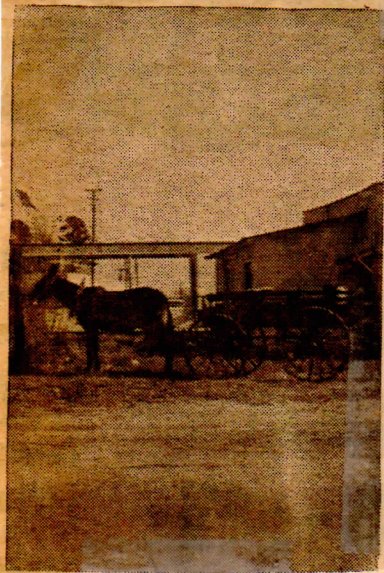


Up until the 1920's the Agriculture Specialists from the University at Laramie told the farmers on the Wheatland Flats that the growing season was not suitable for field corn. One specialist said that this part of Wyoming had only two seasons, winter and August.



The farmers knew that sugar beets was a sure money crop if there was enough irrigating water and beet-dumps and railroad spurs dotted the Flats. The stooped backs and bobbing heads of Mexican laborers, thinning, blocking, weeding and hoeing the orderly rows of beet plants was a familiar sight. The majority of the beet workers were migratory.

The Gonzales family came each spring from New Mexico to Wyoming. Their car, and the cars of the other families in the caravan, were loaded with bedding, pots and pans, bags of hot peppers and other spices, a crucifix, children and meek and submissive wives. After signing the labor contract with the field boss, the families headed for the grocery store that gave credit to beet workers and loaded up with coffee, flour and other staples.

Mrs. Gonzales was a meek and submissive wife but even she protested to Jose, her husband, when they drove to the farm to which they were assigned and she went inside the shack that would be her home for at least seven or eight months.

Their farmer felt that any building with a roof was good enough for these people whose language he did not understand. The shack he provided had one room only and was furnished with a discarded bed the hired man refused to sleep on, a bed with broken springs and a lumpy, thin mattress, a kitchen table and four chairs, a stove that had once been in a sheep-herder's wagon and slab shelves nailed to the wall.

Mrs. Gonzales looked up resignation at her pretty new daughter-in-law, Maria. Jose would never let the bride and groom sleep on the bed, he always kept the best for himself; they would have to sleep on the pallet, now rolled up and tied on top of the Model T car. She wished Ramon and Maria could work beets on another farm and have a shack for themselves, but she did not have the courage to speak to Alfred Williams, the field boss, and suggest such a change. Jose would be angry if he knew she even thought of such a thing. Maria was quick and careful in the beet field; that was the reason he picked her as a wife for Ramon. Mrs. Gonzales sighed as she hung the crucifix on the wall above the head of the bed.

Mrs. Gonzales looked anxiously at Maria. The girl should not be out here this cold November morning topping beets. Maria was shivering even as large drops of pain sweat fell from her face onto the heavy coat buttoned tightly over her distended abdomen. The baby was not due for another month. Maria should not have pain.

At the breakfast table Maria had said she felt pain in her back and belly, and Jose said she ate too much frijoles, that was all. He said she should get to work topping beets and forget her belly-ache.

Belly-ache! Jose should have a baby and learn about belly-ache.

Mrs. Gonzales heard a moan and turned to see Maria drop the wickedly sharp topping knife, and fall writhing on top of a mound of wet beet tops. Ramon ran to his wife and she clutched his hands. He looked pleadingly at his mother.

Mrs. Gonzales wished that Mr. Williams would come. He knew that a woman in labour should not be out in the rain and sleet, even though the farmer wanted to get all the beets dug and topped before the ground froze. Mr. Williams was not afraid of Jose, either; he would dare to tell Jose to shut the mouth and keep on topping. Mr. Williams would say that Maria must go to bed. . . but Mr. Williams was not here. She, Carmelita Gonzales, must stand up to Jose. The Mother, who had also known birth pain, would give her courage.

Mrs. Gonzales put her topping knife with the one Maria had dropped and she and Ramon helped the suffering girl to the house. Jose could curse and wave his hands. Men!

When Ramon opened the shack door the wind was moaning in the Chimney and whipping the torn window shades. Mrs. Gonzales shivered. Wyoming was so cold in the winter. She wished they lived across the border in Old Mexico where there was warm sunshine and friendly neighbors; then Jose could be a Mexican National and come to the United States in a truck with other Nationals. The

Ramon loved his wife very much. He was happy when the marriage-go-between gave Jose and Maria's papa much wine and had them sign the papers while they were mellow but not yet drunk.

Maria! Mrs. Gonzales piled some chips against the piece of tin that steadied the broken grate in the stove and lit a match. She put slivers of an old pitch post on the blaze then some dry cottonwood logs and slid the teakettle to the front of the stove. She must get the room warm and make hot ginger tea to stop Maria's chill.

She went to the pallet on the floor where Ramon was murmuring love words to his wife as he held her close to his body to give her warmth. She unbuttoned Maria's coat, untied the scarf over her head and removed the girl's shoes that were heavy with mud. She warmed a blanket in the oven and wrapped it around her.

Maria's face looked funny; her body did, too. Women did not look like that when babies came. She sent Ramon to tell Mrs. Gomez to come quick. Mrs. Gomez had brought many babies. She was not afraid of Jose, either; she would tell him to go home with Felix, her husband, and not bother the sick girl and the women and to let Ramon stay in the house and help; they might need a man.

The next morning Alfred Williams stopped at the Gonzales shack. The field boss had missed Mrs. Gonzales and Maria among the toppers. When Ramon, who was topping beets with a sullen eye

on his father, told Mr. Williams what was happening in the shack, he was sent to the farm house to telephone for Dr. Fish to come immediately.

The field boss knew he was in the presence of the Dark Angel when he looked at the girl who was now lying motionless on Jose's bed. He put his fingers on Maria's limp wrist and there was no pulse. He dreaded to face the young husband, Mrs. Gonzales with rosary in her hands and lips moving silently, and the sad and understanding Mrs. Gomez who put another cottonwood log on the fire.

The shrill keening of Mrs. Gonzales followed the doctor and the field boss as they drove through the barnyard gate.

Mr. Williams telephoned to Douglas for the priest who served the local church and rode with him the next morning in a gently falling snow storm to the Wheatland cemetery. He cringed as a shovel was placed in Ramon's hands and he, as the husband, must throw the first earth on the coffin. He watched as the shovel passed from male hand to male hand in order of importance, and took his turn with the men in the small group around the grave.

Poor people, he thought as he entered his office. An alien land, a strange language, cold and snow for bodies that craved warmth and the sun and remembering the thud of the dirt he had thrown into the