

# A Long Road to Houston: An Interview with Daniel Galván

by Juan Manuel Galván

The road traveled by many men and women who cross the southern border of the United States carries countless experiences of suffering and humiliation as well as tireless efforts to provide for their families. Throughout the decades, thousands, perhaps millions of Latin Americans have abandoned their homelands and left for “El Norte,” the United States, in a quest for survival or simply for better opportunities. The stories of these immigrants share many peculiarities, one of the most salient being the struggle and tenacity to earn a living even at the cost of one’s life. What follows is one of those stories that we have heard in part; the rest is known only to those who have experienced what it is like to be an undocumented worker in this country.

This is an account of the life of my father, Daniel Galván, in his own words. His experiences are common, yet unique. While thousands have lived and worked undocumented in the U.S., few have experienced this process both before and after the Bracero Program, a guest worker program in the 1940s to 1960s, and even fewer have eventually become U.S. citizens.

Daniel Galván was born in 1937 in a village in the mountains of Guanajuato in central Mexico and lost his mother at the age of five. He completed less than one year of elementary education and at fifteen, he first crossed over the border as an undocumented farm worker to briefly pick cotton near Harlingen, Texas. In 1957, he joined the Bracero Program and for the next seven years worked off and on in the United States as a legal guest worker.

In these years he generally worked in California picking cotton and lettuce, returning to Mexico to work as a sharecropper in the winters. In 1959, he married Inés Rodríguez and started a family in Mexico, but two of his young children died of preventable diseases due to the isolation and poverty in which he and his family lived.

After the end of the Bracero Program in 1964, Daniel continued to travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States in search of jobs to support his family. From then until 1978, he worked throughout the United States as an undocumented worker once again. He picked cotton in Texas, oranges and lettuce in Arizona, potatoes and alfalfa in Idaho, oranges in Florida, cucumbers in North Carolina, apples in Virginia. Additionally, he worked for a time as a cowboy and irrigator in Idaho and an oil field worker in Texas. During these years, he also regularly visited his family in Mexico, where he worked for months at a time as a sharecropper and a tunneler on projects to build fresh water systems. Every trip across the border brought harsh challenges, with dangerous days walking across hot deserts and the ever present threat of apprehension by border guards.

He first visited Houston in 1978, and he began to stay there and work in service jobs in hotels and restaurants and in construction. In 1987, after 35 years of work in the U.S., he received a green card; in 1994, he became a citizen of the United States. This allowed him to bring his family from Mexico to Houston, where he purchased a home and watched with pride as his family prospered.

The following text is my translation of two long interviews conducted in Spanish in the fall of 2004. Daniel Galván speaks in the idiom of rural central Mexico, and I have tried to preserve his syntax in the transcript. I encourage interested readers to consult the Spanish transcripts, which are housed in the Oral History of Houston archives at the University of Houston.



*The Galván family in Mexico before their field of maize, beans, and calabash, ca. 1982.*

## LIFE IN MEXICO

**Daniel Galván:** A small village called El Refugio de Trancas... [in central Mexico] is where I was born and raised. [I spent my childhood]...looking after goats and then working a team of oxen when I was old enough, planting corn and beans, planting chile. All the land belonged to the Hacienda. We were seven siblings...And two who died.

I don’t remember anything earlier [than my mother’s death] because I was five years old when she passed away. And my dad only remained single for less than a year, he then married another woman.

[In Mexico, I worked] as a sharecropper...The Hacienda only provided the land and the seed, we provided everything else, and we split everything in half. Oh, and we also brought the Hacienda’s part to them. When the time came to harvest the corn and beans everything was brought to a *cantón* (barn).<sup>1</sup> And from that place everything was parted in half and everybody got what belonged to him and took it home. The *rastrojo* (cornstalks) we carried on our shoulders to take it to the piles of the *patrón*, that we did without pay.<sup>2</sup> Because that was the tradition and we had to do it. That was in 1960 and 1961.

I also had my own land, but I worked only in part of my

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land and the rest of the time I worked the Hacienda's land...They let us use their pastures for our livestock. And the water channels and everything belonged to the Hacienda, because back then we didn't have to go and get water anywhere else. Back then we used the water from the Hacienda's channels that go by the village. We always had water, even during the dry season, the channels always had water.

[The *patrón* was] a man called Carlos Lance. Because it was back then when the old *patrón*, Salvador Azanza, passed away. I am not sure when he died, perhaps in 1961 or 1962. Because Don Salvador Azanza supported and defended my father very much, and when he died of a heart attack, the people went after my father.<sup>3</sup>

In '63 or '64, I had worked in construction in the city of Guanajuato when they opened all those tunnels [for potable water]...Towards the end of 1965, I went to work in Mexico City for an engineer with whom I had worked in Guanajuato digging the tunnels [for potable water].

And in La Lumbreira there was a tunnel where they called me to work as a helper of *El Escudo*.<sup>4</sup> They had a rock crusher they called *El Escudo*; it was a machine that they had where they worked underground; the rock crusher had something like a round drill that was like a base and was opening the way... There was an operator and two helpers, but were short of a helper and they called me. And I went to work with them; it must have been four or five months, something like that. It wasn't a long time, but outside they earned \$248.00 pesos a week [working twelve hours a day, five days a week].

And from behind the machine they were pulling all the crushed rock to the outside, they pulled all the debris out with wheelbarrows all the way to the end. I was there helping get all that debris out. Underground, as a helper on *El Escudo*, I made \$650.00 pesos a week. Which was a lot more, it was very good money. They even would tell me, "Hey, you are making more than engineer Lemus," who was a very young engineer. And I would say, "Maybe I am working a lot more too." Today as a laborer you couldn't make the kind of money I made back then.

I don't remember how many more weeks I worked, but I went back home to Guanajuato, to my farm to continue working on my crops. My dad and my brother Lupe [who lived in Mexico City]



*After living in Houston for four years, in 1982 Daniel visited his family in Mexico. In this photograph, his daughter Isabel watches as Daniel cooks for her on her birthday.*

encouraged me to stay [with them]. They used to tell me, "Sell everything you have over there, here you can support yourself and your family." But my brother Hipólito thought differently. He would say, "My recommendation is that if you are okay over in your farm, that you stay over there. If you decide to move over here to Mexico City, let that come out of your own heart. We will help you if you come over, but if you feel that you are fine over there, then stay over there. [My wife] Inés had never wanted to move to Mexico City. And I didn't

really want to move to Mexico City either. I was making pretty good money and my brothers and sisters-in-law did tell me, "Come over, man; look, the money you are making is really a lot, often those who are already over here make less than you do, and here we are, all of us."

But I was also aware that my job was not permanent. Once they finished that project they would lay everybody off and when they started another project, not everybody would be hired again. That's because among the employees there are many who want to get jobs for their people and then some of those that are working might not be re-hired. And I was aware of that, so I chose to go back, go back to my village, to my farm, and I stayed back there working on my lands and working for the *patrón*.

In '68, I only worked in agriculture. Part of the time I worked on my own land and part of the time for the Hacienda, getting paid a little bit of money. Some days I prepared my own lands and every once in a while I worked for the *patrón*. When I didn't have a lot to do I could make a little bit of money, right? Four pesos a day is not a lot of money but we had to work for the *patrón* anyway, and four pesos was better than nothing. I don't know how to explain that, those were the customs and the traditions of the *hacendados* of old, because back in the day there were only big landowners, that was it.<sup>5</sup>

[I then went to work cleaning the water channel.] The interest we had in helping clean up the water channel wasn't so much for what we got paid, because we didn't get paid much at all. But that's where we lived and those were the water flows on which we lived. After cleaning up the water channels, for a few days the water ran turbid, because who knows what people did in the tunnels. But later the water came out clear, it was all clear.

[We had] access to the water for our cattle and for us; we also worked for the pastures, for all the pasture lands belonged to the Hacienda and it didn't cost us anything. [I had] twelve heads of cattle, including big and small ones, and a team of horses, perhaps eighteen animals in total, and we needed the Hacienda's pastures.

Those years [from 1960 to 1970], I worked in my own lands and, like I told you, also as a laborer and a sharecropper for the Hacienda...Working with one team of oxen we could still take home, say, two tons of corn and one ton of beans a year. And yet those were not excellent harvests because the lands are poor and don't yield very much.<sup>6</sup>

I was very happy back there in the village because that lifestyle was very beautiful. We raised cows, chicken, pigs, turkeys, and all that we could. Back there you slaughtered a pig and filled one, two, even three five-gallon cans of lard. When you finished up that lard you already had another pig ready to be slaughtered and you had more lard. The chicken laid many eggs; we picked up to thirty eggs a day. We cooked large pans of eggs and all that. Man, that really helped a lot! The cows had milk most of the time. When one didn't have milk, another one did; and there were eggs, there was lard.<sup>7</sup> What people worried the most back then was about buying soap and salt and sugar; they had everything else.

### [Daniel's story of the death of two of his children in 1963 and 1967 reveals a harsher side of life in the Mexican countryside.](#)

I was in Mexico when they died...I was there when they were born and I was there when they died. They were born in the village. Eugenio began to cry at night, around 10:00 p.m. He began to

cry...and he cried all night....Back in that time [nobody had cars]; there was only a truck in El Ciprés and another truck in El Paderón.<sup>8</sup> And at night, we couldn't find a way... to move. The city was very far. At sunrise, we ran with the child to Dolores [Hidalgo], we got there, and we ran to look for the priest where he would baptize the child...where he would pour the holy water on him. We came to Father Moisés Castillo, and he sent us away. He said, "You have to look for the doctor, to look for something to cure him, this child is very ill." And I don't know how it was that we couldn't find a doctor at that time.

And we got back to the priest ...he baptized [my son Eugenio] right then and there, he poured the holy water on him. And then we got out and left. And we found a doctor, I don't remember what his name was. He gave us something to give to the child, but he told us, "If he lives two more hours, he will have life, but he's not going to make it, he is too ill." And yes, he left... In less than two hours the child died right there in Dolores Hidalgo. And we went back home to make preparations for his wake [and funeral].

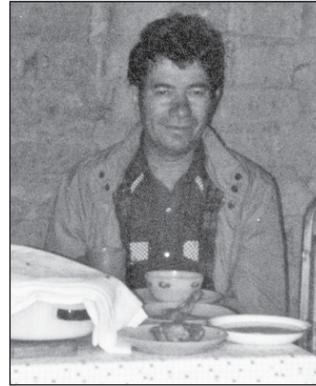
And later [in 1967] my girl Ricarda, the same thing happened with her. It was also a pneumonia, and...we also left for Dolores Hidalgo; well, yes, until dawn. And it was all too late; everything was in vain because of being so far away from the city. Back there in the village there was nothing we could do.... We would give them some... chamomile tea and thyme tea and things like that, but that didn't help them at all.... And yes, it hurt me, it hurt me very much. And every time I remember I think that if there had only been better medical aid...we could've taken them to the doctor, they would have lived... But that was one of the causes, that we never had a chance.

[Life in the hacienda] fell apart [in the early 1960s] when the [old owner] Don Salvador Azanza died and Don Carlos Lance took over. [Every year during the rainy season] the hills collapsed where the cattle came to drink and with their hoofs they caused the topsoil to block the water channels. [We heard rumors that the new owner] Don Carlos Lance was going to build barbed-wire fences on both sides of the channels to keep our livestock from ruining the water.

And when people found out, they turned against him and began to mobilize themselves, to seek advice from older *ejidatarios* from Las Aguilillas who told them to wise up.<sup>9</sup> It was in '62 that they began to organize themselves...The first leaders in the formation of the *ejido*...went after the Hacienda and, well, they mobilized everybody...

The *ejidatarios* would come with fifty or sixty teams of oxen; they would invade a plot of land in just a few minutes [and plant a crop]. Then the tractors of the Hacienda would arrive and ruin everything the *ejidatarios* had done. And the *ejidatarios* would get in the way of the tractors, and the operators would stop because they didn't want to run over them, and they struggled like that for a while. But the *hacendado* [Don Carlos Lance] did not really mistreat them. Not like in the old times, when the late Don Salvador Azanza fought with the *ejido* of Las Aguilillas.<sup>10</sup> Back then it was really bad because the people of the Hacienda would arrive on their horses, the late Telésforo Rodríguez took part in that.<sup>11</sup> The people of the Hacienda rode on horses and carried guns. They would arrive and lasso and drag *ejidatarios*; nevertheless, *ejidatarios* wouldn't give up, they fought on for a long time.

[My father] worked for the Hacienda for many years but he didn't have to fight against those *ejidatarios*. Like I said, the guys



*Visits to Mexico for Daniel included simple pleasures such as eating the produce from his field.*

from the *ejido* of El Refugio were very lucky because even though the tractors of the Hacienda got in their way, they still went ahead and planted their crops. And they grew their crops the first year and the following year, and the Hacienda did not hurt them.

We still sharecropped for the Hacienda, because the land that they assigned to us was in the edge of the lands taken by the *ejido*.

In 1971 was the last time that I ever worked for the Hacienda [in Mexico] as a sharecropper.

Well, from the time of my ancestors, all the people used to work for the Hacienda, but when I got married, I started coming over to the United States. When I was over on this side, I did not work for the Hacienda but others did. Whenever I did not go to the United States I stayed back there farming.

## LIFE AS A MIGRANT WORKER

The first time that I came [to the United States] I believe it was around the month of July in 1952. We arrived at the edge of the town of Harlingen, [Texas]. We could see the small town of Harlingen in the distance, although we didn't go to it. We picked cotton; we were there only two or three weeks. Then people started saying that lots of immigration officers from California were going to come over and clean everything up. Then people told us to go back [to Mexico].

There was another boy younger than me, he was twelve years old, and the older men said that we had to get out because they didn't want the Border Patrol to catch us...Upon coming back to Guanajuato, well...I went to work in the fields. The time for picking up the bean harvest was near and then we had to cut down the corn. I didn't go back [to the United States] for a while. After 1952 I spent some time working [back home in Mexico]. I stayed home, I was single, and we worked communally. It wasn't until 1957 that I started looking for a way to come over as a Bracero.<sup>12</sup> [My dad] sold some corn, well, to get the money to give me so I could go back to the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

...And then we set off to Empalme, Sonora, because [in the Bracero Program] people were assigned to go to different places. Some they sent to Monterrey [Nuevo León], those who were going this way, those who were coming to the North they sent to Empalme, Sonora.<sup>14</sup>

I remember that I arrived over there in California; I believe it was the seventh or eighth of September, to pick cotton. And it got so cold! And so hot, but I mean terribly hot! Because it was so humid, they irrigated the soil, and steam came out of the ground. And they paid us 50¢ of a dollar for...fifty pounds, which they call a *quintal*. I worked there during September and part of October, only about a month and a half.

Then they called me to work for a Japanese farmer, and we

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set out of Brawley, on to West Moorland, a little town down the road. And I stayed with that Japanese [farmer] that entire year... The harvest with that *patrón* came to an end and there was no more work.<sup>15</sup> He returned us to the offices that they called *la asociación*, where all the braceros gathered until they were given assignments. Those who didn't come directly to a *patrón* came also to the *asociación*, where they stayed for a while and did odd day jobs and waited until they found a job.

### After a brief stay in Mexico, Daniel returned to Empalme seeking another assignment.

I met some men from the state of Yucatán. And with them was a man whom they called "attorney," who represented all the people from Yucatán applying for Bracero contracts. And I spoke to him and he told me, "Give me 200 pesos and I will help you."<sup>16</sup> Alright, I gave him 200 pesos and waited about fifteen more days. And I got the contract and crossed over to El Centro, for it was there in Empalme [Sonora] that they gave work assignments to people. We received contracts and crossed over to the United States. El Centro was like a center of re-concentration, where everybody arrived to, and from where we were sent to different places.

And it was my luck to be assigned to a place called King City, California, where we came to pick up onions. They paid us 18¢ of a dollar per sack; those were like burlap sacks, they were pretty big. And we made a lot of money. Anyway, we did only the onion run, which we finished in about twenty days.

When [the onion run] ended, a man came and sent us to a place to pick tomatoes. And when we arrived, we found out that there was no money in that, for all the tomatoes were completely ripe, too ripe and burned by the sun; it was useless. We began picking and looking for the firmest. Then the overseers came over and began throwing most of them away and leaving only three or four tomatoes. From there we went back to El Campo, [California], walking, for we were living in El Campo, and we said that we were not working for that man anymore.

That day a representative came over, for there was always a representative from Mexico. And that man arrived and asked us what the problem was, and why we didn't want to work. And we told them that we couldn't work there because we didn't make enough money to support ourselves. In the way they wanted us to work, we weren't going to work. And he said, "That's fine." And the same day he took us to Salinas [California] himself, and turned us over to a lettuce company, it was called Garren Company. We arrived at the time when they were pruning the lettuce.

We got to work pruning the lettuce and we stayed. Then we continued weeding the fields until the time came to harvest the lettuce. And we stayed there throughout 1958, the entire year. We did the lettuce run in Salinas, and also in Watsonville. When the lettuce run ended in Salinas and Watsonville, it was ready to be picked up in Brentwood. It might be different climate, for [the lettuce] seems to get ready like by regions, right? And we went to do the lettuce run in Brentwood. And later in October it came to an end and that's when we returned to [Imperial] Valley. And then I came back home, to Mexico, to spend the winter.

When I went back to California in 1960 or so, we made about



*In 1971, Daniel joined the Mexican regional state agency for small landowners.*

250 dollars a week, which was very good money at the time—250 dollars working Monday through Friday only. We got off early on Fridays. We were off Saturdays and Sundays.

And 1963 went by and in 1964, I went back [to California]. This time I was not assigned to Gonzalez. They sent me to Borland, I don't remember when we arrived there, it was perhaps in July; the thing is that all work came to an end around the twentieth of October of 1964. That was the end of the contracts, according to the twenty-year agreement between the governments [of Mexico and the United States]. There were no more [Bracero] contracts, and I came back [to Mexico] and worked part of the time on my farm and the rest of the time for the Hacienda.

**Juan Galván:** *How do you remember those years that you worked as a bracero in the United States?*

**DG:** Man, it was very beautiful! Those years that I spent as a bracero I didn't have to struggle much, because once the American laws received us we had medical services and everything else. We arrived over on this side and they charged us \$12.50 a week for board. And they charged us \$8 a week for medical attention.

We paid that much every week, and that was all. And we came to work and they called us when the bell rang, and the whole group, hundreds of people got over to the dining room to eat. At 5:00 a.m. they were calling us to eat, that was in the association, right? But if we were working for a *patrón*; well, there we had to get up regardless of whether it was hot or cold and we had to wash our pots and pans and cook for ourselves.

The time I spent in California working for the lettuce company, those years I didn't worry about anything. There we also had what they called boarding service. The place where we stayed was like a very big house where all the people lived and we came into a living room for all of us. There the only thing we did was wash our clothes. But after that, in other places, working for *patrones*; well, there we had to wash our clothes and we had to do everything that needed to be done.

**After the end of the Bracero Program, Daniel worked for a time in Mexico City and as a sharecropper for the Hacienda. In 1971, he traveled back to the United States as an undocumented migrant worker.**

In 1971, I entered through Arizona. I spent some time in a place called Mesa, Arizona, working in lettuce fields, weeding, and then picking up the crops. That's where I ran into an old friend with whom I had worked long ago in California... We did the lettuce

run in Salinas and then in a town nearby called Watsonville. Then we went to Brentwood...And we worked there [pruning lettuce and beets] during September and October, and in the last days of October all work came to an end over there...I went back to Mexico, the supervisor himself took me to the other side of the borderline, to Mexico...

I tried to get back to California in 1972, but I couldn't [get the money to do so]. Instead I made it to Arizona, to a little town called Chandler. There I worked in orange groves. I tried to go back to California, but I never found a way. Then one day I met a woman who owned an old truck. She was going to take us to Idaho. And many were going to Idaho back then and they made a lot of money, so we joined them; me and three other guys who were also going to Idaho. But passing through the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, the truck broke down.



*Over the years, Daniel has worked on remodeling the family home in Mexico each time he returned from his treks in North America, ca. 2005.*

There was a little town nearby; we stopped there, in front of a gas station, and we got off and ran up to the top of a hill nearby. There was a small junkyard, that's where we hid. And the police interrogated the lady and, well, they sent her back [to Mexico]. They said that they hadn't jailed her but they had sent her home, and the truck stayed back. It was broke...But our mistake was that we made it easier for them to look for us because when we got off that old truck, the one who didn't leave his cap behind left his jacket, or something. When the police found the car they found our stuff there, they of course realized that the truck was carrying people...We didn't know what to do; we didn't know where to go. We would go down to a gas station and buy something to eat and go back to the junkyard. And we would stay inside those old cars, and about two days later we heard something rumble in the distance. And sure enough, a little while later those soldiers, I mean, police officers, were there pointing their big rifles to us and telling us: "Hey, come out of there with your hands up."

So we got out, and they took us to an interpreter where they could interrogate us, because those police officers didn't speak Spanish. An *Americano* came over and told them that a truck full of people had just passed en route to Salt Lake City.<sup>17</sup> Man! They put us into a car right away and drove up, and they caught up with them. Their truck was breaking down; they weren't going to get very far.

From there they took us back to the little town where they had detained us, they only got that far, and there they gathered us all. And we waited for a while and later a bus arrived and they put all of us in it. And it was like fifteen of us I believe, and they took us to Las Vegas. And up there they took us to jail, they took us to the third floor, they took our clothes and gave us all something like blue robes to wear. And they took us to a cell and gave us blankets to put on the floor, and a pillow. And right in the middle of the cell there was a toilet without a cover or anything, and we all slept around it. Well, we got there at night and the next day, early in the morning, they called us over for breakfast. Man, there was a big pot of oatmeal with milk and lots of sugar, and lots of bread.

At noon they called us over for lunch, and those big pieces of beef were good. That food they gave us in jail was really magnificent, it was very good food. But we were there only for three days. Then they picked us up and sent us to Calexico [California], from there we entered Mexico through Mexicali [Sonora]...

I tried to get back into the United States through a different port. It was called Altar from where I got off the bus to cross the desert. And I had on me a watch that I really loved, and I gave it to a guy, his name was Miguel González and he was from Los Quiotes. I asked him to take that watch back and give it to my family and to tell them that I had stayed at the border, that I was going to cross the border all over again. And he went and gave it to them, but they never believed him. I don't know how it was but for a long time my wife and children did not believe that I was alive... because, how could it be that somebody is coming to turn over my watch? It wasn't until I wrote them a letter telling them that I was okay that they believed that I was alive.

I set off and crossed the desert and I got to a place called Casas Grandes in Arizona, and I got a job there thinning beets. I spent a week thinning and in those days the Border Patrol came over and picked up the irrigators, but I managed to hide so I stayed.

I would manage to work only for a number of days; by the way, our paychecks came every two weeks. I would work ten days before getting caught by the Border Patrol. Because they came every other day; and I was there, and I would see them coming and, if there was enough time, I would run into the hills and hide.

But the Border Patrol was around all the time, and every ten days they would catch me as I was getting off from work, they always caught us in the afternoon. For sure they would catch us in the afternoon and we would spend the night in jail, they would give us dinner, and the next day they would give us breakfast and in the afternoon or early evening they would send us across the border. They would take me back to Mexico without a paycheck, and I would get right back because I had to get back to get my paycheck. And I would get my paycheck and I would stay again, and I would get caught without a paycheck again.

They sent me over through Nogales, [Sonora]. Well, just getting out and before getting to Hermosillo, [Sonora], we would get off the bus and turn right back around, and we would wait for another bus to get back over. We would get to the small town of Altar and from there, if it was already dark, we would wait for daylight and we would buy something to eat and we would head over for the desert. We would walk for three days and three nights or three days and four nights, depending on how fast we walked, because it was a three-day journey.

One day I got up early in the morning, and I fixed my lunch,

and there was a mound of dirt near the huts where we stayed. And I took my lunch, and I headed over to the trees. That's when I saw a truck and I thought, "Man, that overseer ...didn't find me." But then I looked more carefully and thought, "Man, it's the Border Patrol." That day, of about ten of us staying there in those huts, the Border Patrol took everybody else, I was the only one left, only because I was already outside. I stayed as the only irrigator.

Another time we were working when I saw them coming very close, and I left the irrigation machine and ran; I went over the dirt mound and into the hills. I ran and kind of turned around, and about half an hour later I got out and looked. They had left, so I went back to work.

In three months, they caught me six times, and after the sixth time I went back home to my village. I said to myself, "I am going back to Dolores Hidalgo." That was in 1972. And in 1973, I did manage to get to Idaho. This time I ended up finding work in a place called Murphy, [Idaho,] near the state line with Oregon. There was a river called the Snake River that crossed that area, that river always had water. From that river people took water for irrigating potato crops and other crops; that is a big river. That year I worked in Murphy...moving irrigation pipes. [In Idaho we grew] mostly potatoes and some wheat.

In 1973, I went to Aberdeen, [Idaho, where] I worked as a cowboy; there were times when I rode horses, at times irrigating, other times operating the tractors. I did everything. That was in 1974, all summer long, and then I went back home to spend the winter in Mexico.



*At the age of 68 and after having worked in the U.S. since 1952, Daniel once again plows his fields with a team of oxen, ca. 2005.*

In 1975, [I went back to Idaho and ] did the same kind of work, mostly as a cowboy, but also operating the tractor, as a driver, irrigating, and doing everything that needed to be done, and then I went back to Mexico to spend the winter.

**JG:** *You have talked about a friend of the family who died crossing the border through Arizona in 1967. Who was he?*

**DG:** I don't remember his name. He was a young man who lived near the marketplace back in Dolores Hidalgo. He wasn't with me, I only heard. You know, we had to walk through the desert...We walked for about four days. They say he died of dehydration. It was too hot.

They didn't have water with them....It could have been a half

a day in which they didn't find water. The guy was very fat and couldn't stand the heat. It was incredibly hot, very hot. With the heat over 100° Fahrenheit and having to walk without water, man!

**JG:** *What was the biggest difference between working under contract with the Bracero Program and the years that you worked undocumented?*

**DG:** Well, it could be the same. Over here on this side and as undocumented migrants, we suffered crossing the deserts; sometimes without food, sometimes without water, always exhausted. One of the times that I crossed through Arizona, that time I really struggled. I was wearing tennis shoes, the very thin ones; the first day I was blistered already, and I still had to walk another three days. And I made it... When I got to the farm I had my feet all torn up. But by the will of God, I made it all right. And, yes, hiding all the time, always hiding from immigration officers...We worried mostly about getting caught and being sent back to Mexico, because it was so hard to get back over to this side, always thinking that we might not have the same luck that we had the first time.

**Daniel recounts one particularly memorable effort to return to Idaho.**

To get to Idaho we needed lots of money! To get back there we would borrow around 3,500 or 4,000 pesos.<sup>18</sup> [In 1978] I tried to borrow enough money to go there, but I was only able to borrow 300 pesos ... and that's what I used to come over here with to Texas.

But this time the journey proved to be somewhat longer and a little more difficult. However, God helped me and I was fortunate, although I struggled a lot and I spent much time wandering; I still managed to get ahead. That time we crossed the river at night. One night it rained a lot and we spent the night covered with pieces of nylon underneath some small trees. We managed to sleep for a little while and at dawn we set off again.

I remember that we were walking parallel to Highway [281]. And I always thought that we were heading back, but I couldn't be sure since we were walking a pretty good distance from the highway. That's when we saw two men [from the Border Patrol] walking in the distance, they were coming from the side of the hill, alongside the barbed-wire fence...And I ran ahead and the other two guys didn't follow me but ran together in a different direction; God knows which way they went.

I found a shrub loaded with flowers and I turned around and crawled underneath that little tree. And there I stayed holding my backpack, underneath that bush. A little while later those men arrived. They were Border Patrol officers and they were following our tracks; they got up to that tree and then stopped because they didn't see me. And they turned back and then came back around to that tree. And I shrank, I shrank my feet where they wouldn't stumble on me, because they kept walking 'round and 'round that tree.

And after a while, they just stood there and whistled, saying, "Hey, get out of there, we have already seen you; we are bringing the plane and we are going to get you out of there anyway, because we already know where you're hiding!" And I would shrink my feet, because they were standing right next to me. You know, back then, if you made them angry; man, they would give such a beating!

And that's how I stayed all day. That happened around 9:00 a.m. and by 4:00 p.m. I didn't hear anything and I got out, looking

in all directions. So I set off on the road again. I walked all night and the next day I found a trail, and I followed that trail until I got to a village ...a small town called San Diego, Texas. And I was on the edge of that small town and then I found another trail, which I followed. And after walking for about three hours I came to a village and I saw this man. And he said, "Come in, do you want something to eat? Come in, I have armadillo soup." And that's what that man ate; he killed armadillos and ate them. He worked there. And he asked me, "Where are you coming from, how long have you been wandering?" And I told him that I had been walking for four days and that I recently had passed through a small town called San Benito. And he said, "Man, you're lost big time! You have to rest here for a few days and then I'll tell you where to go, because you are getting close to the Rio Grande, that's where that trail is leading you!" And I spent... I don't know, four, five, or eight days there in that man's house. And we ate armadillo every day.



*For Daniel, retirement means going back to work in the house where he was born.*

And one day he showed me the way. He said, "Now is the time, I think you have recovered enough, now you can go on. Look, follow this line of short posts and keep on going straight. Follow this trail, it will take you to Alice, [Texas]. You are going to go through El Naranjo and then you'll get to Corpus Christi." "All right," I said. And I set off again. And I walked all afternoon and part of the night. And I walked all [of the next] morning, and basically most of the day. And at sunset I got to Alice.

I came close to a house, thinking that I would ask for some water to drink. A man came out ...and gave me a bottle of water. He said, "You can't stay here, and don't even try going forward because you're lost. In this trail the only thing you are going to find is towns and ranches. What you must do is follow a trail that way, and don't get off. In the first ranch, you are going to find a man... who helps people. You get to that ranch, there is no way you can miss it, his house is right beside this trail."

And it wasn't very far, because I got to that ranch before sunset. Before getting to that little ranch I ran into a young man who was driving a brand new little red truck. And he stopped and asked me, "What are you doing?" "Well, you know, I'm wandering." And he said, "Come with me, my dad is used to helping people who wander

this way." I got in the truck. And he asked, "Where are you coming from? What's your name?" And when we got to that house where there was that man and four other people, they were roasting deer meat and drinking beer, partying. When we arrived the young man got off the truck and went ahead of me, walking towards his dad, and said to him, "Dad, here's Daniel, who's come to see you, he tried to contact you before but he couldn't, it's taken him a little while but here he is." "Hey, Daniel, how are you?" And he spoke to me pretending that we were old friends. "Come over and eat with us. Come on, have a beer," and right away he gave me a beer and some roasted deer meat.

And that day went by. Next day, at dawn, they had a deer ready for me to skin. Then they left. A little while later they came over with another one. That day they killed five deer or so, and I skinned them and cut them up. And they had a fire going and lots of roasted meat. And we ate roasted meat, lots of deer meat. And several days went by. He also had some cows. During the day we went out to roast *nopal* for the cows, we also fixed the barbed-wire fences.<sup>19</sup> Then we went out and helped them do whatever needed to be done. They had corn fields; it was mostly corn that they grew. We also worked after the tractors unearthing the plants that got buried during the plowing. And after twenty days or a month he got me a job where he worked. I believe it was an oil company. ... I worked there with them for two or three weeks, I am not sure. And between the 5th and the 10th of May, in those days, a *coyote* came by. They call *coyotes* those who transport people from one place to another, for a fee.<sup>20</sup>

And as that man came, they called me, "Hey, they are asking if you would like to go to Florida." The other guys said, "We are going too." And I decided to go, what the hell! And he took us, we weren't going to pay him until we started working, we didn't have to have any money in advance.

We left one evening and we rode all night. And the next day around 9:00 a.m. we arrived in Florida. And we got into the orange run right away. We started with the oranges that they cut for stores--the Valencia, I believe that's how they call it. What they cut for stores we have to pull, it is hard to cut and they make sure that it doesn't get bruised very much. When we got to the other type, the one they cut for juice, that one they cut with some leaves, sometimes they just shake the branches and it all falls to the ground and we grab it by bundles, sometimes with leaves, and then we get up there on ladders to grab whatever is left. They just didn't want us to leave any fruit up there; they wanted the trees to be totally clear.

And we spent some time there. I liked that type of work very much because even when we didn't make a lot of money, we still made more than working by the hour; we made pretty good money anyway. And then around the fifteenth of July, the orange run came to an end. Then we left with the same contractor we were with, because we worked for him. He came to an agreement with the bosses. He collected the money and he paid us, we were his people and we worked for him.

And when work came to an end in Florida, we set off for North Carolina with the same man, and we got to a place called Elm City. We stayed there a day or two. About the third day we got out and started working picking a cucumber crop. But there were only a few, very small cucumbers, and we could only make very little money because there was so little to harvest. And some time later things started to get better. Man, later there was really a lot of work!

I only worked with that contractor in the cucumber run for about three weeks and then I went to work for a farmer [also picking cucumbers]. With that farmer things were different; well, at least I felt happier working for that farmer, since I could keep a little bit more money and I worked more at ease.

Then we went on to the tobacco harvest, which we also finished in two weeks or so. In September the tobacco run came to an end...Some of my comrades had a small station wagon and we went to Virginia, those guys knew that area. We arrived to a place called Mount Jackson [where] we picked up the apple harvest. We picked apples for a week and a half or two weeks. And I don't remember the name of that kind of apple; it is a very fine apple, very expensive. That one had to be pulled very carefully, we had to be careful not to squeeze it because our fingers would be printed on it, and we couldn't drop it either because it would get bruised, it had to be pulled carefully and also had to be put in the baskets slowly. And we also had to empty the baskets very carefully, because otherwise they would get bruised. And they paid better, but one makes about the same because we get a lot less done. And the apple run came to an end around the twentieth of November... I joined some comrades who were coming over here to Houston, and that's how I got to Houston.

## BUILDING A LIFE IN HOUSTON

Well, the thing is that I stayed here in Houston. At first I worked for a hotel in the Galleria, the Westin Oaks, where I stayed for the next eleven years. My first job was washing pots and pans, that's where I worked I think the first two years. And then they promoted me to kitchen helper. When I first came to work for that hotel, I worked mornings, from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Then I found a second job as a janitor, cleaning office buildings; well, you know, cleaning those little cubicles, and that's how I spent a long time. I found another job at a restaurant right there inside the Galleria, but in the first floor, beside the ice skating rink. And, well, I liked that a bit more; I made a little more money and I was happier at work. That restaurant was called the Cockery. And the time came when they closed it and then I only kept one job.

Later I found another job at another restaurant also inside the Galleria... On one occasion they transferred me from the hotel kitchen to the bakery. And when I was first transferred, the bakery's supervisor liked me and I thought it was always going to be that way...And, well, I liked where I was and I had hopes of perhaps getting a raise. Man, a few days later that lady started getting very grumpy. She wanted everything to get done faster and faster. What I'm saying is that she assigned us jobs by the minute and if they weren't done on time, man, she would scold us badly. And one day I took courage and said to myself, "I'm leaving, I'm not working here anymore."

I had been going over to Kingwood, where our relatives and friends worked at the time, and I had worked weekends cleaning up construction sites. And the next day I went with the relatives over there in Kingwood, and I found work right away. Man, I made more money. They paid us \$35 a day, I believe. That was in '89.

That's when I received a phone call from Mexico telling me that my wife was ill, that I had to go because she was going to have surgery, that it was urgent, that she was very ill. And I collected

some money and took off immediately.

And it all turned out okay; it was not as bad as I had been told. A young man from El Terrero had come from Idaho and was home for a visit. And he told me, "Let's go to Idaho," and I went off to Idaho with him. And I only had to wait three or four days out there before they got me a job moving irrigation lines in the potato fields.

I stayed up there until the end of the season. The day we finished harvesting the potato, the *patrón* took us all to the restaurant to eat whatever we wanted. He who wanted to drink, he drank whatever he wanted. The *patrón* was paying for the feast...And we left that place, and the next day I set off to come over here, to Houston, I caught a bus this way.

That was in '91. [From Houston, my nephew Carmelo Casas and I] left for North Carolina to work in the Christmas tree harvests. We only did the Christmas tree run, and there was no more work. When we came back over to Houston, [my son] Pepe was working for a Honduran man and he got me a job [as a landscaper], and I worked for that Honduran for a while...And I left that job soon after, that's when Antonio Piñón got me a job at Texas Trees...and I stayed there for a long time. I worked [for that tree farm] for seven years until I had the fortune of finding a job in the oil pipe yards, making less money by the hour, but with the hope of working much longer hours; because back at the tree farm I made \$7 and some change and over here I started out at \$5.50.<sup>21</sup> And, well, I stayed until now, until I retired because I could no longer work. There was too much pressure and they were making me work harder every day. Because back then, everything was alright, but lately, the way they set out the work, at least for me, I felt it was too hard and that forced me to retire.

**JG:** *Why do you think that you stayed in Houston?*

**DG:** I was afraid. I was afraid that in a trip to Idaho I would be caught on the way...When I started working for the hotel, one of the things I liked was that they had very good [medical] insurance... that was really their only true benefit. And we worked indoors and



*Juan Galván and his parents, celebrating in the year 2000 his very first degree—an associate's degree from Houston Community College. Juan is now working towards a PhD at University of Houston.*

with air conditioning. Because there was no real money and they were always pushing us, always demanding work of higher quantity and quality. They kept saying that they were building another hotel in Massachusetts, and that they were building another hotel in Ohio, and that we needed to work harder so the company would progress. But there was progress only for the company, for us there was no progress. And as for me, I did better after I got out of that place and went to work in construction, outside.

I got my papers on the tenth of July of 1987 [and my citizenship] on the twenty-second of September of 1994.<sup>22</sup> I applied for my family back when I received my permanent residence, which I think was in July or August of '89...and everything was running very slow, the process basically came to a halt. It seemed that nothing was moving, and that's when I received my citizenship. Soon after that my son-in-law Enrique helped me buy this house. He worked for a real estate company and he found this house for me. And when I received my citizenship, immediately I sent a letter notifying the government that I was now a citizen and that I needed my family here. And they replied telling me that I would have my family here as soon as possible. And that's also when I managed to buy this house. We got the house in November of '94 and I believe that in February of '95 my family was already coming over here. That was very fast. Back then those processes ran very fast.

**JG:** *How were all those years away from your family, since the first time you came here when you were a newlywed, until '95 when a large part of your family arrived?*

**DG:** I don't know how to explain it, but even if one is fine, one is always thinking, "Is my wife okay? What about my children? Could they be ill? Are they okay? Do they have anything to eat?" And so on, right? And sometimes thinking, "What do I do? I really want to send them some money, but I can't, I don't have anything." And years go by...and it's hard.

And that's what I keep asking myself why so many people that I have known since way back then came undocumented for so many years, when their family was back there and they were over here. And they got their papers and they're still living the same way—they're over here and the families are still back there... [Are they] only interested in the money they make, or is it that they are not interested in being with the family?

Now, if for instance I am here and I am already legal but I don't want to bring my family over and I am here working and I'm sending a few cents back to my family... Well, yes, the family is over there. I am here, and once or twice a year I go back over there. Then those little savings that I have, I get over there and in two or three weeks, they are depleted and I come back over. I get back once again and look for a job, I get back and the family is always alone, right? And that's one of the things to which I always aspired, that someday we all would be together.

I was always thinking and hoping that perhaps one day we could be together. Because my wife, she never wanted to come to the United States.... Well, she came once and spent some time here and then went back.... She used to say that she didn't want to have anything to do with the United States.

And when I was finally able to file for my family's permanent residence, I called her. I wrote to her...that my hope was that one day we could all be together. I already got used to living in the

United States, I don't know why, because rich I will never be, only that I think that in the United States we can live better than we would in Mexico. Taking into consideration that in Mexico we could make a decent living, more or less comfortable, because one can also support oneself in Mexico, but it is very rare for someone to be able to stay at home with the family and be okay, without lacking anything; there are very few people like that.

Always they have their house in Dolores Hidalgo and they're working in Guadalajara, they're working in San Luis Potosí, or they're working in Mexico City. And they come to see the wife, the children every weekend or every other weekend. And when they arrive, they go and buy groceries and this and that, whatever they need, and the next day they go back and the family is always alone, always alone at home. And I say to myself, "Well, if we can all be here [in Houston] together, then it is better this way."



*After a lifetime of traveling between Mexico and the United States, Daniel has decided to stay in Mexico and enjoy his family, home, and garden.*

I used to tell my wife, "I would like for one day, if God blesses us in the last days of our life, to be together." Because, my entire life, our entire life we've been separated... To me, that was not, that was not happiness. Because I was never happy being alone. And since I stayed here [in Houston], that is one reason why I stayed, because it was closer to Mexico, closer to the border. Not really close to home, but it wasn't that far. When I went to North Carolina, it was so sad for me to think that in case of an emergency we would have to drive three or four days to get to Mexico. And to fly, we would have to drive six or eight hours to get to an airport where we could catch a plane to Mexico, that's one of the things I didn't like about that place. The rest; yes, it was pretty. But, because of the distance, I always hoped to be over here in Houston, close; and, well, perhaps that's why I stayed over here.

**JG:** *And now that you have all your children and grandchildren in Houston, how do you feel?*

**DG:** Well, right now I feel very well, very happy, and more so since I don't work anymore. And, yes, I kind of want to go back to work.... Here in Houston it is all very difficult. Over in the employ-

ment agency, the office of the *rentados*, there is work all the time.<sup>23</sup> But from what I have seen, it is very hard because...you go to those offices and the people whom they send you to, you always go to do the dirtiest work, the hardest work, until you are fortunate to stay with a company.

Daniel moved back home to Mexico the summer of 2005. The following section is based on a short interview conducted in Houston this fall.

**JG:** *After your wife and most of your children came to Houston in 1994, did you continue going to your house in the countryside back in Dolores Hidalgo?*

**DG:** Well, yes; but I only went every once in a while. I only went once a year for a week or two, and then I came back [to Houston]. [When I went] I always planted some trees and tried to repair the worst parts of the house. [For the past ten years] my wife lived here in the same house where we live in Houston. She only went to Mexico to see her relatives for a week or two and then came back to Houston. Sometimes she stayed in Mexico for a month, but that was unusual.

**JG:** *Before you retired from North Star Steel in 2004, did you consider going back to Mexico to live?*

**DG:** No, back then I only thought of going to Mexico to spend two weeks or a month and of coming back to Houston to stay two or three months and going back to Mexico. Right now, I just got back from Mexico where I stayed for two and a half months. I just got here to Houston, but I am only planning to stay for a few days to take care of some business and then I will go back to Mexico again.

I have a lot of work to do back there. I have to fix my barbed-wire fences. I just did some remodeling to my house; it was in very bad shape and we did many repairs to it. I also tend to my fruit trees. I am planting more nopales because the old nopales are very old and are dying off. I am clearing the land around my house where it looks nice, and a lot more. I also sowed an hectare of maize. At this time, it is starting to grow ears.

I have an interest in raising some twenty or thirty sheep. When I come over to Houston, well, I am going to see if I can find someone to help me take care of them. I will come especially to see my family, to see my children and grandchildren, and to be in a different atmosphere for a while.

[I plan to live most of the time] in Mexico because that's where I have my little house. I am very happy back there. The climate is very nice...and there is a lot for me to do....

Relatives and friends live back there, but my main interest is taking care of my house and my land. By the same token, when someone from Houston goes back there for a visit, I will have a place where they can come to, where they can spend the night.

[My wife] is with me most of the time. At this time we are both here in Houston. Perhaps this time I will go back to take care of what I have and she might stay in Houston for a while to help take care of our little newborn granddaughter, and maybe in a month or two she will go back to Mexico to spend some time with me back there. ■

schools in Houston met great resistance. One assistant Bureau commissioner wrote to Governor Hamilton that a Houston woman told him she would "sooner put a bullet in their heads" than support freedmen's education.<sup>44</sup> The first edifice for freedmen's education opened in September 1865.<sup>45</sup> By 1870, the school had 275 students making it one of the largest freedmen's schools in Texas. Nevertheless, the yet unnamed school was under-enrolled due to a lack of qualified and willing teachers.<sup>46</sup>

The Texas enrollment numbers could have expanded except for an extreme lack of teachers, either from the North or the South.<sup>47</sup> Female teachers from the North made up a large majority of the Bureau's educators during Reconstruction, and since Texas was often seen as unsafe for those who supported freedmen, a shortage resulted.

The Bureau tried to eliminate the problem in Houston. Shortly after the first freedmen's school opened, the Bureau founded the Freedmen's Academy (soon renamed the Gregory Institute), a four-room brick school between Jefferson and Louisiana streets built to educate black teachers.<sup>48</sup> The original academy and the current Gregory-Lincoln Education Center on Taft Street are named for General Gregory.<sup>49</sup>

Houston's freedmen made bold strides in education, but such progress was not universal in Texas. In 1866, Texas' Bureau Superintendent of Education, E. M. Wheelock, noted that only 4,865 students, white and black, were enrolled in schools. He believed that in central Texas 30,000 freed children awaited schooling that required 800 more teachers.<sup>50</sup> In February 1867, new state commissioner Charles Griffin, reported only 500 freed children in school. Probably to aid his reputation, but possibly due to his support of benevolent associations active in the state, Griffin reported 5,000 enrolled just two months later.<sup>51</sup> By 1870, the first year "students enrolled" became a census statistic, 4,000 freedmen's schools existed in the state, and by the time the Bureau left Texas a few years later, 40,000 blacks were literate.<sup>52</sup> Out of this push for education, Texas created its own public school system for all races in 1871. African American higher education began in 1878 with the foundation of Prairie View State Normal School, now Prairie View A&M University.<sup>53</sup>

Education served some Texas freedmen well, but many were left behind. Commissioner Howard cited national statistics of black children in and out of school. The total black school age population in 1869 was 1,664,600, and out of these only 238,342 went to school, for a seven to one ratio. Texas, unfortunately, held the dubious distinction of having the worst African American school attendance of all the southern states with a ten to one ratio. Of the 74,701 Texas freed children in 1869, only 7,364 were in school, but it was a huge increase in just four years in a still very rural state.<sup>54</sup>

Some white civilians wanted to aid the freedmen's education and even their religious wellbeing. Gail Borden, of Borden Ice Cream, milk, and cheese fame, offered to help with Reconstruction when he spent his winters in Texas. "I propose doing what I can towards ameliorating the condition of the Freedmen," he wrote General Howard. Borden "hope[ed] to help in the work of Reconstruction by putting up mills and assisting to build schoolhouse[s] and churches."<sup>55</sup> Howard also believed tensions