

The American Dream:

The Ybarra Family



Benjamin Treutler

The American Dream is many things to many people. To some, its being successful, to others it ^{means} having many things. To Salvador Ybarra it was coming to the United States, being able to support his family, and being happy with what he had.

In 1891, the Niedringhaus brothers came to the Granite City area, looking for a place to set up their growing utensil company. In 1896, they incorporated their community as Granite City, named for the granite that they used for the utensils. By 1899, their NESCO plant was a 4000-employee company and that drew other heavy industries to the town.¹ One of those industries was the American Steel Foundries (ASF), located on the edge on Lincoln Place. ASF was founded in Granite City in 1905, and was primarily used for the construction of railroad cars. ASF was always interested in more than pouring steel into the shape desired by the customer; it wished to contribute to the design of the product, too.²



¹ <http://www.villageprofile.com/illinois/granitecity/granitecity1.html>

² <http://www.asf-usa.com/story.htm>



The addition of the new thriving industries attracted many immigrants to Granite City. One of those immigrants was an 18-year-old Mexican named Salvador Ybarra. Salvador was born on March 6, 1906 in Mexico and was the son of a dairy farmer. “My dad would talk about taking horse and buggy to deliver milk.”³ Everything seemed to be going well for the family. “They [were] considered wealthy in Mexico, my grandparents. Mexico’s poor to begin with, but back then it was worse because of the revolution.”⁴ However, in 1924, there was some trouble. “Well, there was a little trouble. The revolution was going on in Mexico, [they] wanted a price on his head, and he had to leave. He found out about that through a high-ranking official’s wife, who was a friend of my grandmother, who said that his name was on a list to get hung and so he fled Mexico.”⁵

³ Henry Ybarra. Interviewed by Benjamin Treutler. November 3rd, 2001.

⁴ Luis Ybarra. Interviewed by Benjamin Treutler. November 14th, 2001.

⁵ Luis Ybarra.

Salvador had heard about the opportunities that were available in Granite City while he was still in Mexico, and moved there when he arrived in the United States. Instead of settling immediately, he went on to Pontiac, Michigan to work in the automobile plants. "He worked [in] Pontiac, Michigan, and he said that [he] worked on a car called [the] Whippet."⁶ Salvador saw many opportunities while living in Michigan, but soon learned that not all of them were genuine.

"The rubber industry was growing, and they were taking Spanish speaking people to South America. My dad was telling this to a real old timer at a bar one night. He said 'I'm getting ready to go to South America in a few more days,' and the man told him 'You won't come back if you go.' So my dad didn't wind up going, but he came back to the St. Louis area."⁷

When he returned to Granite City, Salvador started working at American Steel. "He worked at the American Steel in Granite City for 46 years."⁸ Salvador started as a laborer, but was soon promoted to the position of crane man.



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“The crane man would pick up molten steel, 50 tons of molten steel and pour it into a mold. It was an important job to American Steel because when World War 2 broke out, he was drafted five times and they said that they only had four crane men at the time that could do the job. So they said that he would serve his country better operating the crane than going into the service.”⁹



⁹ Luis Ybarra.

Salvador and his first wife, Helen, had five children:



Carmen



Celia



Frederico (Kiko)



Theresa

“[We] grew up together [with] Theresa’s sons Mark and Mike. Mark was my age and Mike was Louie’s.”¹⁰



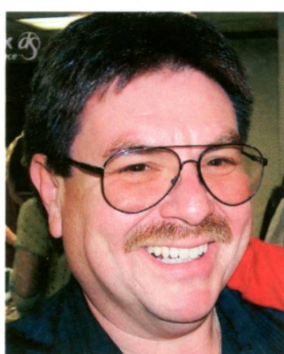
Joe

“My brother had gotten out of Viet Nam and he started taking us around. I got to know him more after he got back from the war.”¹¹

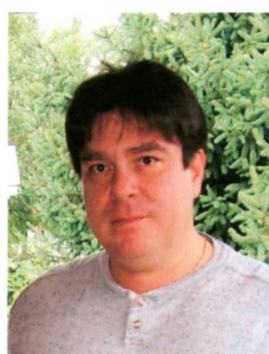
Helen and Salvador were later divorced, and on a trip to Mexico, Salvador met his second wife, Esther. “My mother was friends of his cousins in Mexico. So through the cousins they met.”¹² “In one of my dad’s visits, he met my mom through my dad’s other sister, Carmen.”¹³ Salvador and Esther returned to Granite City, where they had three kids of their own.



Esther



Luis



Enrique (Henry)

¹⁰ Henry Ybarra.

¹¹ Henry Ybarra.

¹² Luis Ybarra.

¹³ Henry Ybarra.

“My dad used to go to the Armenian club down the street and play cards there. Or [he’d] go to Sim’s Place and play cards or pool. It was like a cigar store, it was a pool hall/cigar store type of thing.”¹⁴



“They called it Sim’s Place but everyone here called it Blubby’s. [And] they would have all their card games there. These, how can I say it? I wouldn’t say they were really corrupt or anything like that, but they were the ‘gangster’ element, I guess. They’d have

¹⁴ Luis Ybarra.

their card games over there and a lot of the times, I'd be sitting around and wash their car for twenty dollars."¹⁵

"I can remember times [where] we'd get mad at someone. But the next day [I'd be] saying, 'Come on let's go to Blubby's to get a soda.' It was tight knit - Lincoln Place. When you'd go out of the neighborhood, someone would say 'Hey, you're from Lincoln Place,' and it was just like you'd met a friend, even if you didn't even know them.

I can remember going to the A.R.F. club when I was little. They would have their little bands playing - I don't know what kind of music, a really funny type of music, and they would play there Fridays and we'd go in there and buy sodas and they'd [say] 'Get out of here,' and chase us, cause we [were] kids."¹⁶

"We always thought we were tough and all that. The thing is, everyone was really tight. Everyone was just real close to each other. I consider them like my brothers to this day, even though I don't see them everyday. That's thing about this neighborhood is that everyone was real tight."¹⁷

"Lincoln Place stuck together. I can remember going camping one time, and all we took was beer. For a weekend, all we had was beer. We took 13 cases, [and] there was seven of us guys. [At] about three o'clock in the morning, we [were] hungry. And we went to Scully's Truck Stop, cause that was open 24 hours. Back then, nothing was open 24 hours but a truck stop. We scraped enough money to buy a monster burger the

¹⁵ Henry Ybarra.

¹⁶ Luis Ybarra.

¹⁷ Henry Ybarra.

kid that had the most money got the first bite. And what was funny is he had the biggest mouth.”¹⁸

Lincoln Place was a neighborhood of immigrants from all over. When the industries were built, people came from Mexico, Europe, and Western Asia. “It was all mixed. I mean across the street [were] Hungarian people that we grew up with.”¹⁹

“In this neighborhood, we weren’t rich kids, that’s for sure. I always feel we had more fun down here than other neighborhoods. See, we had the pool hall, we had the community center, we called it the club. Every generation called it the club, except for now. They call it the ‘Rec Center’ now. At the club where we all went, that’s where we had everything we wanted. We had a gym there, play[ed] softball out in the yard, we had a jukebox, pool table, TV room, couches. It was a nice place for us to go as teenagers, just to hang out.”²⁰

“We would go out to the corner, which we called the clubhouse. It is the Community Center. But we would just play and hang around there. They have a gymnasium. We would play basketball or out in the back we would play baseball. On Olive Street, there used to be a ball diamond there and we would play baseball there, too.”²¹

“We had this field down on Olive St. That was the ‘Mexican Diamond,’ because the Mexican Honorary Commission bought that piece of land a long time ago and they

¹⁸ Luis Ybarra.

¹⁹ Luis Ybarra.

²⁰ Henry Ybarra.

²¹ Luis Ybarra.

built a baseball diamond there. Every morning we'd wake up during the summer, kind of like that 'Sandlot' movie."²²

The movie, "The Sandlot" is about a group of nine boys who, during the 1960s, go play baseball together all day, every day. One of the significant things about the movie is that the boys all come from different ethnic backgrounds.

"We were in San Antonio, Texas on our way back from Mexico. This time me, Louie, and one of my cousins were on the train. You wouldn't believe who we ran into. Do you remember the "My Three Sons" TV show? Ernie and Chip were on the train, playing. It was weird. I can remember that because I can remember seeing them. That was pretty exciting."²³

"After school, I'd come home and watch the Three Stooges."²⁴

Salvador would also entertain his children by telling stories about his past.

"This is something [he] would [have] told me a long time ago. There was a man down the street by the name of Bartolo Campos. He was older than my dad, and he had an unusual job in Mexico. Have you ever heard of the bandit called Pancho Villa in Mexico? He used to print his own money, and it was backed by his guns. So, when he'd go into town, [he] and his men would spend it in town backed by his guns. They'd have to spend it or [the merchants would] get killed.

And when Pancho Villa left that town, that paper money was worthless. Bartolo Campos would buy it [for] pennies on the dollar. He would buy it so cheap that it was just given to him, because it was of no value to the merchants. So he would have bags

²² Henry Ybarra.

²³ Henry Ybarra.

²⁴ Luis Ybarra.

full of money and wherever Pancho Villa would go, he'd go into that town and spend it."²⁵

"His name was Jose de la Luz Picharra. Picharra was a supposed real bad ass. When he was younger, they say that supposedly he slit somebody's throat. I don't know if that's for sure, but they say he'd walk down the alleys so no one would see him. [He] and my dad played music when they were younger.

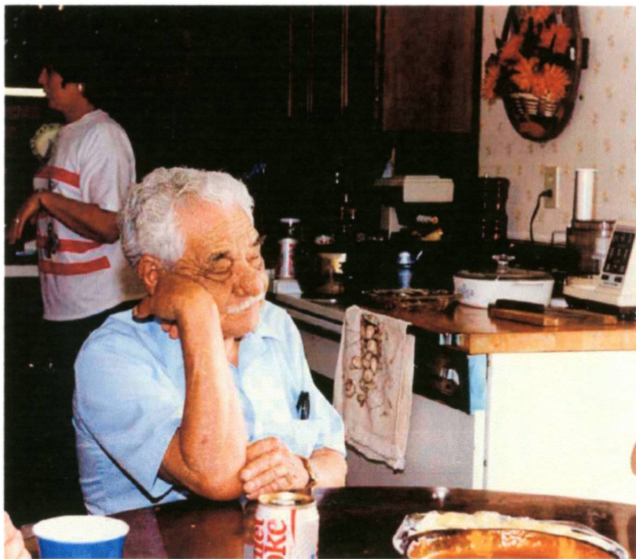
My dad played violin, and my dad could play anything, really. He could play guitar, a lot of wind instruments, piano, he was a really good piano player, too. I can still [hear] his little songs that he'd play all the time. I can still hear them."²⁶



²⁵ Luis Ybarra.
²⁶ Henry Ybarra.



Sadly, Salvador died in 1995, but his legacy lives on. His two youngest sons have inherited their father's work ethic with job loyalty. Luis has worked at his job for the past 23 years and Henry has worked at his job for the past 17 years. While American Steel helped Salvador attain the American Dream, Salvador passed it on to his sons.



About the Author:

Benjamin Treutler is a student in the History department at SIUE with senior status and a graduation pending. Having lived in the Chicago area for most of his life, he was surprised to find a neighborhood with such a diverse background as Lincoln Place.

After his Fall, 2001 graduation, Benjamin plans on working towards a Masters Degree in Sociology at SIUE.

All Ybarra family photos used with permission from Henry Ybarra.

This project was completed under the guidance of Dr. Anne Valk, professor of History at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, in compliance with her Oral History class, and the Granite City Oral History Project.
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