

The Oral Histories of la colonia  
Transcribed by Jennifer Trujillo  
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**Virginia Hernandez** arrived in Lamar in September of 1948 when she was five years old. She describes her new home in la colonia as a two-room shack that housed her parents and four children. There was a bed for the boys and a bed for the girls. She remembers her mother putting a plastic cover below the sheet to protect the mattress because when one child would wet the bed, it would impact all of them. She recalls that she never felt poor there, though they only had hand me down clothes and had to pump water from the cistern in buckets to carry back in order to wash the dishes and bathe. Bath time would consist of one large tub of water and the children would bathe in order of age with the youngest going first. Virginia remembers that by the time the older siblings got their turn that the water was muddy and murky from the other children who had gone before. There were only four toilets available to them and no toilet paper so they would have to use whatever they could find such as old newspapers.

Virginia remembers that the foreman of la colonia had his own house and set the rules for the community but never gave them any trouble. Virginia didn't like working in the fields so instead she cooked for the family and cared for the younger children while her mother and sister worked in the fields. She remembers the Ybarra community garden and while they were not free to take anything they liked, the Ybarra family would share produce and sugar cane with the other residents. She recalls washing all of the clothes by hand and hanging them to dry regardless of the weather. Eventually they purchased a Maytag washer, which would be considered archaic by our standards. It would wash the clothes but the downfall was your fingers could get caught in the wringer as you were wringing them dry. Virginia did attend the colony school but she was only interested in the free milk they provided. If you brought a container, they would send you home with either white or chocolate milk and free chocolate milk was enough to get her to school every day.



**Frank Ybarra** recalls that la colonia had no water, light, or heating and they had to chop wood to keep warm. The Ybarra family was privileged in that they had two houses. The boys slept in one house while the girls and their parents slept in the other house. His grandfather had pigs, chickens, and a garden so he remembers always having

good food to eat. Frank was one of the few students that advanced from the colony school to the junior high school in town. He was the only Mexican at the school and while he doesn't recount any particularly difficult incidents, he does remember feeling like the other students were prejudiced towards him. When Frank was 16 his family moved to town and he remembers la colonia as being hard living but he always felt like the residents were a family.



**Teresa Corrales** was older than most of the kids in la colonia. She was born in Las Animas and moved to Lamar with all of her possessions carried in knapsacks. There were no suitcases or dressers when she arrived. She kept her clothing in boxes and remembers using tubs and scrubbers to do her laundry. They had to heat up their irons on the stoves due to lack of electricity.



**Alfonsa Herrera** moved from Lamar to la colonia in the 50's when she got married. It was quite an adjustment as she had become accustomed to modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing that were not available in the colony. She recalls that it took her months to get accustomed to her new living conditions. When the sugar beet factory closed down and they were forced to move very quickly they began building homes on the North side of Lamar with great haste. She says they didn't use levels and that the windows in her home were poorly made because of that. She had to have replacements specially made since they were not standard. Alfonsa has fond memories of la colonia and said that the community helped a lot of people.



**Daniel Duarte** seems to have the clearest memories of life in the colony. He arrived in 1948 at five years old and recalls life at the colony as hard living. When he

arrived, he only spoke Spanish and he remembers his home as an adobe building with cement floors and no indoor plumbing or water. Each apartment contained four rooms, which included a bedroom, living room, kitchen, and utility room. The only electrical power came from cords that hung from the ceiling that only provided light. He shared a bedroom with nine other children and recalls that there were no playgrounds.

Daniel describes the Arkansas River Valley as the land of milk and honey during those times, as water was plentiful and farming sugar beets was profitable. There were three buildings at the American Crystal Sugar Factory but only one remains today which is now used for storage by BMS near the train tracks, a hotel, and the local Loves. Daniel remembers a lot of the children being laborers and while there was a machine to dig the sugar beets, they had to use what he refers to a machete with a hook to remove the top, which was very dangerous for children.



The workdays began at sunrise and ended at sunset, which resulted in a 14-hour workday for both adults and children. Prior to work they would eat breakfast, which was usually a pot of beans, potatoes, and occasionally some bacon.

The colony children would start school in the first grade and might attend through the seventh grade. The schoolhouse was also an adobe building with a classroom and utility room. It was heated by a potbelly stove and the students had to use out houses. Eventually they did build a playground for the colony school but it finally shut down in 1954 at which time everything was demolished. Daniel remembers that some of the residents returned to Mexico while others just left town and some hastily moved into Lamar. His one regret that what remains is an eyesore and there is no recognition for the community that embraced him as a child.



The Colony School  
by Jennifer Trujillo  
taken from selections of Marcela and the Mexicans  
by Gladys Doty  
and Mexicans and Hispanos in Colorado Schools and Communities  
by Ruben Donato

The population of the town of Lamar grew from 4233 in 1930 to 7715 in 1959. The American Crystal Sugar Company had an arrangement with the town of Lamar in that they owned the schoolhouse and the Lamar School District would provide the teachers. The colony school only served small numbers of students however enrollment was constant. In the 1920's it is estimated that 78 of 1078 children in Lamar were immigrants and by 1950 those numbers increased to 207 out of 1832. However the school never had more than 25-35 students per year.

Margarie Blackman was one of the first teachers at the colony school and also began her career there. She described the school as such,

You would never know it was a school. It looked like an adobe hovel. It did not have bathrooms. It had outhouses. We had a well for water. It had no playground, no equipment, no swings, no nothing. There were two teachers. We had old books and they were dirty. We had round stoves to keep the room warm. I taught first, second, and third. She (the other teacher) taught forth, fifth, and sixth. The kids didn't do too well...We made lesson plans at the colony school but nobody saw them...The kids were good about attending school.

Students were taught English and American Culture in the colony school and once they learned the basics they were expected to transfer to the regular schools but this rarely happened. However, in the oral histories Frank Ybarra does recall transferring to Lincoln



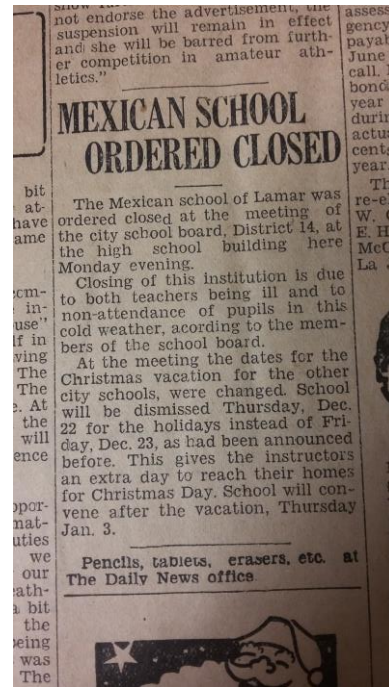
after his time at the colony school. Blackman remembers her time teaching at Lincoln, “I cannot remember a Mexican child at Lincoln when I started.” For most Mexican students, the colony school was their only experience with public education. Blackman also complained that the colony students received hand me down desks and supplies that were deemed unusable by the regular schools and there was no plumbing or electricity, which was available at the public schools.



While there were several other well-known educators from Lamar at the colony school, it was Marcella Hertzog who gained the most notoriety when Gladys Doty published “Marcella and the Mexicans” in *Empire Magazine* in 1989. She opens with an anecdote about a boy named Manuel who came to Marcella quite upset the first day after Christmas vacation because he had not received any gifts from Santa. The children had written letters to Santa and one was even published in the local paper. What Marcella had not considered was that the great depression had hit everybody hard; particularly the



sugar beet workers and Christmas gifts just were not a possibility. The following year, she asked her students about their traditions and participated in building a piñata and in the Mexican tradition of Posada.



This incident sparked Marcella to go to the school board to ask for better desks rather than the damaged ones that had been handed down from the south side of town. She also wanted a piano and a cot for the children if they became sick. It took some time but she did eventually get new desks. She was also to get a teeter-totter for the children but it was broken within two days because the adults were playing on it too. They continued to receive second hand books but eventually got new supplies. She complained of the difficulties of proper sanitation since water had to be carried from a cistern.

The school superintendent handed down a directive to teach the resident children of the colony English and get them through the first two grades at which time they could enter the third grade in the city school but that rarely happened. According to Herzog, those who did make it had,

their self confidence battered a dozen times a day. Anglo children tease them, and some of the teachers think that the Mexicans cannot do as well as the other children. I have to see to it that they are well into third grade work before they ever enter the third grade.

Despite her dedication and interventions only nine Mexican children graduated from High School in Lamar between the years of 1920 and 1960.

Not only did Marcella serve the children of the colony school, she served the adults as well. She noticed that the young mothers and pregnant women needed medical advice. She went back to the school board and asked them to establish a meeting room for the adults. Once it was approved she put up charts and pictures about infant care and diet and showed the women prenatal exercises as well as how to bathe their new babies. She had baby items from her own child who had died and held a drawing to give away the items to the new mothers. She also convinced the Federated Women's Club to sponsor a clothing drive. Rather than give the clothes away, they hosted a rummage sale and sold the items for almost nothing. According to Herzog, "The colony people have a choice, they pay their money, and they walk out with their self-respect." The rummage sale became an annual event in the colony.

When she noticed that the parents were starting to read the children's books she started a library in the community room with adult books, as the adults were reluctant to go to the local library. She also intervened for the teens that were not allowed at local dances and had to sit in the balcony at the theatre. She began having Saturday night dances in the community room and it became so popular that Mexicans from surrounding towns began to come to Lamar for them. She also began a program to help the women in the community earn money. She created a homemaking corner in the community room to teach them how to vacuum, wax floors, and polish furniture so that they could become maids. She also taught them how to sew and gave them advice about interviewing.

After fourteen years at the colony school, Marcella Herzog died at 66 after a battle with brain cancer. Gladys Doty went looking for former students to see how they fared in life after the colony school. Russ Abita, a former student, who owned and managed Community Builders Enterprises Company remembered Herzog, "The best

thing that Mrs. Herzog did for us was to make us feel that we could do anything we wanted to.” Abita remembered some of his classmates one who owned a restaurant in La Junta, two who worked for Boeing in Wichita, a foreman on the Greeley Tribune, and a teacher in Laporte.

