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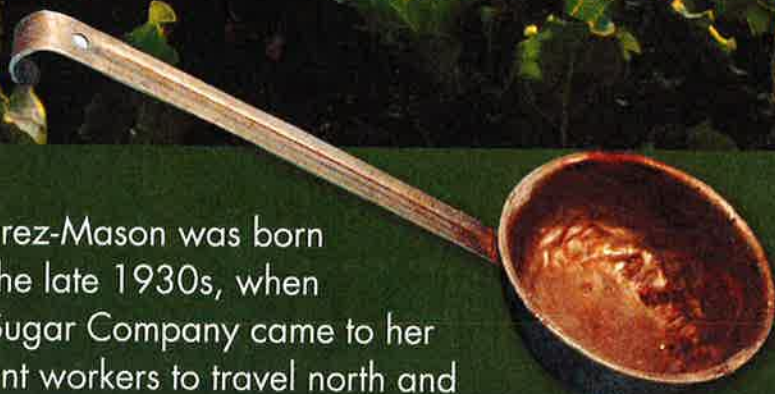
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Living the Migrant Life

Marylou Hernandez Olivarez-Mason was born in San Antonio, Texas. In the late 1930s, when she was 3, the Michigan Sugar Company came to her community to recruit migrant workers to travel north and work in its fields.

For the next 12 years, the Hernandezes did just that, often living in the back of a truck. Like the adults in her family, Marylou worked six days a week in all kinds of weather, picking sugar beets, blueberries, cherries, cucumbers, strawberries, and more. As a migrant worker, she was not enrolled in school, but she had a will and a desire to learn.

When Marylou was a teenager, her parents finally settled in Michigan so that their daughter could get an education. She graduated from high school in Saginaw at age 18, though she did not start taking classes until she was nearly 12 years old.





The reason that we left Texas was because the Michigan Sugar Company came to San Antonio and established an employment office there. They couldn't find people in Michigan to do agricultural work, and so they were there to set up the office to contract people to come to [their state] to work

in the sugar beet fields. My father signed a contract and that's how we came to Michigan.

I was about 3½, 4 years old. If you were [too small to walk], then you would not be counted as a worker. [Your family] would get paid for every child who walked. That meant that the children would have to be out in the field working.

Every year, we'd come back. We'd leave Texas in March, and then we wouldn't get back until the end of November, first of December.

Learning the Routine

The first year that we came, of course, my father didn't know anything about sugar beets. He didn't know that [though you had to be there for the planting, you didn't get paid until fall,] when you finish harvesting them in November. And so the farmer that we were working for took the families to the grocery store, where they would let us get the food on credit. And then the farmer took the responsibility at the end of the season. They would come and find out and see if we owed anything and deduct all that and pay the grocery bill.

Of course, we quickly learned that we had to find something else to do between when you start planting the beets and when you finish harvesting them. So then, there are the other crops—blueberries, strawberries, cucumbers, potatoes, and cherries. In July, we found out that you go to Ludington, Hart, or Traverse City to pick cherries.

We went to Traverse City and we started to work for a farmer there, on the Old Mission Peninsula. [All] the same families went to the same farmhouses. We had work. That

Facing page: Marylou drank from this ladle to quench her thirst in the fields. Above: At this age, she was already working to help support her family. Right: She also served as an interpreter for her parents, Ricardo Duarte and Macedonia (Nonie) Bazan Hernandez. All images courtesy of Marylou Olivarez-Mason.

was the main thing, that we had work. It didn't matter that we didn't have housing.

Living in a Barn

[The farm family] had a great big barn, where they used to keep their animals. [We] used that for housing. We had to use blankets or sheets or cardboard, then you kind of divided rooms. And then they had a couple of stoves, so we all took turns using the stoves.

But, many times, we lived under conditions where they didn't have housing and then we'd have to sleep in the cars and trucks. Then we'd go in the ditch [where] there'd be water and just bathe that way. Because it was all outhouses or the well, you know, get water from the well. Just warm the water up in this great big tub and then take turns going behind the outhouse to take a bath. In Traverse City, we were lucky because [Lake Michigan] was across from the farm. So we would just go across the road to bathe in the lake and do our laundry.

Traveling from Texas

The first year that we were contracted, we came on the



train. They paid our transportation and everything. The second year, you know, someone would have a truck, and you would come in the back of the truck. The trucker would bring many families, as many families as he could get in the back of the truck along with their belongings. It was just one great big truck that they would put wood rails on the side. The clothes and the trunks or suitcases would be lined up all around the truck and they would put blankets or pillows on top and that's where you would sit. Then, in the center part, you would have boxes of food or formula or diapers.



Above: Three of the Hernandez children (Marylou at left) pose for a formal portrait. Right: The family used this knife to harvest sugar beets from fields near Saginaw.

And then, as far as bathroom facilities, you'd have to stop along the way on the roadside. They didn't have rest areas then. The men would wait until the women [were done], and then they would go. We couldn't stop at a gas station to use the restrooms,

because at most of the places we were prohibited from entering. They had signs—"No Mexicans or Negroes Allowed"—so we couldn't go into them.

In Traverse City, there were no signs. You would enter a store and an employee would follow you around to see what it was that you wanted to buy. They'd follow you around, and then escort you out of the store.

Hard Work, Hot Sun

It was very hard work—sunup to sundown—all day long, out in the sun. I mean there were no trees or anything in the middle of the field. We hated those fields with the long, long rows. You'd sit in the middle of the row, and you'd look and you couldn't even see the end of it. That's how

long the rows were!

We had to take water. The person that we went with, they would bring cans or containers of water out in the field for us. Of course, the water would be hot. There was no shade or trees around. I mean, the water was like soup. But at least it was water. That water kept us alive!

Of course, we had to take our own food, to make sure we had food during the day, because they wouldn't come back to get us until sundown.

Dealing with Sickness

If anybody got sick, you'd have to just wait until the truck came around. Or, hopefully, you could walk to a farmhouse if it was close by and someone could come help you—we [mostly suffered from] sunstroke, because you were out there in the sun a lot. You had to be covered up really well. And then, of course, with babies, the little ones out there, they'd sometimes start vomiting, they'd have diarrhea, and get dehydrated.

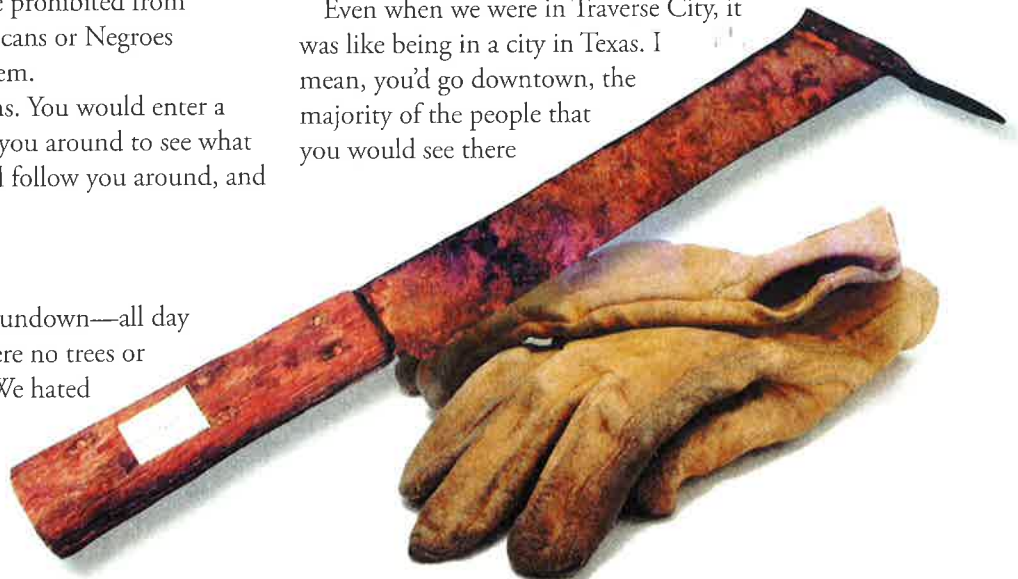
Now, [migrant workers have a] clinic that they go to. We didn't have any of those luxuries.

Following the Crops

We would go to whatever crops there were...potatoes in Munger or Edmore. Linwood was cucumbers. Grand Haven and South Haven, you know those areas are known because of the resorts and the beaches and all that. Well to me, when you say South Haven or Grand Haven, it's peaches, because that's where we went to pick peaches.

We used to pick tomatoes in Blissfield [which was] like three miles away from Ohio, so we'd cross the border into Ohio. One year we went to Kokomo, Indiana, because there was a small factory there where they needed tomato pickers and also factory workers. My dad worked in the factory and we picked the tomatoes.

Even when we were in Traverse City, it was like being in a city in Texas. I mean, you'd go downtown, the majority of the people that you would see there



would be Mexican. Because during that certain time that's all there was, Mexicans there to pick cherries. You started with the sweet cherries, you'd get those done, and then the sour cherries, and that was it. That was the end of the crop.

In Kentucky, we'd pick cotton. To get the cotton, it's all dried, and so your cuticles would always be bleeding. You didn't want to use gloves, because you can't work as fast. The faster you work, the more money you make.

When I was 12 or 13, we were picking cotton, and the house we were living in burned to the ground. We lost everything! We were just left with the clothes on our backs.

Caring for Clothes

When we washed our clothes, we would wash them by hand on a washboard. My mother had an old tub that she would put the clothes in—full of water—and then some kind of yellow soap that was really strong and the soap would melt in the water. Then she would boil the clothes. You didn't just wash clothes, you had to boil them, especially sheets and pillowcases and all that. All our clothes were boiled, and then we would hang them out on the clothesline. You'd have to get the clothes ready for the next day. Especially when you worked in the black dirt.

I can remember my first dresses. We'd buy great big sacks of flour, like a hundred pounds. The flour would come in sacks of cloth, and had different patterns. Some were little flowers; some were stripes. They were very colorful. My mother would save those and she would make our dresses out of that. And she would make my brother's shirts out of that.

Cod Liver Oil

I was the skinniest in the whole family. My other sisters were built a little bit bigger than me.

My father always worried that I was going to die of tuberculosis, because he had a younger brother who died of TB. He was afraid that I had been around that uncle when I was little and that the same thing was going to happen to me.

My father would make sure that we always had a case of



Trucks served as transportation and, sometimes, as the family home.

cod liver oil. That was supposed to be some kind of a medicine with a vitamin. He didn't care if the other kids didn't take it, but he wanted to make sure I drank my cod liver oil. I used to hate that stuff.

Whenever we could afford it, he'd get oranges and make sure that they were kept just for me to drink the oil. He'd ask my mother, "Did she take her medicine today?" I can still picture my mother coming towards me with a great big spoon. I used to plug my nose and then take the spoon of stuff, and I would take like a quarter of the orange and stick it in my mouth, and squeeze all the juice out trying to get that taste out.

Cooking for the First Time

We ate a lot of beans, tortillas, and hot sauce. That was our main meal. We ate beans every day, three times a day. If you could afford it, you had, maybe, hamburger meat and potatoes that they would mix together.

I remember when I started to learn how to cook; I was 8 years old. The first time I tried to make rice, we were working in Traverse City. I had watched one of the other ladies, so I thought I'd surprise my mother. I fried the rice, like the lady did, and put the spices in it, and then put water in it. I saw her put the water in it, but I didn't know you had to then cook the rice. I thought after you put in the water, you just simmered it for little bit and it's done. Of course, it wasn't done. I did everything right except for that.

When my baby sister was sick, they would leave me with the other ladies and I would take care of her. That's when [I learned how to make tortillas]. I would watch how they put the dough together, put the flour and the ingredients together, and then put in the lard and the water. But I could never get it to stick. I didn't know you were supposed to put real hot water in it, and then start kneading it. [So] I was just throwing it away. The flour [supply] was going down. I didn't want to tell my mother, because I was afraid she'd get after me. [One] of the other ladies that always traveled with us, she finally showed me how to do it. From then on, I was making the tortillas all the time so I could help my mom. Because after you got home from work, you'd have to cook and feed everybody, and that's a lot of work, too.

Learning to Drive

My uncle taught me how to drive when I was 13. I was really little. I would have to sit on top of a pillow and put pillows behind me to reach the foot pedals. He had a pickup truck and it had a clutch—it wasn't an automatic.

I already knew how to drive a tractor [from our time in Traverse City]. I was trying to get out of picking cherries, and I could see that if you drove the tractor, all you had to do was drive between the trees. I kept thinking, “I can do that.” So I talked one of the farmer’s sons into teaching me.

If you had an adult with you, even if you were not old enough, you could get a driver’s license if it was for the purpose of agriculture. So I got my driver’s license when I was quite young, because my uncle took me and signed for me. I was the first woman in my family to get one.



Marylou completed all of her formal schooling in just six years.

Getting Educated

I was [also] the only one in the family who spoke English. I translated for both of my parents, whenever they needed me to.

I taught myself how to read. Some of the farmers’ wives would get books for us [and] I would borrow them. I just picked it up on my own, with a farmer or the farmer’s kids. And just being around people that spoke it.

When I was very little, my dad was in the service. When [he would write to my mother, she] would go to the neighbors so that they could read the letter for her. I would see my mother doing that, and I would tell her, “How come you had to do that?” She said she didn’t know how to read. So then I would take the letters and start going over [them,] trying to make out the words. If I got stuck, I would ask the neighbors, “What does this mean?” or “What does this say?” They would take the time to kind of dissect the words.

[When I was almost 12,] I started going to school. They told me the harder I worked, the faster they would move me up in the grades. There were a couple of teachers who helped me. But if you spoke Spanish [in class,] they would keep you after school—a whole hour! And punish you for speaking your own language.

Leaving Home

I graduated from high school in [Michigan at 18]. I was the first in the family to [do that] on both sides. I wanted

to go on to college. But, of course, I couldn’t, because I had to go out and get a job and help my dad [earn money for] the family. Then I decided instead of continuing to work, if I got married, I probably could do something different. Well, I got married and had five kids—one right after the other.

My husband was a good person. He was a migrant, just like I was. We were very young, 18 and 19. It wasn’t what I thought it was going to be. We both were not ready for it. He didn’t have a steady job, so it was one thing after another. We went our separate ways. I raised my kids by myself. I worked two jobs, because I didn’t want to be a welfare mother.

One of Marylou’s jobs during this challenging time was working in a doctor’s office. Seeing her potential, the doctor promoted her from receptionist to office manager and then encouraged her to go to nursing school and earn a degree. In 1986, she experienced another career change: being named director of the Michigan Commission on Spanish-Speaking Affairs. In that role, she has helped pass legislation protecting migrant workers and create educational and health programs for them.

Marylou has received numerous awards and honors for her work with the Hispanic community. She has also served on the Lansing Community College Board of Trustees and is the co-founder of a community college in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

Marylou no longer has to live her life out of a truck or in a migrant camp. Her comfortable home sits on a wooded lot in Lansing, near the banks of the Red Cedar River. “I chose this property because of the trees,” she admitted. “It reminds me of how I used to live. When my grandchildren come over, we make bonfires and cook outside, just like I used to do when I was growing up.”

Stephen Garr Ostrander is a historian at the Michigan Historical Museum. Martha Aladjem Bloomfield is a writer, oral historian, artist, and photographer. Marylou Hernandez Olivarez-Mason’s oral history is excerpted from Ostrander and Bloomfield’s book, “The Sweetness of Freedom: Stories of Immigrants.”