



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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Remembering Aunt Tula

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By Gilbert Gia, as told by Henry Orozco
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I was nine in 1949. In those days there was always lots of people in our house in Delano, but I didn't know all of them. I guessed they were uncles, aunts, or cousins. My mom kept one of those shiny two-foot-high aluminum coffeepots going all the time. It seemed to me the grown-ups mostly sat around the kitchen table talking and telling stories. Sometimes there was a bottle of brandy in the middle, but there were always coffee cups. I don't think people visit and talk as much as they used to.

About this time in my life my mom and my sisters took me out with them to pick, but it was only on Saturdays when school was going. My parents believed in school for us kids, and my sisters and brothers did pretty good after they left home. But on the weekends my mom got us up and going about 4:00am, and she put some food in the car for lunch. She'd drive us out to Wasco or around Lamont or someplace like that, and we usually were working by the time the sun came up. We did beets and potatoes a lot. But then there was the tomatoes.



I didn't like the tomatoes. These tomatoes were not the sissy kind, like staked up on poles or anything like that. They just grew down on the ground. After I'd been picking for about an hour, the coffee pressure started building up inside me and I had to go take a leak. The problem was there was a lot of that tomato stuff that comes off on you, and it was over my arms and my hands. Greasy, like yellow and green and black goo. I didn't know what it was then. Probably it was mud and pollen and insecticide. Anyway anybody'd be crazy to touch their thing with that stuff on their hands. One of my uncles saw me and saved my life when he showed me how to cut a soft tomato in half and rub it all over my hands to get that crap off.

We also worked in the grapes and oranges. About those oranges, all the ranchers we worked for had their own three-legged ladders. They were 10, 12, or 16 feet tall. When I said I went out to work with my mom and my sisters I didn't exactly mean it. When we did the oranges, my mom scouted out the rows and picked out the best trees for us kids to pick. The best ones were short and loaded with fruit so we didn't have to move the ladders so much. Then she'd sit down and smoke cigarettes and supervise us kids while we picked.

The growers gave everybody metal rings so they didn't pick any oranges that were too small. After a while nobody used the rings because you just got to know when an orange was too little to pick. Except my uncle Chulo. He pick the whole damn tree no matter what size the fruit was. He never got caught, and man was he fast. By the time we got our ladders up on a tree, he already had his sack full and was coming down to dump them in the box.

Me and my sisters each made about \$25 for ten hours a day. That came up to about \$500 a month for all three of us. Of course my mom cashed our checks and gave us some money to spend. I got \$2.50 on

Saturdays, and I think my sisters got the same. It was lucky for my mom that my older sister Gracie was a tomboy and wasn't interested in clothes. Years later when my mom was real sick, I said, "Mom, where's all the money we gave you when we were little kids?" Boy, did she give me a dirty look.



In the summers, right after school was out, we packed our stuff and went up to Yuba City where my aunt Tula and uncle Beto lived. We moved into one of the little farm buildings next to them.

My aunt Tula was about four feet high and three feet wide. She was real dark and had a big mole on her nose, right there. She wore her hair braided like ropes on both sides of her face, and she had a bunch of *canas*, but her hair was still mostly black even after I grew up. Every summer she always wore the same plain cotton house dress and thin button-up sweater that always hung open. In one pocket of the dress she had a pack of cigarettes and in the other one she kept her matches. Tula had flesh-colored stockings that were permanently rolled half-way down past her knees.

My Aunt Tula and Uncle Beto worked up there for a grower named Saki. My uncle was a permanent ranch hand and did clean-up and pruning and irrigating, and all the other stuff that needs to be done all year around on a ranch. Saki had about 25 workers in the summer time. Those guys stayed there at the ranch. My aunt cooked for them, and served all of them at a long table. She also more or less took care of the big barn where they slept.

They were all illegals, wetbacks. That's just what we called them. It wasn't anything mean in those days. After supper at night they'd sit around and play cards, gamble, smoke, listen to the radio, and maybe

drink. They never went anywhere except on the weekends to go into town and buy something. I didn't think about it at the time, but when I got older I realized it must have been a real lonely life for them away from their families.

The first thing those guys did when they first got here was buy a big metal steamer truck. They all had their own next to the wall where the bunks were. Those trucks were for stuff to take home to their families at the end of the season. If the cops were expected, the men and the trunks went out the door for a couple of hours. I never knew where they went, but they always were back by nighttime. If they got caught, the cops took them away in one of those buses. About a week-and-a-half they were back at the ranch.

I told you about picking tomatoes already, but I didn't tell you about the lunch my mom packed for us one time, and it's probably another reason I still hate tomatoes. One time me and my sisters sat down in the field to eat, and we opened up our brown bags one time. All that was in them was these little packages of salt. Really.

Mostly my mom made bologna sandwiches for us. One summer we were at Aunt Tula's ranch picking peaches, and my mom told us it was time to eat lunch. When we took out our bologna sandwiches we happened to be sitting next to where Tula's men were getting ready to eat lunch. My aunt could really cook, and she made them good stuff, like burritos and tortillas and tea. My sister Gracie, who was 15, asked one of them what they had to eat. He showed her the burritos. Gracie showed him the bologna sandwiches and asked him if they wanted to swap. That's right! Me and my sisters had some good burritos for lunch that day. I don't remember if those guys ever traded with us again.

My aunt Tula could understand English, but she never spoke it. Once in a while that was a problem. She had to go to town pretty often to buy groceries, and she had to buy the meat from a Chinese butcher. I was there when this happened. This guy probably knew some English, but he didn't speak Spanish. I'm thinking now that it was a matter of pride to my aunt that she didn't speak English. Anyway, she got frustrated because he didn't understand what she wanted, and then it got pretty hot and loud. She'd started pointing and cussing and saying stuff like "No, No! Como tu chingas!" and that Chinese guy was

doing his best to calm her down -- "Yes, yes, mama! Yes, yes, mama!" Somehow there wasn't any bloodshed, the guy made the sale, and Aunt Tula went home with what she wanted. Aunt Tula usually won.

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