

*Life is not what one lived but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.*

— Gabriel Garcia Marquez

## About the Title

I had serious misgivings about using the word “wetback” in the title, given that it has properly been relegated to the dustbin of outdated and intolerable ethnic slurs. It seems painful to write the word and almost impossible to utter. Yet it was quite common at the time that my story begins. As a matter of fact, the U.S. attorney general initiated a deportation program in June of 1954 which was officially called “Operation Wetback.” This was actually the third such initiative with that name. Operations Wetback I and II had taken place under two prior administrations with the goal of opening up jobs for American citizens during trying economic times.

The offensive nature of the word comes not from its literal meaning, but rather from the degrading racist attitudes that created it and its use in government policy shows the prevalence of those attitudes at the time. My use of the term here is a reminder that it has existed, and there is some merit for us in not forgetting that it existed, and that even now a U.S. Congressman (Don Young, Alaska 3-29-13) felt at liberty to use it in a public interview. As with many things that are feared or considered taboo, they cannot be eradicated until they are confronted.

Sometimes we get lulled into complacency by the coded words that become prevalent in our discourse and we mistakenly view the evolution of racial rhetorical subtlety as progress. Ian Lopez, a University of California law professor, provides a brilliant analysis of how “dog whistle” politics has been used effectively to the detriment of minorities and even the middle class (*Dog Whistle*

*Politics*, 2014). Perhaps removal of the dog whistle is a means of shaking off the complacency.

As I pondered the use of the “W” word, I came to the realization that in Spanish it didn’t carry the same demeaning and hostile tone as it does in Eng-



*Manuel Barbosa, with his father, in an irrigation canal at a cotton farm. This is the earliest known photo of Manuel.*

lish. It is often used in the diminutive form, “mojadito,” when used in the third person, thus connoting sympathy or pity. When used in the first person, it seems to humbly convey a spirit of suffering or adventure brought on by a life that desperately seeks hope beyond the unknown foreign horizon. Sometimes it seems to convey determination and adventurous courage: “Me voy de mojado” (“I’m going as a wetback”). The Spanish word has a sound devoid of all disdain and offensiveness, conjuring up a sad social reality from which it springs, with all its human

dimensions. It is a reality that Spanish speakers are in some form familiar with, and thus view with compassion.

I was surprised recently, perhaps pleasantly, when I spoke to a college class in which a large number of students were unfamiliar with the term. I should also point out that over the last couple of years I have sought the opinions of many friends, educators, professionals and Latino advocates, and overwhelmingly, they felt my chosen title was appropriate under the circumstances.

Recent heated debate about immigration policy has reminded us that although the term is no longer used in most polite company, the attitudes that created the term linger for some. The new and improved term became “illegal alien.” In time that term fell into disfavor as the realization set in that people are not illegal, although their actions may be deemed illegal. It was only recently (June 2013) that the journalistic giant the Associated Press (AP) acknowledged the same in its style book. According to the AP, “Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use ‘illegal’ only to refer to an action, not a person: ‘illegal immigration,’ but not ‘illegal immigrant.’” *The New York Times* apparently encourages the use of the term “undocumented,” though it does not ban using “illegal immigrant.” *The Times*, however, has come a long way. In November of 1953, my family and I were going through the process of becoming “legalized.” Unfortunately, we didn’t complete the process soon enough to avoid

being part of their headline, which read: “WETBACK INFLUX NEAR THE RECORD; October figure highest in history—Crime follows the illegal immigrants” (*Dog Whistle Politics*, P. 129, 2014).

Professor Lopez points out that the term “illegal” is a misnomer in any event, since “crossing into or remaining in the United States without proper authorization is not a crime, but rather a civil matter.” He notes that in *Arizona v. United States*, 132 Ct. 2492,2522 (2012), the majority, unlike Justice Scalia, avoided the term “illegal alien,” pointing out that “as a general rule, it is not a crime for a removable alien to remain present in the United States.” Mary Sanchez of the *Kansas City Star* points out that she used the term “illegal alien” because the use of the term “undocumented” was a “turn off” to many readers who viewed it as “pandering, a softie touch on immigration and a red flag that the writer’s position is one to reject, often without reading very far into a piece.” If that’s true, then my title should get me a big chunk of the literate bigot market, if there is such a thing. There are many decent, open-minded Americans who have legitimate concerns about our failure to formulate and implement a rational immigration policy, and the ongoing and ultimate consequences of such failure. The topic is an important subject of debate over which reasonable minds may differ, but the topic tends to ignite the passions of unreasonable minds. Someone said that “resentment abhors a vacuum.” There is much resentment in our country today by the unemployed, the underemployed, those fearful of demographic and other change, and others who feel ignored by their government. Some of these individuals may often find those who look different to be a convenient target, especially if the term “illegal” can substitute for any overt racial animus.

Further, with respect to the “W” word, George Carlin, the thought-provoking comic, once told us that there are no bad words, only bad thoughts. He would have proceeded to illustrate his point that it is our conscious manipulation which gives words their offensive effect. As an example, he would tell us that it’s okay to say, “I came out of the shower with a wet back.” But you probably would avoid saying, “I took a shower with a wetback.”

The first Mexican-American to run for American president, Ben Fernandez, had an interesting take on how slurs evolve into acceptable terms. He pointed out that the term went from “wetback” to “illegal alien” and then to “undocumented.” He was quite certain during the height of our fuel crisis, with new reserves being discovered in Mexico, that the term would soon become “misguided tourists.”

My purpose in writing this book is to let my children, their children and their children's children have an account of how our family got here, and how I journeyed from a baby wetback to a lawyer, chairman of the Human Rights Commission for our state and, finally, a federal judge. The journey is not particularly exceptional, as there are many immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere who have achieved more impressive accomplishments by far. Many others have had far more interesting and exciting adventures. But the point is that this is my story for my posterity, and if anyone else finds insight, inspiration or mild amusement, that's great.

I ran an early draft past my son, Vincent, who like my two daughters, Cristina and Elena, has a creative strain and is well read. I took no offense at his criticism, being accustomed to my children's brutally honest assessment of most things I do. My kids tell me they're tired of the old stories of how I was "born in a small log cabin that I built myself" etc., etc. My son's suggestion was that I embellish the truth with some fiction to make it more interesting. I took some solace in the fact that one of my law clerks had referred to me as the "world's most interesting man," although I think he was influenced by having imbibed more than two (dos) Dos Equis Cervezas (beers).

One of my sisters concluded that the information may have some interest for family, but "the writing just didn't flow." I found the idea of a "ghost writer" somewhat spooky, but, more importantly, I want my great, great grandchildren to hear my voice with all its cynicism, weird humor, faulty grammar, weak logic, non sequiturs and, in the words of my son, the critic, "pompous, pretentious, pedantic poppycock." Further, I found the process of recollecting all these chapters of my life somewhat therapeutic and revealing. I was amazed at how life seems to be a continuous cycle of tragic and comedic episodes. Nonetheless, I tried to avoid being too introspective and have purposely omitted my personal intimate life, thereby shortening the length of this book by about one paragraph. As one of the great Latin American writers said, "We all have a public life, a private life and a secret life." Anything worthwhile in the latter two categories would have been covered in that omitted paragraph.

I go some length into the family background in Mexico, particularly the demise of my uncle, General Saturnino Cedillo, because it played a pivotal role in the course my family would take. Additionally, it was a fascinating chapter in Mexican history which merits a brief recitation from a family member's perspective, which I will admit, has a touch of sour grapes. The topic merits a more

complete treatment, which has been excellently accomplished by Dr. Dudley Ankersen in his book *Agrarian Warlord*, and partially achieved by other historians. My feeble effort in that regard subscribes to an old saying that a little inaccuracy is better than a lot of explanation.

Be that as it may, I was born in the La Huasteca Potosina region of Mexico. I recall that my father would often point that out to his friends with a smile and a certain pride. Thus, I always sensed that there was something special though unknown to me about my birthplace. To be more exact, the town was called Tamuin, and like most of the Huasteca region near the central Gulf Coast, it thrived on a tropical climate and fertile terrain, which produced great varieties of fruits and allowed for the raising of cattle. The Panuco River ran through town and provided good fishing for those who didn't venture to the Gulf Coast. The region has its own unique music, dress and traditions, but more about the Huasteca later. I guess a little background is in order to explain how I became the littlest wetback.