

MARCIANO AGUAYO



On a typical northeastern Colorado day, I braked my orange Volvo in front of the plain white clapboard house on First Street. In those days Sedgwick had named streets, but there were no signs at intersections designating what they were. The crisp air carried the familiar smell of burning leaves, signaling that winter was on its way.

Magdalena, our two daughters Marisa and Lucia, and I approached the front door of the modest home. My mom, Jovita, came out to greet us. Though profoundly hearing impaired, she somehow sensed someone was coming. She hugged and kissed everyone while waving to me and saying, “*Hijo*, your dad is not here. He said he was going to see his pigs. It is getting dark and he has not returned”. “I’ll go get him”, I said.

I found Marciano sitting on the stoop of the tiny weathered barn he had placed on the small parcel of land he purchased at the northeast edge of town. He was proud that he no longer needed to rent places to keep the livestock he always raised. Marciano looked like an Andrew Wyeth figure, sitting dressed in characteristic cambric blue shirt and Oshkosh b’Gosh overalls and silently picking his lip. The usual brown cap with railroad union buttons pinned on the side covered his graying hair. I wondered what he was thinking; perhaps reviewing his life and pondering what might have been or satisfied that he had achieved all that he expected.

Marciano was a long way from his birthplace, La Barranca de las Cabras, Aguascalientes, Mexico. I remembered many winter evenings when most of the Aguayo children sat in the kitchen of the “old house” on Second Street as he regaled us with tales of life in that wildly picturesque gash in the Mexican landscape. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Aguayos three-room stone and adobe *casa* perched on the lip of a low limestone outcropping in the canyon seemed a prosperous abode. Aguayo patriarchs had somehow acquired the means to maintain a small herd of cattle, goats, horses, and a pair of burros. Marciano said Grandmother Maria Hernandez’s brother Alejo provided the largess with two sacks of silver stolen from a mining mule train.

Life in the *barranca* was rugged. At an early age, Marciano was assigned the task of guarding the family’s five *milpas*



bordering the stream running through the canyon. His hazel-colored eyes would squint with delight as he shook his head remarking, “*Ay, esa agua era tan clara y dulce!*” The *milpas* were named *La Mahada, El Almagre, La Cava, La Pistola* and *Las Cabras*, he remembered. Though he was only about seven years old, Marciano’s vigil at the *milpas* often lasted for days at a time. His allegedly abusive father, Jeronimo, provided no food and he was forced to roast immature ears of corn and squash growing below the stalks to ease his gnawing hunger.

On those extended field watches, Marciano slept atop his burro to protect himself from snakes and scorpions. Once, he said, he even fended off a hungry puma with burning sticks from the campfire. Periodically, his father enlisted him to help load dusty sacks of charcoal that the pair sold on a circuit of nearby towns, including *San Jose de Gracia, Garabato, Carboneras, Rincon de Romos* and *Paredes*.

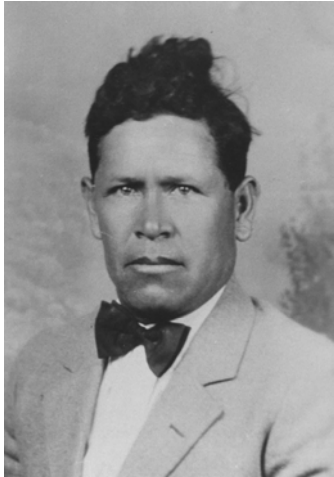
It is not surprising then, that Marciano left the barranca when he was about fifteen. As I sat next to him in the advancing darkness, he recalled walking seventy kilometers to the provincial capital bearing the same name as the State. His brother, Ciriaco, who was eight years older, was already living in Aguascalientes. Despite Marciano’s relative youth, Ciriaco managed to secure a job for him at El Progreso, the railroad maintenance yard where he worked. With 100 pesos, they purchased a house at #5 Vasco de Gama Street. From the roof of the house, Marciano watched General Pancho Villa’s ferocious Division del Norte fight General Carranza’s forces.

Marciano remembered the victorious *Villistas* entering Aguascalientes in a dusty, day-long parade after the battle. He and some companions earned extra pesos by riding the horses of the weary “*dorados*” into the river for a refreshing bath. When the *Villistas* infantry left Aguascalientes on their crowded troop trains, they invited Marciano to join them. He boarded a train. But as he looked back at the rapidly fading rooftops of the city, he changed his mind and jumped off the train. This was the shortest military service of any Aguayo before or since!

Back at the railroad shops, Marciano learned the blacksmith’s trade. He wielded large, steam-driven hammers to beat molten iron into various parts needed to repair the locomotives used by revolutionary armies transporting troops into battle. Marciano toiled in the railroad shops for about five years. Pancho Villa had captured Aguascalientes twice, but by 1916 the fortunes of war turned against him. General Obregon decimated Villa’s fearless cavalry with entrenched machine guns at Celeya – a strategy adopted from the world war engulfing Europe at the time.

Work in the rail yard ground to a halt. Workers demonstrated in the streets, demanding that General Obregon make the good their wages paid in *bilimbiques* – Villa’s now worthless currency. Marciano remembers shop administrators abandoning the factory grounds, their suits dripping with spittle as they marched through a gauntlet of angry workers.

Marciano notified his supervisor that he was leaving – going to El Norte. The supervisor urged him to stay. “Obregon will replace Villa’s currency when he arrives”, said the man. But that did not happen. When Obregon faced the striking workers, he pointed to his flaccid uniform sleeve and said, “When this arm that I lost to Villa’s artillery grows back, then I will make good his money!”



The next morning, clutching his meager belongings, Marciano jumped on a freight train heading north. Riding the rods under a freight car became Marciano’s preferred mode of travel. He crossed the border at Laredo, Texas, posing as the husband of a widow with two small children. Ciriaco had departed for the United States two years earlier and Marciano was determined to find him.

Over the years, I often wondered what ensued during the time Marciano left Aguascalientes in 1917 and when he and Ciriaco turned up in Sedgwick, Colorado in the early 1920s. Continuing his narrative Marciano said, “My first stop was Tyler, Texas. I met two young women at the train station. I lived with them for a while.” He related no more details of that curious relationship. In Tyler, Marciano got a job working for the Copper Belt, Mississippi, Kansas and Texas Railroad. He earned 35 cents per hour.

Marciano still wanted to find his brother, so from Texas he traveled to Blackwell.



Oklahoma. There wasn’t much work there, so he cut two and one half cords of firewood per day at 25 cents per cord to survive. He didn’t say how long he lived there. Sometime after, he rendezvoused with Ciriaco in Pueblo, Colorado. For a long time, I understood that he found Ciriaco working in the Colorado Fuel &

Iron Steel Mill. While I was working at the Colorado History Museum, however, I came across a 1920 photo of beet workers in the fields of Sugar City – a small town fifty miles east of Pueblo. I swear that one worker wearing *pecheras* and a conical straw hat and characteristically picking his lip is Marciano Aguayo.

Marciano continues his story. “I hitched a freight train and ended up in Merino, Colorado”, he says. From there he worked his way to Sedgwick – his adopted home for the rest of his life. I have a bankbook that shows he was working in the area by October of 1922.

All of the Aguayo children remember stories from this period in Marciano and Jovita’s life. He toiled in sugar beet fields from before until after dark, using a miner’s carbide lamp mounted on his cap to illuminate the rows. He consistently earned “A” grades on Great Western Sugar Company reports to farmers. Jovita remembers Tia Severa urging her family members to partner with Marciano to tend sugar beet acreage from planting to harvest --- “*Porque era muy trabajador*”. Marciano, Jovita, Ciriaco and, sometimes even other couples, lived in ramshackle, one-room houses near fields where they worked. After sugar beet harvest, Marciano crossed the Platte River to pick corn on bottom-land farms lining the stream. During the Great Depression, the couple struggled to earn enough to feed and clothe their growing family.

In 1941, Marciano landed a permanent job with the Union Pacific Railroad. Summer days he replaced wooden ties and shoveled weeds from the rocky, road bed under the steel bands carrying monstrous steam locomotives from the main line at Julesburg to Denver. Many nights his rubber *capote*-covered figure maintained a lonely vigil at bridges watching for washouts caused by frequent torrential rains. In winter, he bundled up in heavy, knee-length, sheepskin-lined coat, snow boots, gloves and mittens to clear the tracks of drifted snow. Marciano’s deeply ingrained work ethic was the reason that he never missed a day of work during 32 years of service on the railroad.



We will never know everything that this exemplary man experienced. It is certain, though, that destiny placed him on the path of adventure and eventual settlement far from his beloved Aguascalientes. Though he never forgot his Mexican heritage, Marciano and Jovita proudly became United States citizens in 1957. His first priority was always providing security and love for his family. Through his and Jovita’s hard work and sacrifice, all of their seven children earned college degrees.

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