

Topic: A father's life and how it shaped him into deciding not teaching his daughter to speak Spanish

Abstract: My dad grew up in Colorado until he left for the Navy at the age of 18. Before he left for the Navy he lived with his family on various farms as the farmer's help. He started working in the fields when he was 12 years old to help his family with money. Eventually his family settled in a small town where there was a clear racial divide among the Mexican and White people. He continued to work on farms until he enlisted into the military. During his time in the Navy he received special training in electronics. This would be the foundation of his career later in life. A few years after leaving the Navy my father relocated to CA and met my mother. Although he is proud to be Mexican, he was heavily influenced by American culture, and it was the American culture that he passed to me rather than any of his Mexican traditions.

Key Words: farm, fields, Navy, Mexican, White, traditions, speaking Spanish, speaking English

I always wondered why I was not taught to speak Spanish. All of my life I have been met with funny looks, snide remarks and even teased because I only speak English. This has left me with a wide range of emotions: guilt, unworthiness, fake, unauthentic, "too" American/not Mexican enough... the list can go on. So, why do I not speak Spanish? Well, my mother does not know the language and so she simply could not teach me. My father on the other hand does know the language; as a matter of fact it is all that he spoke until he was six years old. When we were given this assignment I thought it would be a great opportunity to dig a little deeper into my father's history. Maybe I could find out exactly why it was he never passed on any of his Mexican traditions on to me.

In the fall of 1944 my father was born to a Mexican-American woman and an immigrant Mexican man. He was the oldest of their 9 children. My grandmother was born and raised in Kansas. Later she moved to Colorado and that is where she met my grandfather. She worked hard both inside and outside of the home. In addition to her daily work at home

(cooking, cleaning, tending to the children, etc.) she worked at a potato dock where they processed the freshly picked potatoes. In the summer she also worked under the hot sun out in the fields picking various types of vegetables with my grandfather.

My father's father grew up in Mexico until he was eight. He came to the United States of America with his family, and they settled in Wyoming. Eventually when he was older he moved from Wyoming to Colorado looking for work. When my father was a young boy his father worked in the fields reaping whatever had been planted. In time he would work his way up as a Farm-hand working directly with farmers and helping tend to the entire farm. True to Mexican tradition he only worked outside of the home and left the responsibilities of home life to my grandmother.

They lived in humble homes on whatever farm they were working with. These homes were for the hired help and usually where small and old. My grandfather would have a working relationship with most of the white farmers for a couple of years at most, and so my father and his family moved around quite a bit but never left the general area. Finally they settled in a small farm town called Eaton. There was a clear division among this community. The east side was where all the Mexican families lived. The east side, of course, was considered the bad side of town. And if you did not live there, you did not go there. My dad cannot recall any Mexican families living on the west, rich, side of town - only the white folks.

Like most Mexican families, my father was brought up Catholic. He and all of his siblings took part in all the traditional ceremonies. I asked my father what other Mexican traditions his family had, but he did not have a lot to share. He said at times his parents listened to "Mexican" music but could not specify what type. My grandmother cooked both Mexican and American food inside the home (this explains my father's love for meat and potatoes). My

grandparents solely spoke Spanish with my father until he was six years old. Once he started school (for some strange reason) they no longer spoke to him in Spanish and only spoke to him in English.

When my father started school, he does not recall ever having any problems adjusting to an all-english speaking environment. He did really well in school and got along with his classmates and teachers without any problems. It was not until he started middle school that he noticed segregation between the Mexican kids and white kids. He remembers the white kids looking down on the Mexican kids seeing them as lower-class citizens. Often times he would hear unkind remarks about Mexicans from the white kids. One time on the bus, a white boy made a comment about a Mexican worker who was out in the field “ditching” (making rows for water for the plants). He said, “Look at the dumb Mexican. He’s working way too slow.” Little did he know that the man was doing his job correctly because the slower one works on the ditches, the better they are.

My father started working in the hay and potato fields when he was just twelve years old. He did not make much money but whatever he did earn went directly to his parents to help out his family. During the school year he worked part time but in the summer he worked about eight hours a day. Of all his siblings he worked the most. His younger brothers would help him and his father occasionally but not on a regular basis. His sisters also worked. They helped my grandmother in their home with the chores most women traditionally have in the Mexican culture.

Life for my father was not all work. He had a good group of friends that he liked to spend time with. They would often find trouble to get into, drinking and partying at a young

age. They also liked going to the local dances to meet girls and hanging out at the theater on Sundays.

My father soon became bored with small town living and craved something new and exciting. As soon as he turned 18 he enlisted into the Navy. After he completed his boot camp training, he was sent to an electronic/radar school in Memphis. He would gain training to help prepare him for his job on the Ticondaroga carrier. His life with the Navy was short lived. He could not get used to the military life and culture, particularly conforming to the rules and regulations. Once his four year recruitment was over, he left as soon as he could for his hometown.

Back home in Colorado my father found various jobs here and there in factories. In time he finally obtained a job where he could use his skills acquired in the Navy. His career would continue to grow inside the electronic industry and eventually take him to California. Being the small town boy that he is, my father never thought California would be the place he would spend the rest of his life. A few years after relocating there he met my mother. Within a few years they were married and had me.

So, back to the question at hand, why did he not speak to me in Spanish? And better yet, why did he not pass down any of his Mexican traditions to me? He says the answer is very simple: he felt as though it had been so long since he had used his native tongue that he just did not have the ability to teach me. And as far as his traditions, he feels as though he was heavily influenced by American culture and really lost touch with his Mexican traditions. In addition to that he walked away from his Catholic upbringing and decided that he would not raise me with any particular religious beliefs. I must say, though, do not be fooled by his choices to raise me the way he did. When I asked my father what he felt about being Mexican-

American he answered, "I would not rather be anything else. I am brown and proud." And so he must have passed something along to me about our culture because I may not speak Spanish or practice most Mexican traditions, but like my father, I am brown and proud and would not want to be anything else.