to go. Her husband they told them Gilroy and the man asked them are you positive the people waiting in Gilroy have the \$5,000.00 cash to pay me. Her husband reassured him yes they were sure and then they were driven to Gilroy and met her sister-in-law at the store

on 10th street and she paid the coyote the \$5,000.00 for bringing her brother and wife to Gilroy.

The owner of the fat wallet called the sister-in-law a couple of days later and they made arrangements to meet at the local mall to give him back the wallet. They met at the mall on 10th Street and she gave him his wallet and never heard from him again. They never opened or counted the money in the wallet because they did not want any trouble.

She and her husband have been living in Gilroy for the last four years and now have a child who is three years old. He works as a supervisor at a local landscaping business. She does not work and stays at home to cook, clean and watch their child. She said this country is a land of opportunity if you want to make money you can. Her mother always was working to help her father make ends meet for the family. She is grateful she can stay home and spent time taking care of their child. They have bought their two meters of land in Mexico and are in the process of trying to buy the materials to build their house. She is grateful for everything her husband has provided and had to cry for several days and pout to get her husband to buy the land in Mexico. She wants to go back to Mexico to raise their family and live but he does not want to go back. She said her child is very stubborn and short tempered and feels their child would not make wise choices because their child is very spoiled because they both have showered their child with lots of toys, clothes and special treats. As she was growing up she never had any toys and buys gifts for her younger brothers and sisters in Mexico and sends them back home. They know a courier who travels back to Oaxaca every two to three months and he takes packages and brings packages for the different families who live in this area.

Her parents send back spices they do not have in California and she uses these for cooking.

She feels the life is much easier and better here but there are so many things children take for granted and would like her child to know their culture and to appreciate everything they have. Now she realizes they have over spoiled their child because of their poverty while growing up. My friend and I went to the local library and she picked out some DVD's on parenting tips and is now in the process of watching these DVD's along with her husband. With all the economic changes in the world her husband is looking at being laid off in December of 2009. They have agreed if he is laid off they will go back to Oaxaca to live and not have to worry about being separated from their child who is a citizen of the United States.