

JOVITA AGUAYO ORTEGA

The copper colored disk of autumn sun dipped toward the horizon, drawing light away from long brown rows of freshly turned earth. Jovita Aguayo's dark silhouette was barely visible hunched over the scattering of fist-sized white potatoes that she grasped and stuffed into the burlap bag dragging below her. Almost at the end of the row, twelve-year old Emilio and ten-year old Jose looked back apprehensively at the farmer's tractor approaching on the adjoining row. They held their breath as the farmer leaned over and asked, "One more row Mrs. Aguayo?" They already knew what she would reply. Jovita never shied away from extra effort and the chance to earn a few more dollars that could be applied toward new clothes for her children's return to school.

Jovita was conditioned early in life to adversity and to hard work. Born on February 15, 1908 in Chihuahua, Mexico, Jovita was the second of Francisca Gonzalez and Jose Ortega's four children. She often boasted, "My great grandparents were part of Guadalajara and Zacatecas upper class." Perhaps she was right. A visit to Zacatecas today reveals the Gonzales and Ortega names on streets and monuments in the city center. The families apparently lost their former status at the beginning of the devastating revolution that swept Mexico from 1910 to 1920. Her recollections of her parents were sketchy at best. Jose Ortega disappeared early in the war. According to his death certificate, he died in the streets of Chihuahua in 1912. Francisca Gonzales contracted diphtheria and died three years later. She left daughters Margarita and Emilia in the care of their *madrina*. Francisca's younger sister took in Jovita and Jesus.



Early in the war, Chihuahua was a major target of General Pancho Villa's revolutionary forces. Unbearable artillery bombardment and continual skirmishing in the streets of the city caused tio Antonio Varela, tia Severa, their four sons, Jovita, Jesus and grandmother Alvina to flee. Jovita remembered running down the street and jumping over the bodies of dead soldiers on the way to the train station. Grandfather Matias Gonzales refused to leave his beloved Mexico and stayed behind.

At the station, the panic stricken refugees encountered a chaotic scene. Passenger trains were packed with people and still hundreds stood on the platform jostling for a place on the only transportation remaining – a locomotive pulling a string of cattle cars. Hesitating for only a moment, the tiny party clambered aboard. Jovita recalls speeding toward El Paso, Texas, wind streaming through the open-slatted sides of the straw floored cattle car.



In El Paso, tío Antonio built a comfortable adobe house for the extended family at #3 Spruce Street – just steps across the border. He did masonry work throughout the city. Grandfather Matias, belatedly reunited with the family, earned money from gathering rags and other recyclable materials. Grandmother Alvina added to the family earnings by raising pigs and chickens that she fed with restaurant scraps from the city dump. She employed Jovita as a door-to-door salesperson taking orders for fresh eggs from the neighbors.

Jovita recalls a relatively happy childhood in El Paso. Tia Severa enrolled her at Beall Elementary School. I have a photo taken by the Aultman Studio of girls at Beall School dressed in the uniform she described – pantaloons, dark stockings, and middie blouses. When I showed it to her a few years before her death in 2000, I pointed to a girl in the middle of the front row and said, “*Quien es?*” She quickly replied, “*Pues soy you!*”

Jovita loved learning. Every morning she rushed to catch the trolley on Alameda Street. She jumped off two blocks from the school situated at the intersection of Rayner and Rivera Streets. “I ran like a jackrabbit to arrive just as the morning bell signaled the beginning of classes”, she recalled. Learning was easy for her and she especially excelled at solving math problems. Alas, her best friend Anita didn’t fare as well. To get by, Anita paid Jovita five cents to do her homework for her. “This was enough money to buy a bowl of *menudo* and a cup of hot chocolate for lunch,” Jovita remembered. The two friend’s arrangement worked fine until Anita was called to the blackboard to work out math problems in class!

Jovita hoped to complete eight years of school, but tia Severa cut short her ambitions. She only allowed Jovita to finish fifth grade and then forced her to stay home to cook, clean house, and wash and iron clothes for the growing family. There was some compensation though. Tia Severa was fond of *zarzuelas* – traditional Spanish operettas – movies, circuses and puppet shows and she took Jovita to all of them. Maybe that is why Jovita was always seated in the front row of the Sedgwick gymnasium when her own children starred in school operettas and plays.

Tia Severa also took Jovita shopping, buying the most stylish 1920s clothes for her. Jovita declined, however, her tia's urging to cut her hair "flapper" style. Tio Antonio added to Jovita's teenage entertainment by taking her to Saturday dances in downtown El Paso.



In 1926, the family trekked north to Colorado. Eight adults crowded into a three-room labor shack near Ovid and began to work in the sugar beet fields. Jovita continued as mistress of the house and more. She awoke at three in the morning to light the fire in the wood-burning stove and prepare breakfast. After cleaning up the breakfast table, Jovita made another stack of tortillas, put

beans to cook, and then joined the others in the field. She returned to the house to serve the noon meal, again washed dishes and returned to the field until dark. She prepared dinner, cleaned up after, and then washed and ironed clothes before going to bed about eleven.

Family pictures reveal that Jovita Ortega was a very attractive young woman. In conversation with her children in later years, she recalled boyfriends in El Paso and a fiancée in Ovid. Valentin Mendoza was set to marry her, but got cold feet and returned to Mexico instead. Jovita was so angry that she vowed to marry the very next man that displayed a genuine interest in her.



The only respite for the farm laborers in the area was weekly dances held in Sedgwick. Every Saturday night a society of Mexican men, Marciano and Ciriaco Aguayo among them, rented the second floor of Jankovsky's Garage, hired musicians, and hosted dances to raise money for the annual *Fiestas Patrias* on the 16th of September. These festivals were gala affairs featuring a parade of Mexican and American flag draped farm trucks and banner carrying marchers. Seated on one of the trucks were the event queen and her royal court. Orators delivered patriotic speeches and epic poems. The final dance of the season capped the day's events.

At one of these dances, Jovita's attention was drawn to a handsome young man with dark wavy hair. She remembered, "There was a glimmer of interest in his hazel-colored eyes and a gold tooth or two glittered in his captivating smile." Marciano Aguayo didn't ask her to dance, but scarcely a week later sent a letter offering his friendship. Just as Jovita vowed, a short courtship ended with the couple marrying on November 2, 1928.



"The Depression years from 1930 to 1936 were trying times for us", recalled Jovita. Marciano continued seasonal work in the sugar beet fields while she cared for daughters Linda and Anita, tended the family garden, and washed and ironed clothes for the more prosperous White members of the community at seventy-five cents per bushel load. Many times she left Linda watching the younger children while she carried lunch to Marciano working in the distant fields.

As World War II unfolded, Marciano secured permanent employment with the Union Pacific Railroad. Jovita continued to harvest onions and potatoes, launder clothes, clean houses, and do other odd jobs to augment the family income. Recognizing the value of education, the couple was determined to keep their children out of the fields and in school. Jovita demanded perfect attendance at school for her kids. Some of the older kids remember her walking to school in blinding snowstorms, and knocking on the door to make sure the schools were indeed closed before excusing her children. Likewise, illness had to be life threatening as an excuse to miss school. Many of us still find it difficult to comprehend how Jovita and Marciano, with their meager incomes, managed to provide adequate food and clothing, along with money for band uniforms, instrument rental, athletic equipment, and other school expenses for seven children. One way, of course, was the produce collected from the half-block garden they always planted. Every autumn Jovita canned vegetables and fruit that her green-thumb helped produce in abundance. In the garden, indeed wherever there was a patch of bare ground, Jovita also planted every type and color of flower imaginable! Marciano's small herd of animals provided plenty of meat and fresh milk downed with Jovita's tasty homemade bread.

Yes, all of the Aguayos are grateful beneficiaries of Jovita's hard work and single-minded determination to make it possible for her kids to excel and achieve where she could not. We all remember incidents that illustrate her intelligence, her unwavering faith, her exemplary courage and perseverance, her inspirational creativity and her love of nature's beauty.

Special thanks to Jose Aguayo for providing this story and photographs of his family.