

“Memories”

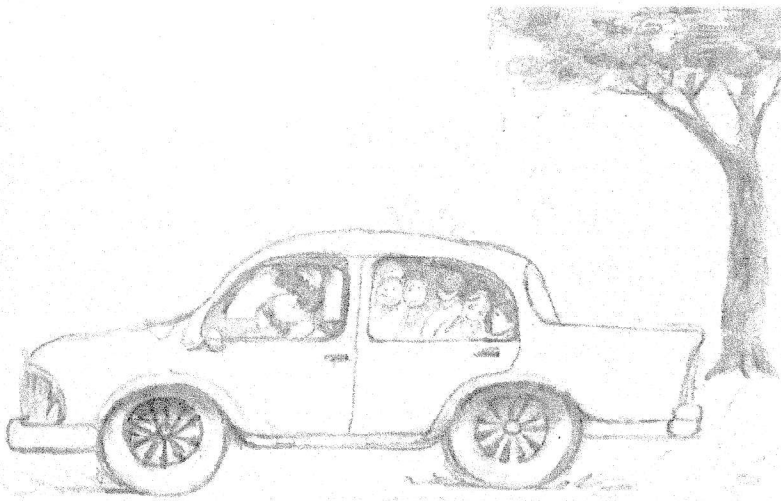
By- Guadalupe Smith

Illustrator- Jane Kim

These are ramblings...no connection of ideas or happenings, one thought leads to another. These ramblings are not in chronological order and not always will names be mentioned.

Since I am no scholar or writer, this may be difficult reading for some. However, that won't bother me because I am doing this as much for myself as I am for my grandchildren to read – as they get older, to get an idea of what we did to occupy our time when we were children and "growing up". In those days, I don't believe the term "Teens" was ever used to describe an age. Maybe great grandchildren – when they're older may get a kick out of reading about the "Older Times" when Great Grandma Lupe was a kid.





School, Skates & Bikes

School was more than a mile from our home, and as children we always walked since our parents never owned a car. Occasionally, a neighbor would pack the younger neighborhood kids in her Ford car and drive them along to school with her daughter who was a year older than me. This only happened when the weather was bitter cold and occasionally when it was raining "cats & dogs." Otherwise, we, my two older brothers, two younger sisters, younger brother and I always walked regardless of the weather. In the spring, it was fun to roller skate, but since all of us didn't own skates, (usually two pair in our family), we traded off and shared them on different days. As for bicycles, we had only one among the six of us. I remember on the evenings when it was my turn to get the bike, I would ride from home to Monmouth Park and know that if my parents had known how far from home I was, they would not have liked it! On those evenings I felt so FREE with the wind blowing in my face. Of course, this didn't happen until I was 13 or 14 years old. Before that age, I probably would have been afraid to go that far by myself.

Looking back, we led very sheltered lives, comparatively speaking, but everyone in our neighborhood lived like that. We lived on West 6th Avenue and the other people on the Avenue lived in the same houses forever, it seemed!

A young man from our neighborhood married a beautiful young girl who was "new" to us – anyway, she was no one who lived close by. She was very kind to us and we always found an excuse to visit her sometime during the hot days of summer because she always treated us to a cold sweet drink. Now we'd call it Kool-aid, but at the time I think she bought small bottles of different flavored concentrate and let us choose the flavor we wanted, and then made a pitcher-full for us. Sweet memories!

All of the kids in the neighborhood were permitted to go barefoot in the summer but we never could because my mother had the old fashioned idea that it was indecent. I distinctly remember one hot summer day when we had a downpour. All along the Avenue, there was a depression in the lawns between the sidewalks, which were brick, and the street. They were grass covered but on this day, that depression made a perfectly good wading pool. I can't remember how we were able to convince my mother to let us take our shoes and stockings (long ones even in the summertime) off to wade in the water. She probably saw the other youngsters from the neighborhood having such a good time splashing and playing that she relented.

I remember tucking the hems of our dresses, which came to mid-calf, inside the elastic on the legs of our bloomers. (I should explain what bloomers were – we now call them panties, but in those days they were cumbersome, usually too large and made of plain white cotton with elastic at the waistband and on both legs.) Anyway, that day we really had fun as after the summer rain – really a downpour, we played in the sun and water to our heart's content!

My Beginnings in Monmouth, Illinois

I was born on August 31, 1923 at 11:30 at night in a boxcar on the south side of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad – better known as the CB&Q. It was just west of the railroad station or depot, as we called it. My mother was Refugio Gutierrez y Mendiola de Almaguer. Gutierrez was her father's surname, Mendiola, her mother's surname and Almaguer was my father's surname. My father's name was Benjamin Solorzano Almaguer and he worked as a laborer for the railroad. He had come, as a very young man, from his native village in central Mexico from the state of Guanajuato, from a village called Jaripitio, now renamed Aldama. He worked in Colorado and then came East with other relatives – all men who worked on the railroad, too. My mother came to this country from the same village and actually she and my father were what we call "cousins once removed", or second cousins. They were married at Immaculate Conception Church in Monmouth on December 6, 1918.

There were other Mexican families, all the men working for the CB&Q, living in the same area, in box cars provided by the railroad as living quarters. By the summer of 1927, all the Mexican families except for us and another one had left Monmouth to move to Chicago to try to get work in the steel mills. (They all did, and once my oldest cousin, who worked there, told me that one had to be half animal and half man to work in the open hearth at the steel mills.)



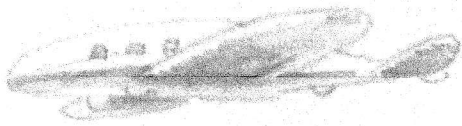


Railroad Box Cars as Our First Home

The box cars, as I can recall, were two box cars with small high openings cut out as windows and one large door. There was also an opening at the opposite side of the door that connected the two box cars together. I can't remember any of the kitchen furnishings except the table which was wooden and oblong and covered with brightly colored "oilcloth". Oilcloth was fabric-backed and the top was slick and easily cleaned with a damp cloth. I'm sure my mother used the table to make tortillas daily and surely we must have all sat around the table at dinnertime (any meal time). The chairs were plain wood, not square with sharp corners, but rounded corners and not painted but natural colored lumber. The reason I remember these chairs is because I dusted them for years (in later years) on West 6th Avenue where we moved when I was about 5 years old. I can only remember one large double bed, but we must have had two - one for my mother and father and one for the children.

At the time of my parents' marriage, they lived in the house that my father lived in with his older sister, whom he helped support. She had two sons living with her who had been born in Mexico. Anyway, that was my parents' home also until just before my second brother was born. My oldest uncle, my father's brother, advised my father to get a place for my mother to live where she could be mistress of her own home. Apparently, he could see - what my father could not see or chose to ignore - the fact that she was unhappy and getting thinner by the day. This fact became very real to me in later years because many times my mother would tell me of the trails and tribulations she suffered as a member of that household. Consequently, a few months before my brother was born, she, my oldest brother and my father moved into one of the box cars which the Railroad Company gave to employees if they needed them for a home. They were placed on railroad property and this happened to be south of the railroad track and west of the passenger station or depot. I know that my mother was very happy when the move was made because she told me about the change many times and that she didn't care if all they took with them was the bed, a table, two chairs and a few pots, pans and dishes, she was finally in HER HOME!

At the time they moved to that area, there were several Mexican families living in the box cars. Many of them were relatives, all related to us on my father's side except one young man who was my mother's brother. He was working as a railroad laborer. When his parents (my grandparents) died in Mexico, he sent for my mother and a younger brother and sister. They had two other sisters in Mexico who were married. My mother was twenty-seven years old when she arrived in this country with her younger brother and sister. A male relative, an older cousin traveled with them from Jaripitio to Monmouth, a distance of about 1750 miles. She didn't say much about the trip. It probably was such a horrendous experience that she wanted to erase it from her mind. I do know that neither of the adults knew any English and had only their destination written on paper. My mother did tell me that she carried provisions for the first few days of their train trip and later bought food which was sold by vendors at train stops. They made this trip towards the end of the Mexican Revolution, when there was still plenty of unrest throughout the whole country. In later years, she would tell about paying "dos centavos" (two cents) per person to cross the bridge across the Rio Grande from Mexico into the United States, nothing else was needed. I'm not even certain at which location they crossed the border. At the time that they tried to tell us these stories we weren't interested.



Gardening by the Box Car Home

I know every household had a garden in the summer and always plenty of “elotes” (sweet corn.) They also always planted tomatoes and hot chili peppers and probably many other vegetables but squashes and sweet potatoes stand out in my mind. Also peanuts! I remember helping to gather those by pulling on the plants and as they came away from the ground, many peanuts were exposed which we gathered and placed in buckets.

Since Monmouth’s airport was one of the earliest in the state of Illinois, we sometimes had small planes flying – what we thought was quite low over our neighborhood. I don’t know who taught us our first phrases in English – probably one of the older children who undoubtedly attended Willits School as did some of my older cousins. Anyway, when a plane would fly over, all of us children would yell as loudly as we could, “Hey, Mister, give me a ride!” How funny it now seems to me but at the time how in earnest we must have been thinking that we might possibly get a ride. I really believe that phrase to the airplane pilot was the only phrase I knew in English before I started school because in our “barrio” only Spanish was spoken. We didn’t call it a barrio in those days.

I mentioned earlier that by 1927 almost all the Mexican families had left to go to work in the steel mills in Chicago. My father had no desire to uproot the family – and himself again. He had established roots and as he said, “I knew what I had here, and I didn’t know what I would find in Chicago”. Do you suppose he was tired of living a bare existence and knew that he was finally establishing a home and a family? I certainly can’t say that he didn’t have an adventuresome spirit after having traveled thousands of miles from his home to this country. My father was orphaned and working as a waterboy to field hands by the time he was five years old. He never saw the inside of a classroom as a student.

Years later, when he was working as a railroad laborer, he told us that the older men would go into “town” after work but he was quite young and stayed with the foreman of their group. He would try to copy letters, individual letters of the alphabet, from old newspapers in the evening. You must remember that he did not know how to read or write nor had he had the opportunity to learn. The foreman saw him one day and told him that if he wanted to learn to read and write, he would teach him. God bless that man, my father did learn.



Strawberries, "Agua Fresca" and Ice

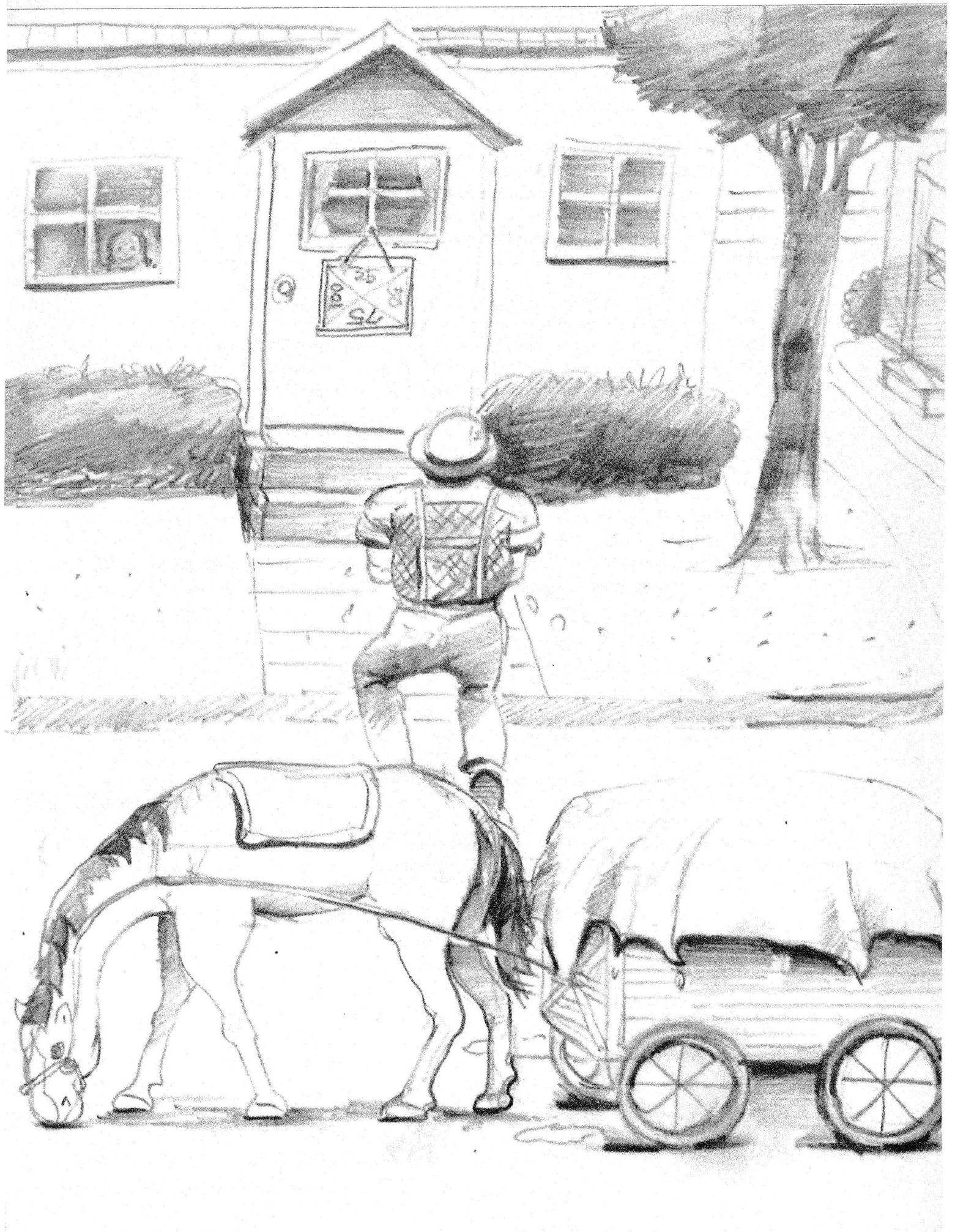
As young children, we picked strawberries along the Railroad right-of-way: they were tiny and extremely flavorful. At the peak of the season, it was fun because we filled our containers very quickly. Arriving home, my mother always made a sweet fruit drink, very refreshing, from the strawberries – mashing them and adding water and sugar. It was "agua fresca" – fresh water – as we called it. She always saved a large pitcherful in the ice box for my father when he came home from work.

Writing about the ice box brings another thought to mind. Since the railroad was about 50 yards from our house, we could watch the trains go by. They stopped, you might say, right in our back yard and if they were going West, we knew that they most likely had been to Chicago. In the long summer evenings, if we saw yellow box cars we knew that they were refrigerated cars returning to be filled again. We also knew that since they were leaking water, they still had chunks of ice that had been used to keep the produce fresh on its way to market.

My father and brothers, who were probably 12 -14 years old, would take gunny sacks (burlap) and my father would climb up the side of the yellow box car and down into the inside where he would again, climb the ladder carrying chunks of ice which the boys would help to carry home. This way it would save a little money not having to buy ice. I don't know what my father's thoughts were when he did this but I always was afraid that the train would start to move and he would be gone forever to California. How we knew it was from California, I don't know; I suppose there was lettering on the box cars which gave us a clue. Anyway, I once voiced my fear and he told me about the train's whistle which signaled that the crew should get ready for departure.

Trumpet Vines on "Calle Seis"

When we lived on West 6th Avenue (Calle Seis) as we now call it, after we had rented for some time, our folks finally bought a home with a loan from Security Savings, then called Homestead & Loan. As we would walk home from school, we would pass a home, on Calle Seis, which had a long fence where trumpet vine flowers grew. Some other "kids" had told us that if we cut buds off just before they were to bloom and placed them on the brick sidewalks, then step on them, they would give off a big POP! We loved doing it until the lady of the house came to her front door and yelled at us that she was going to phone Number 5 on us. Did we ever run home quickly and were we scared!! Number 5, we knew, was the phone number to the local police station!! I didn't blame the lady and I know that we never did it again.



The Ice Man Commeth!!

Speaking of ice brings thought of the "ice man." (Remember, we, as well as our neighbors, didn't have refrigerators in our homes at that time.) He had a wagon pulled by a horse – in later years it would be a truck. The ice was always covered by a heavy canvas covering and when we children on the Avenue would see him coming, we all gathered around to get chips of ice, and sometimes, a small chunk about the size of a couple of three present day ice cubes. The housewives on the Avenue placed a card in their front window showing the amount of ice needed for the day. The cards were given by the ice company and were about 12" x 12" square, with numbers on each quarter of the card. When the ice man saw the card in the window, he knew how large a chunk to cut to deliver to that home. Whichever number was at the top was the amount needed for that day.

I guess he must have made the rounds a couple of times a week. Taking care of the ice box was another matter. There was a water pan under it which caught the melting ice and it was one of the children's jobs or chore, to empty it periodically. If one waited too long, it would spill on the floor as we were carrying it outside and we'd have a bigger job cleaning up the mess we made.

Our Clothes

Clothes were different; my mother bought fabric and made some of our clothes, especially summer clothes and underwear – bloomers. Winter clothes were given to us, at least some of them, from my aunt in Chicago. I especially remember a winter skirt that I loved. I must have been the same size for at least two winters because I wore it a lot, just changing blouses to wear with it.

Feeding Family & Friends

In the summertime, cousins from Chicago would come to visit us and we enjoyed that because as we got to be early teenagers, they taught us to dance and... was that ever fun!! The boys would go hunting with my older brothers and about the only game they ever brought home were rabbits. My mother cooked those in the oven in a special sauce. I liked it as we didn't have meat too often. We did have pork but it had to be eaten in the wintertime when it was butchered and the cold weather in a shed kept it frozen. Chicken was always available in several ways but being fried was always a favorite. We always had plenty of chicken on Sundays as friends from Galesburg were apt to come by for a visit and my mother always had enough food to feed at least ten extra people...and I'm not kidding or lying. She always had extra food and was always pleased by the compliments that came because of her food. This cooking extra food continued even after I was married and she'd have my father take a full dinner to a couple of older people every Sunday.

Mama's Wash Day and Papa's Railroad Work

My mother did her washing in galvanized tubs on an old fashioned washboard. In the summertime, the wash tubs would be set in place under our grape arbor. We used old railroad ties set on end blocks to bring the ties up to a height for a bench. The tubs would be set on these benches. Of course, the whites (white shirts, underwear, socks, etc) would be boiled in soapy water on top of the coal stove in the kitchen. How the kitchen did get hot on wash day with the hot fire from the stove and the steam from the wash boiling!!! I know that my mother sometimes suffered neuralgia pain in the side of her face and the only thing (medicine) that relieved the pain was a pearl-like capsule filled with ether. She called them "perlas de eter" which we purchased at the drug store, Spriggs and Bradshaw, on the city square. They definitely contained ether because in later years when ether was used as an anesthetic when I was nursing, it would bring back memories of the smell of my mother's breath when she had to take "time out" for this pain.

In later years, for wash day, she could rent a washing machine. This doesn't sound believable but it's very true. The man who owned the electric washing machine with a wringer – you may have seen old fashioned machines pictured – anyway, he also owned a pick-up and would have that machine available for various families on the Avenue to use. The rental cost for one day plus delivery and pick-up was 25 cents!!! You must remember that prices in those days were comparable to wages which a laborer received for one day.

My father was a railroad laborer and his daily wage was a little over \$2.00 a day! For that, he would nearly freeze in the wintertime. In the summertime, it was just as bad because they always worked outside regardless of the weather. Summertime was especially hard as they replaced ties that the rails were anchored to in order to steady them with spikes. Several men would carry the ties and when they were placed under the tracks, spikes were used to anchor them steady. Again, all this was done by manual labor since machines weren't used at that time.

I vividly remember one summer day when my father came home in the middle of the afternoon with blood streaking down his face. They were working on the railroad ties under the railroad tracks and when using the gadget to drive the spikes in place, a piece of steel apparently hit his forehead and that's where the bleeding came from. In those days, the boss just sent the worker home to take care of himself. (How different an injury on the job would be taken care of today!) I had a bent for nursing even then, so I took care of the injury and put a patch over it. Next day, of course, he was back on the job as usual. Later, an infected raised area became visible where the blood had come from about 2-3 months before. Since it seemed to have pus in it, my father wanted me to open it to drain the pus. After I sterilized a needle, (lighting a match, holding the needle to the flame and then cleaning it with alcohol) I did open the area and hit something under the skin and eventually worked out a sliver of steel-iron, cleaned the area and patched it up again. This time, it eventually healed.



Yearly Chicago Visits to Our Relatives

Every summer we'd go to Chicago for a couple of weeks. How different Chicago was to Monmouth - just as the difference is today. When we were grade school age, our aunt would send us, along with our cousins to a summer day school program sponsored by Bishop Shield of Chicago. When we went home in the afternoon, we'd each receive a loaf of bread for free. While there, we'd pray, learn songs, do crafts and even learn to embroider and finish a small embroidery project in two weeks. We enjoyed it, we thought we were privileged and special to enjoy these benefits, but now realize that this was a program sponsored for poor children in the area. We even got to swim in the pool at the park!

On Sundays, the only day one of my uncles was at home, we'd go visit him. He would always have lots of fresh fruit which he'd offer us. He worked all week, and then on early Sunday mornings he would visit a fruit store where they gave him all the ripe fruit which would not hold over for the following week. (Back then, stores weren't open on Sundays.) Being very ripe, the fruit was as tasty as it could be. We loved it.

Our Telephone

We were one of two families on Calle Seis who had a telephone. The only reason we had one was because my father's railroad boss told him that if we got a phone, he would give him enough extra hours of work to help pay for it. The reason the boss wanted us to have a phone was because in the wintertime when the Railroad Depot would call the boss to tell him that the snow had to be removed from the platform for passengers and off the loading dock, the only way he could contact my father to shovel the snow was to get out of bed, get dressed and knock on our door. After the phone was installed, all he had to do was make a call to our home. It sure beat getting up, dressed and driving over to our house to give my father the message.

After we got the phone, we used to play a stupid game. We'd call a cigar store to ask if they had "Prince Albert in the Can." (This was a brand of tobacco that was sold in a tin can. Men would use it to roll their own cigarettes) When the clerk answered "yes", we'd say, "Let him out!" then hang up and go into gales of laughter! We only did this when friends were over to the home. It was fun and scary at the same time.



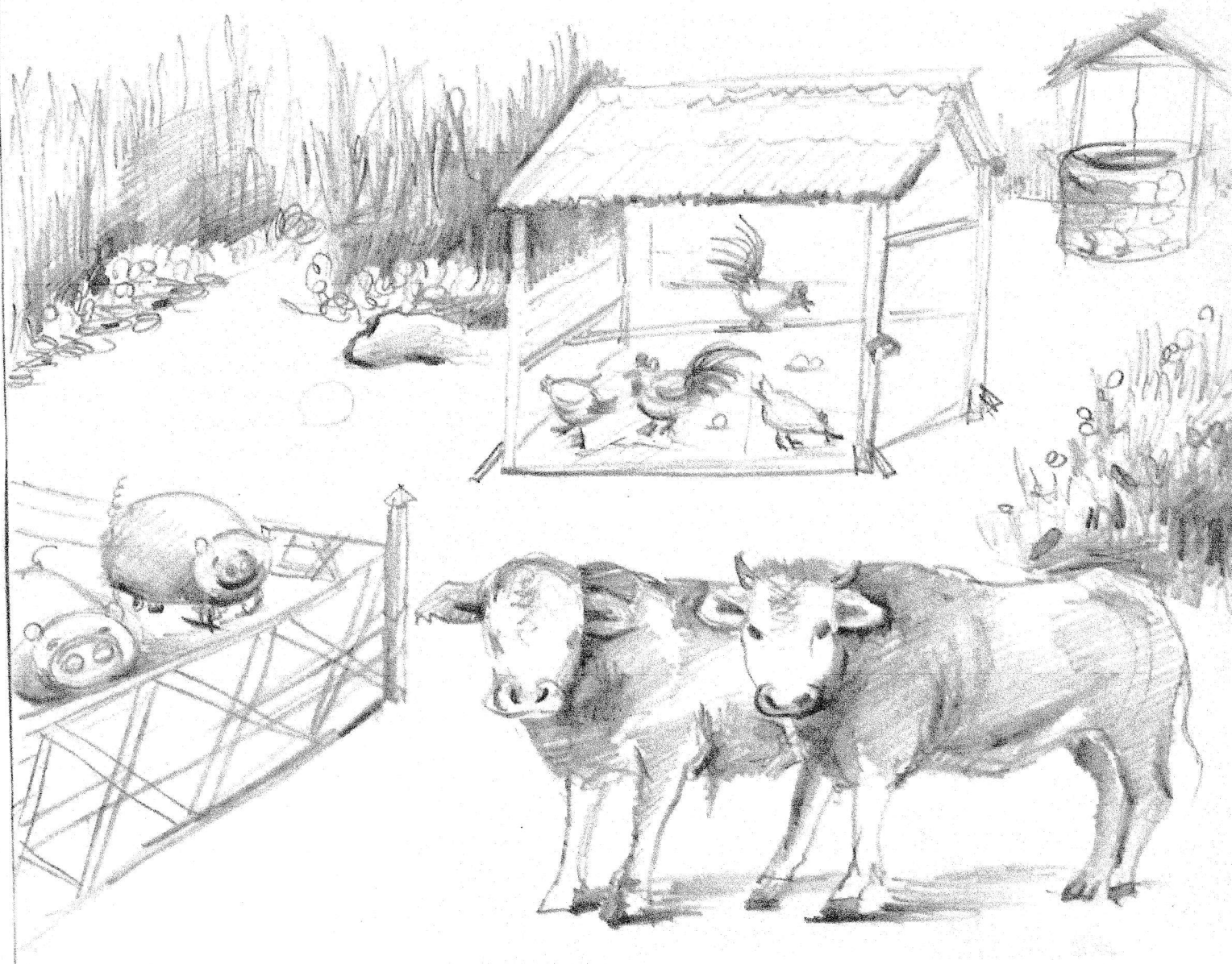
Wine & Beer

I earlier spoke of picking wild strawberries along the "right of way" of the railroad tracks. Later in the fall, we'd pick wild grapes, my, they were tiny – my mother made wine from them. This was during Prohibition but I guess they didn't know anything much about that. Neither did I because if I had known, I would have lived in fear – of the police or something – "cuz I was always a "scardy cat!"

Speaking of Prohibition, my parents also made home-brew (home-made beer). I hated the smell when it was fermenting but I always helped with cleaning the bottles (which were large ones probably holding twice as much as a regular beer bottle today.) We also were able to buy malt and hops plus caps for the bottles so apparently we weren't the only ones in the city who made home-brew.

In the summertime, when my father got home from work he'd sit under the shady grape arbor and my mother would bring him a bottle to refresh himself. I'm sure that after 8 hours or more in the hot sun on the railroad, he was ready for a cold drink of anything. Thinking about refreshing him, my mother sometimes would serve him the center (heart) of a watermelon with no seeds. We kids got the slices with all those seeds and my mother said that he worked hard in the sun and needed the best part of the melon. We now call it TLC – "tender loving care."

We were able to afford watermelons and cantaloupes in those hard times because my mother would bargain with men who came from Oquawka with pick-up loads of fruit. She would trade home-brew for their fruit so we were always supplied. They were told to bring the bottles back, which they always did. Some of our young friends always marveled at how we always had watermelons and cantaloupes to enjoy.



Popcorn, etc.

As I think about harvest time, since money was scarce, we would sit in the living room and shell pop-corn after harvesting and drying it. My two brothers who were "paper-boys" would sell it to about 4 or 5 small grocery stores which were located in the center of our shopping area or close by. That brought in extra money. They would deliver it in our red wagon, pulling it behind them and the grocery owners called them "the popcorn kings". They did this for many years.

Sometimes during that season, my parents might have asked for permission to glean a field of field corn if it was fairly close to home and both of them would take "gunny" burlap sacks with them, glean the corn, then store it to help feed chickens, a couple of hogs and the two cows we owned, even though we lived in town. We did have a field just to the back of our property which we rented for the cows. The chickens were in a pen in the back part of our back yard and our two or three pigs were also penned further back. We still had plenty of room to play and for our parents to have a small garden close by, too.

Speaking of gardens, my father eventually purchased a plot across the road from our house – actually across from many of the houses on our block. It was about 15 acres. There we planted some field corn, popcorn and potatoes, tomatoes, onions and other vegetables including cabbage and of course squashes and pumpkins. These are vegetables that I can definitely recall that we planted, took care of and picked. Oh yes, I must not forget the pepper plants! Being Mexican, the peppers were a big item not only to use fresh but also to dry for later use. We girls would help my mother can the vegetables in glass Mason jars. Man, that was hot work!! I always had to rewash the jars for canning because I had the smallest hands and I could scrub the insides of the jar (quart size) with no problem. One thing is certain, we were never hungry during the hard times but our Menu did get monotonous. I remember my mother saying, "you'll never feel hungry even if all you have in your stomach is beans – and who would know any differently."

When the first freeze was predicted (don't ask me how my father knew about this, probably some of his friends at work talked about it.) anyway, he'd come home from work that day and put us all in motion! He assigned each of us six kids a job – some to pick all the peppers, others all the tomatoes, and any other vegetable above ground whether it was ready to eat or not. My mother would have us also pick her beautiful flowers and we'd have buckets full of flowers sitting around the kitchen and dining room floors! The vegetable all went down into a cellar with dirt floors. We didn't call them basements in those days, nor were they anything like basements today. At that time of year, it would be very cold and after that picking chore, we were happy to come into the kitchen warmed by a wood-burning stove to a hot supper. My mother always had something warm for us to drink – warm our insides – she said.

Relatives That Came to Visit or Live with Us

Relatives from Chicago – my father's families – would come to visit anytime without ever letting us know ahead of time. They'd arrive one whole carload and sometimes two carloads! As I recall, our parents were always glad to see them and welcomed them with open arms! We were glad too, because they'd bring teenagers our ages and we'd learn all the latest dance steps from our Chicago cousins. There was always room for everyone because all we needed was a blanket on the floor someplace. This was always in the summertime.

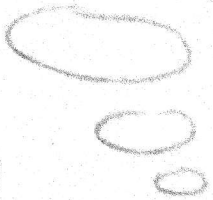
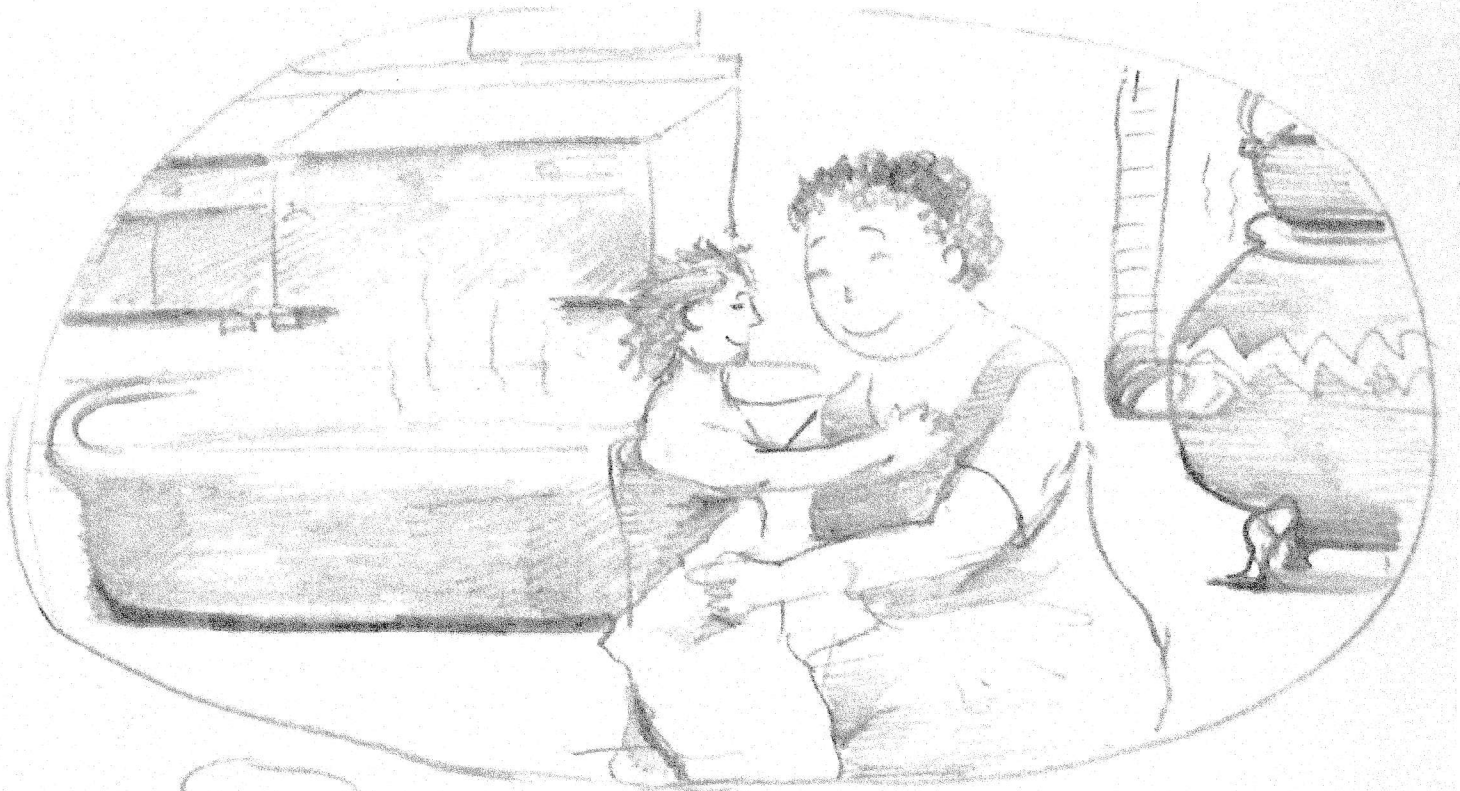
One time my mother's second cousin from Sterling, Illinois came to live with us when he lost his job, probably in a factory. Uncle Adolph as we called him lived with us for several years and we certainly liked him as he was always giving us dimes which we never had been given before. Eventually he went back when he got a job in a factory again. He later married and had a family.

The other man that lived with us as we were growing up was another uncle. Actually, he was my mother's brother-in-law. He'd left his wife, my mother's sister, in Mexico and came to the United States at the time of World War I. He apparently joined the Army and was sent to Italy where he was assigned as a cook – someplace. When he back to this country he had no home to go to, so he became a hobo. Since my father was a railroad laborer and was working close to the depot – the train came to take-on water for the steam engine and Joe Moreno (his "acquired" American name) got off and happened to meet my father. As they visited, they recognized each other and my father brought him home where he lived with us for many years. He began drinking after he'd worked construction and had money. Eventually he left Monmouth and we never saw him again. I must say our parents were very generous in their home and with what little they had.

Summer Evenings

When we were growing on the Avenue – West 6th Avenue – on summer evenings young kids and even teenagers would meet under the Arc Lights. We call them street lights now. We played games like "hide and seek", "Red Rover" and other games where we chose teams. We were very diplomatic about choosing young as well as older kids for each team without being prompted by a supervising adult. We took care of ourselves. Our parents never seemed to worry about us as they could always look out their front doors and see us all playing together under the lights. I absolutely cannot remember us ever having a serious disagreement while playing.

Playing at night brings to mind something else. When we were little girls, my mother always braided our hair because it was long and neither she nor my father would hear of us wanting to cut it short, even tho it made more work for my mother every morning before school. Anyway, as we got older, we didn't want it braided, we wanted it curled. I don't know how my mother got the idea to cut brown paper grocery bags into strips about four inches wide, fold them towards the center lengthwise a couple of times, then twist them. Those were the curlers she used for our long hair. I've learned as I grew older that some people used rag curlers. Anyway, one evening, after bath and hair washing time, we all went out to play under the arc lights. I guess I stayed out too late for my mother to wait to curl my hair. When I came in, she'd gone to bed and told me if I wanted it curled, I'd have to do it myself! You can bet that I learned how to do it tho it probably took a very long time. In those days, we'd buy a glass jar (about eight ounces) of some green "slimy stuff" called wave set. While our hair was wet, we' rub some of that on the hair strand we were curling, then roll it up on the paper curlers. Well, from that night on – my mother never curled my hair again, it was my job! I guess that in time my two younger sisters eventually did their own hair, too.



Cold Weather – Coming Home from School

As I said previously, we walked to school (over one mile). On very cold days in the wintertime we'd hurry home, no playing around. I clearly remember one exceptionally cold day. I didn't own a pair of mittens – anytime up til then. There was a grocery store about half-way home. It was heated by a large pot-bellied stove in the center of the store. We stopped there to warm ourselves and by that time I was crying because my fingers were so cold! The owner of the store, Mr. Byron Zay took my hands in his to warm them, then gave me a pair of gloves from his stock to wear. God bless that man – I know he's in heaven!

Further along, we'd stop in at the Railroad Station depot. Naturally, there was a bathroom in the waiting room for ladies – the men's restroom was further down the hall. We always stopped there to go to the toilet before running home for the last long block. Remember, our toilet was an outhouse.

When we arrived home on extra cold days, my mother would have a large pot of hot cinnamon tea for us. She used the large stick cinnamon broken up which made a lovely pink drink! It was such a pretty color when we poured a little milk and sugar into it to cool it slightly. Warm memories!!!

Bath Time at Our House

Bath time was probably a weekly occurrence at our house. Sometimes, we'd put a large bathtub (really just a large, round wash tub) the one my mother used for washing clothes – we'd put it in the kitchen by the side of the stove. When we were small, my mother would take each of us – one at a time – give us a bath in that wash tub with water heated on the stove. Even now, when I step out of my tub and pull a large luxurious towel across my back, I vividly remember the feeling I got when I stepped out of that old wash tub and my mother wrapped us in a large soft flannel-like covering. Some feelings, one never forgets!! My two older brothers took their own baths as they were older.

In the summertime, we took baths in the garage – since we never had a car, the garage was also used as a playhouse in the summertime.

Don't know why I remember this, but once my father was taking a bath, naturally even in the summertime water was heated on the stove in the house. But this day, my mother pumped a bucket full of water (my father was in the tub in the garage) opened the garage door and threw the bucket of water on my father!!! I can still hear him yelling! I loved it, I thought it was funny and I believed that my parents never did anything to have a little fun – if that's what one calls it!



Mass during Lent

We, of course, went to daily Mass during Lent when we were children in Immaculate Conception grade school. We chose teams in our rooms and "kids" on Calle Seis always hoped that we'd be on the same team because we'd all go together walking to 7:00 a.m. Mass, then home for breakfast and again to school by 9:00 a.m. Since Lent is in early Spring, six weeks before Easter, there would sometimes be snow or rain and it was always cold. Remember that we lived a little more than a mile from school. I guess we were tough kids!

On Sundays as we'd be getting ready for Mass at 8:00 a.m., my father would always urge us to hurry by saying, "you'll get there in time for the blessing". For those of you who are not Catholic, the blessing comes at the end of the Mass.

My parents would go to early Mass at 6:00 a.m. on Sundays and sometimes the priest wouldn't be awake and the people would huddle outside the church waiting for him until someone would go over to ring the bell at the rectory to wake him up. One friend said that once, when another priest was the Pastor, the same thing happened and when he heard the door-bell ringing, he stuck his head out of his window and said, "Well, Mass won't start on time, but it will end on time!" Funny!!



Christmastime & Our First Christmas Tree

Christmastime at our house wasn't like it would have been in other homes, probably. At least, not at all like Christmastime now. My mother had brought an Infant Jesus statue from Mexico for Christmas and that was placed on hay. I think she had gotten small statues of Mary and Joseph to place around the Baby Jesus. We would pray in front of the Christmas scene in the evenings. Then on Christmas Eve another family with two young girls the same ages as my sister and me would come to join us. We'd sing songs in Spanish for the season and my mother would have fixed little decorated baskets with candies and nuts in them for all of us. This was a really special treat as we didn't often have candy at our house.

I remember the very first Christmas Tree which we had in our home. Since my two older brothers were paper boys, instead of giving their earnings to my mother, they saved it. They bought a small Christmas tree, a string of lights and a few ornaments at our Woolworth's Dime Store. Of course, our manger scene with Baby Jesus was still under the tree. No presents, as there never were any presents! We all put our coats on to go outside to pretend that we were people passing by out on the street and said to each other, "Don't the Almaguer's have a beautiful Christmas Tree?" We were so proud of our small first tree!!!

As children, we looked forward to the Elks Club and their "Christmas Dinner" which was held at their club in the afternoon at least a week before Christmas. We thought it was great as we NEVER had a real turkey meal at home with all the trimmings – a great treat for us. Then after the meal the entertainment was given by any child who could perform in any way. The "kids" from my Calle Seis always yelled that I could sing so I always to "sing for my supper". As we left, the Elks members handed us each a bag full of Christmas goodies – what an afternoon!!! I'll never forget those special events and God bless those members.



Now for Evening Entertainment

Sometimes, on long winter evenings we'd play the Victrola. We had only the Mexican records which I suppose our parents bought in Chicago when they visited relatives there. Of course, our parents could never go to Chicago together since one of them had to stay and take care of our cows, pigs and chickens. Anyway, we children would dance, alone by ourselves as children often do with our parents telling us how well we danced. Naturally, that made us put more energy into our dancing.

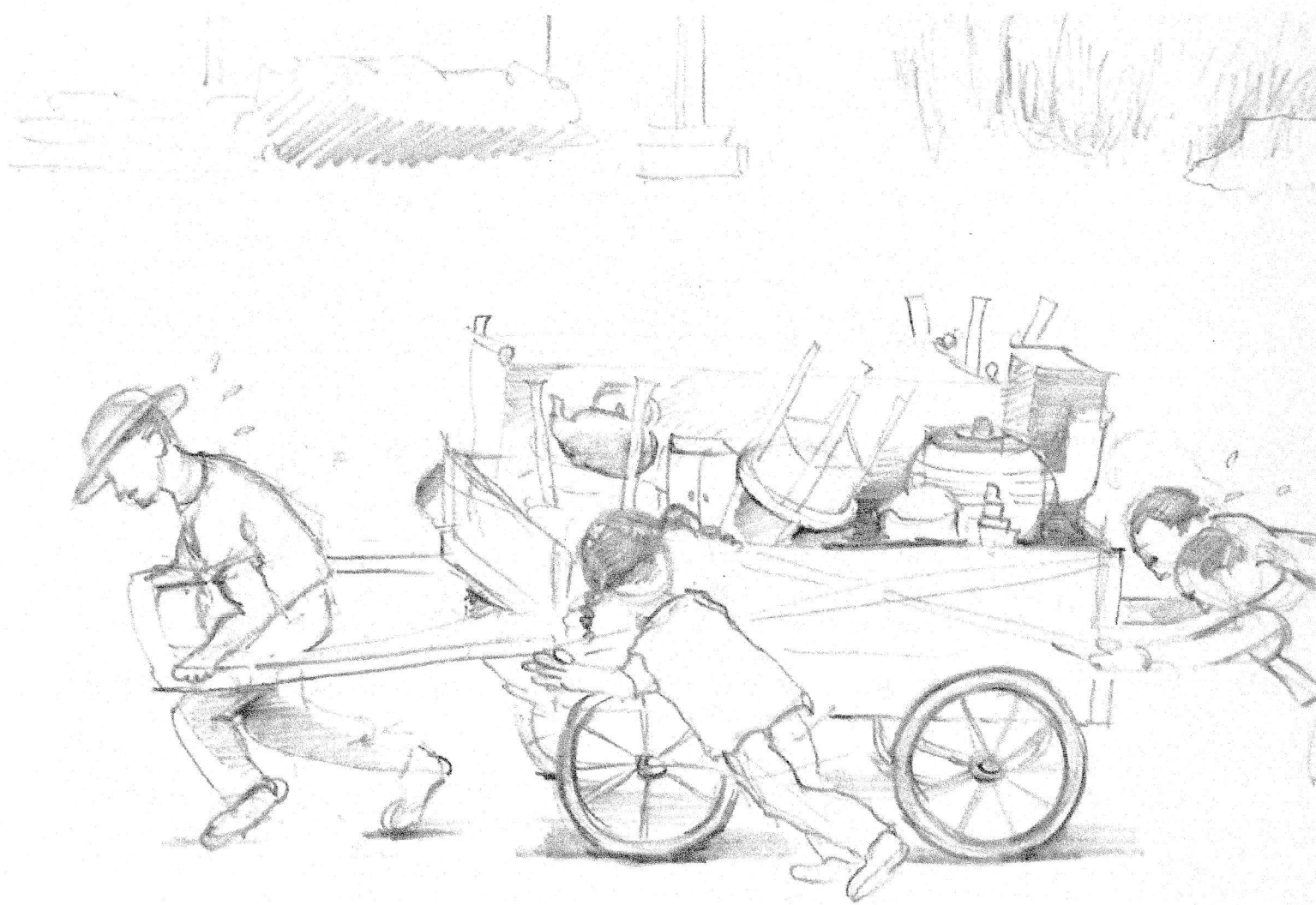
On other evenings, our mother would read us novels from printed four-page sheets – probably bought in Chicago, too.

On most evening, tho, from the oldest to the youngest, she'd teach us religion and prayers and tell us stories about the saints. Our favorite story was about the "Santo Nino de Atocha". Here in America, he's called the "Infant of Prague." When we were in Prague (in Eastern Europe) in 1998 we went to the actual church where the statue was placed on a special altar for veneration. This statue had been brought, in the 16th century, to Prague by a Spanish Princess who was being married to a Prince from that country – an arranged marriage. Apparently, she came from a city in Spain named Atocha, hence the name – "Santo Nino de Atocha". In my parents' bedroom, there was a large framed picture of the Saint (glassed in) and around it were pictures depicting miracles attributed to the Saint. The pictures made the story more vivid, that's probably why that story was our favorite.

Speaking of Saints, the feast of St. John the Baptist was very special. June 24 in Mexico was a day to pack up food (we call them picnics now-a-days) and be away from home the greater part of the day. The place they went in Mexico was always a place with water – a pond, a lake or a similar body of water. My mother, we six children, plus a Mexican lady and her two daughters who were our neighbors always went to a pond where the railroad steam engines got water – when it wasn't frozen over in the winter. Anyway, on that day, we'd get to splash around in the water then have our lunch and walk home by the railroad tracks. It was a special day for us because we never got to play at that pond other days even though it was a place that many people used for swimming in those days.

I did mention that we had chickens, hogs and two cows but I don't think I mentioned that I milked the cows. We also owned a goat – a nanny goat that I also milked. That was kinda of hard and I got just a little bit of milk, maybe a cup full. Well, since I was the skinniest one in the family – and since in those days – thin was thought not to be healthy, I had to drink the goat milk (while it was still warm) after my mother had strained it. What an awful taste! Now in my mid 80s I'm still in good health so the milk must have done some good. God is good!

I remember when I was a young teenager, one of the cows was sick and we called the Vet. He took the cow into the garage – put some straw in it and the poor cow was given an injection with a giant syringe. Then, the Vet took a pill and put it in the cow's mouth and gave her a soda pop bottle full of water, showing me how I should do it. I loved that job and did it well as the cow did get better. Probably that was the beginning of my nursing career.



Buying a Home

After having rented a house for several years, our folks learned that one family on the Avenue was leaving town and wanted to sell their house. My mother was anxious to own a home that she could really call home, but my father knew that we didn't have more than a few hundred dollars and that wouldn't be enough to buy a home. Someone told them that an initial payment could secure a house and the rest could be paid in monthly payments. You must remember that my father would be the first Mexican to purchase a home in Monmouth. Since he couldn't speak much English and had no one to advise him, he still *didn't think* it was possible so he told my mother to go look at the house to see what she thought of it.

I remember that she took me along to act as interpreter. The house was a two bedroom house with a living-room, a dining room and a kitchen. Also there was a large front porch across the front of the house and a large back porch off the kitchen. A toilet (out-house) was located 'way in the back yard, a pump outside where we got our water and an old garage with a side addition where the coal was kept for the stove (pot-bellied) in the living room in the wintertime completed the house. I can remember how glad we were when spring came and we could haul that old stove back to the garage and storage area. Then we'd have all that extra space in the living-room. Anyway, as I recall, the house was small but had larger rooms than we had where we rented. Some of the wall paper was torn off and hanging, actually some of the lathes were exposed with plaster falling out of the walls. I can remember that my mother went home and told my father that the house was beautiful and large enough for us. They made arrangements and we bought it and moved in carrying everything including a kitchen cooking stove and a heating stove for the living-room for wintertime, plus beds, tables, chairs, etc. The transfer of our belonging was made in many trips back and forth, pulling and pushing a large cart on rollers.

After several years, an extra room was added to the side of the house off the dining room. Part of that room was partitioned as another bedroom and the other part opened to the kitchen. Our parents and six children lived there for many years until I went off to nursing school in Chicago and my two older brothers went into the armed services in the early 1940's. I left for Nursing School in Chicago in September of 1941. That's another story!

Baby Sitting in 1941 and Movies

This was the year that I was a Senior in High School. Some neighbors, a few houses down the street from us wanted me to "sit" with their three children. There was a boy about seven, a daughter about five and another boy about three years old. The parents owned a roller-skating rink in Peoria about 70 miles from our town. You must remember that in those days about the only entertainment was had as young kids and teenagers was the movies – we had three of those in town. They were the Rivoli, Bijou and the Ada. The Rivoli and Bijou were across from each other on the 200 block of South Main Street and the Ada theater was a smaller one right on the square just east of the Court House. I remember seeing almost all of the Shirley Temple pictures at the Ada. We could take our youngest sister with us and in those days, we didn't have to pay for her – if she sat on our lap!. I distinctly remember having her on my lap because if the story was sad and Shirley Temple cried, I cried too and my little sister would turn around to look at me and I'd hit her and tell her to turn around.

Anyway, now to get back to baby-sitting. The children's mother would wash her stockings just before she left and would hold them out of the car window as they drove so that they would dry! She also left dishes in the sink and on the counter – many of them, for me to wash. I really didn't mind that as they were the only people who had running water in the house. That meant that they also had an inside bathroom. I would wash the dishes, do the cleaning including the vacuuming and I did NOT mind doing it because I thought that it was fun to keep the house that way. I hoped and dreamed that someday I'd have those amenities in my home!!

I also prepared the children's supper, gave them baths and put them to bed. This job was every Saturday from about 1 p.m. until around mid-night. Imagine how much I got for all those hours - \$1.00!!! If my sister sat with me late so that I wouldn't be asleep when the parents returned, they would give her a dime – 10 cents.

My mother would save that money because it would help when I went into Nurse's Training. I believe that money was scarce but then it only cost ten cents to go to the movies – now it's \$7 plus in larger cities.

My Parents

I guess I'll end these few pages of my young life by telling about my parents. I now realize that they were very brave, good people!

My father was a very kind, gentle, soft-spoken man. When friends came over he opened up a bit and liked to join in the laughing. He worked so hard to support us and we knew that we were well taken care of and loved although we were never hugged or kissed by him – not that I can remember. He and my mother would sit on our front porch swing and sing together in Spanish sometimes.

Of course, my mother sang almost all day long as she worked. For every small job that she did – at the beginning she would say “en nombre de Dios y de Maria Santissima.” “In the name of God and the most holy Mary.” Sometimes if she was worried about something, she would say, “traigo el nombre de Dios en la boca.” “I have the name of God in my mouth.” She, too, never hugged and kissed us, although we knew that we were loved. As a matter of fact, after Grandpa and I were married, one day she saw us kissing and she said that “kissing was for babies”.

I must say that my father did have a nickname for me – “gachupina”. I never knew what it meant, but knew in the way he said it that it was an endearing term. Since I've grown up I looked it up in my Spanish/English dictionary and it means immigrante/immigrant Spanish settler in America; Spaniard.

By the way, there is a small town southeast of Madrid, Spain named Almaguer, my father's last name. When my sister, Rosita, her husband and we were in that area; she and I had our picture taken by the sign – Almaguer, the name of the town.

This is my thought – that beautiful buildings in southern Spain, the Alhambra, the Alcazar, were all built while the Moors lived there after they conquered Spain. Naturally, some intermarried with the Spanish people and some later, I suppose, came over to the Americas with the Spanish conquerors to Mexico, our southern states and California and intermarried with the native Indians in the “New World.” So aren't we a good mixture?!!!

Once, a man was bragging about how long his family had been in this country by saying, “I can trace my ancestors back to the Mayflower”. I said to him, “mine have been here longer – they were here to meet yours.”

The last thing I'll say is that our parents were rich in good qualities, taught us right from wrong and gave us our religion. Also they taught us the value of hard work. Since my father never had one day of school, he always admonished us to pay attention to our teachers and learn so that we wouldn't have to work as hard as he did. They weren't ever “lovey-dovey” but we knew that in them we really had a home, security and a very deep love for all of us.

May God bless them and have them in his kingdom.