

**San Jose State University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Gil J. Villagran**

---

2005

# Beto, El Escritor de Cartas de los Braceros (English)

Gil J. Villagran



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/gil\\_villagran/68/](https://works.bepress.com/gil_villagran/68/)

## ***Beto, El Escritor de Cartas de los Braceros***

By Gil Villagrán, about my father's experience as a Bracero

My father, Gilberto Villagrán, left Mexico City in 1943 at 23 years of age to come to the U.S. as a Bracero with the goal of earning enough money to be able to support his family -- widowed mother and four siblings--and to be able to marry his *novia*, his sweetheart.

He arrived through El Paso, where the braceros were sprayed with chemicals to be "de-mexicanized," as the rumor with gallows humor went. He was assigned to go to Bakersfield, California, to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. The rail line along the San Joaquin Valley had originally been built in the late 1800s, and was now being used to ship heavy weapons and equipment to Port Chicago in San Francisco Bay for the war in the Pacific. The whole rail needed to be rebuilt quickly to handle the heavy loads if the country was to win the war against Japan. Since American men were off fighting the war, and American women were building ships, weapons and airplanes, the war planners realized they needed additional men to bring in the massive California food harvest and to rebuild the rail line. My father was assigned to one of the teams of braceros contracted to Southern Pacific.

The men lived in freight boxcars converted into a traveling barracks, with crowded makeshift bunk beds and a coal-burning heater for use during the cold nights. Relief from the extreme heat of summer was by way of leaving the steel door of the boxcar open.

The men worked six days a week, Monday through Saturday, sun-up to sundown. On Sundays the men rested in their bunks, or walked to the nearest town when they were near any town. Most went first to find a Catholic church to pray for the safety of their families back in their *tierra* or *pueblito*, attend mass, and then find a Woolworth or some such retail store to purchase items they might want such as a newspaper in Spanish, if they could find one, stationary and postage stamps for letters home, sewing materials to repair torn clothing, or some other item they wanted and could afford.

After making their purchases, or just window-shopping, they sought an inexpensive working class Mexican restaurant where they could order a *comida corrida*, the meal of the day. The men, so far from home, missed their *platillos favoritos*, favorite dishes, so any Mexican meal would fill their bellies with a taste of home. A typical comida would begin with a light soup of fideo or consume, then the day's special such as chicken in mole, or carne asada, chile verde, chile colorado, or enchiladas. There was always a side of refried or whole beans, and rice in tomato sauce, and unlimited corn tortillas and very *picante*, spicy, fresh salsa and chiles of various kinds, raw or cured in vinegar.

If the worker had enough money, he might drink a beer with his meal or just water to save his money. In any group of men, someone would ultimately put in some coins in the jukebox, or the restaurant cook might have a radio on, and when a corrido or bolero came on, telling of life's injustices of exploitation, lost love, or missing your beloved *tierra y familia*, eyes would moisten and conversations would die out to the internal personal thoughts of each man.

So Sundays were the braceros' day of rest, for sleeping in, playing cards or checkers or dominos, or reading and re-reading letters from home or writing letters to their families and *novias*, sweethearts.

Now these men, who contracted out of their country as braceros, were desperate for work, any work, which was not to be had in their ranchos, *milpas*, cornfields, pueblitos or in the urban barrios of 1940s Mexico. These men did not have the benefit of careers offered by formal education, many could barely read or write, and some had never seen the inside of any classroom.

My father was such a young man, from a pueblito, Santana, Sonora. However, he was able to attend school until age 13, when his father died. As the older brother, it was his duty to leave school, which he loved, to work to support his widowed mother and four siblings. When the family could no longer afford the rent of their humble home, they moved to Mexico City, where they hoped to have better prospects for jobs and education for the younger children.

While living in Mexico City, the war broke out, and three years later, the Guest Worker (*Bracero*) Treaty by Mexico and the U.S. was signed offering work to Mexican men. My father hoped to

earn more money as a bracero in the US than in Mexico City, where millions of people were streaming in from all parts of the nation, all seeking a livelihood at any wage.

With my father's sixth grade education, he could read and he could write, and the other men would ask him to read their letters to them. They then would ask him if he could write letters for them. Of course he did this for any man who asked. Gradually, he spent so much time, in the evenings and on Sundays reading letters from home and writing responses to the men's letters, that it became almost a second job. He realized he had to purchase more stationary, postage stamps, and keep a file of letters received and sent. He wrote every letter in pencil, which was all he could afford, and made carbon paper copies using one page marked completely with carbon using the side of the pencil point.

Now in addition to not being able to read or write, some men had never before been away from home, so when it came time to dictate their letters so my father could write them, they found themselves unable to put their thoughts and feelings into words. They might say, "well...tell *mi mamita*, my mother, that I miss her, or tell *mi esposa*, mi wife, that I love her." But my father would say, ok, I already wrote that, but what else do you want to say? Or how *much* do you miss her or love her? Many of the men remained silent, tongue-tied, embarrassed, or would finally ask my father, "*Pues tu sabes...*, well you know... what would you tell her if she was your mother or your wife or sweetheart?"

So it was that my father became a letter writer offering his own words for these men of few words but many feelings. He would ask them about their families, their names and what they were like, about their work and their health, about their wives or sweethearts, how they met, what was special about them, about their plans which always included getting married and having many children. He would ask about their children, their names and ages, what they liked to do, their favorite toys and games. And from these inquiries the men would come out of their shyness to share the love for their families, their worries about their health, about wives and sweethearts who may be straying from their love for them. These men, and my father also, were very lonely for those they loved and left behind. And all the men dreamt of better times after their contract was completed and they would return with more money than they had ever earned.

Known as Beto, *el escritor de cartas*, the writer of letters, my father became their confidant, their counselor, their editor and the keeper of their correspondence with those they left in Mexico. He was one of the youngest men on the team, and the most trusted, as they trusted him with their life stories, their family dynamics, and their innermost thoughts, worries and dreams. He was paid a *propina*, a tip, for his letter writing, and kept a file for each man for whom he wrote letters, as well as his own letters, in his footlocker beneath his bunk.

One day, in the summer of 1945, as a coworker was pounding a rail spike, the sledgehammer bounced off the spike, hitting my father's foot with great force. He was rushed to a hospital in Fresno, bleeding with a crushed foot. While still hospitalized, trying to ensure that gangrene did not set in, the war in the Pacific ended. He joined the celebration of a war weary nation with the hospital patients and staff. He knew his contract would be terminated at the conclusion of the war, but he was happy to return home to his sweetheart and family.

His foot was saved, and he got paid and went home with many gifts from the Woolworth's for his family and to marry and set up a home with his sweetheart, Graciela. Three years later I was born, the second of six children. Eight years later our family emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. to settle in Santa Clara so Beto's children could get the education he could not get as a poor child in 1930s Mexico. All his children went to college in California and Oregon.

When the war ended, the letters he wrote were dispersed to each bracero so they could have a record of their letters, written by **Beto, el escritor de las cartas de los Braceros.**

Written from *los cuentos*, the stories, my father told of his experience as a *bracero en los Estados Unidos*.

The author did social work for 32 years with immigrant families, the descendants of braceros, and U.S. born Mexicans and other Latinos in Santa Clara County.

He is a Lecturer of Social Work, San Jose State University, and writes on social justice issues.

See: [www.indybay.org](http://www.indybay.org) search: Gil Villagran

to hear his Smithsonian interview go to: <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/140>

email: [gilbert.villagran@sjsu.edu](mailto:gilbert.villagran@sjsu.edu) phone: 408-482-0371