

# FRAGAS: A HUNDRED YEARS IN THE EAST END

By Emily Chambers

I remember when I was two getting all dressed up to take a picture; even at that tender age I sensed it was an important occasion. My uncle David was on the board of directors for the Houston Bar Association at the time. The association's magazine, *The Houston Lawyer*, was writing about balancing work and family in the legal profession. My family seemed to be a perfect example for the title "Family Matters." There I was in my parents' arms in a dress that looks like Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz* being held up for the world to see. It was the first of many times when I sensed my family's importance in the community and began to learn the value of the word "family."

The decedents of Felix A. Fraga and Angela Zamarron became business owners, judges, and elected officials, all well known in the East End and the larger

Houston area. Growing up, I had heard bits and pieces of our family's history, but some of the stories seemed to be hearsay. It became my mission to paint a complete picture of our history.

Born on November 20, 1892, Felix was one of two boys. His father was a large ranch owner in San Luis Potosí, in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico. A middle-class citizen, Felix was fortunate to attend elementary school where he learned to read and write, but one of the subjects he remembered the most was U.S. history. As his son Angel explained, "He was so impressed with the United States that he wanted to come [here]."<sup>1</sup>

In 1910, the Mexican Revolution became a full peasant uprising against the dictator Porfirio Diaz. Unfortunately for Felix, one of the revolution's components was land reform and, as a result, the government

*This photo appeared on the cover of The Houston Lawyer in 1994. On the porch are Joe Z. Fraga and Lupe O. Fraga; behind the fence at the right are John Paul Chambers Sr. and Rosalinda F. Chambers holding their daughter Emily Chambers (author of this article); in front of the fence on the left, back row are David O. Fraga and Nelda Fraga, standing in front of them from left to right are John Paul Chambers Jr., Eric Fraga, and Joshua Fraga; and seated are Amanda Fraga and Peter Chambers. Photo courtesy of The Houston Lawyer.*



took his ranch and his family's livelihood and status with it.<sup>2</sup> Left poor, Felix felt no ties to a country that betrayed him and decided to venture into the country that had impressed him years earlier.

On July 16, 1913, Felix Anguamo Fraga entered the United States at Eagle Pass, Texas, and paid the toll—only five cents—to cross the international bridge. Eventually, he found his way to Baytown, Texas. Felix had a friend there, Mr. Rocha, whose sister, Medusa Rocha, he later married. The couple had a daughter named Guadalupe, but unfortunately, the mother died young from tuberculosis, leaving Felix alone with his little girl.<sup>3</sup>

Staying in Baytown, Felix soon met a visitor named Angela Zamarron who had grown up in Contrayerba, a small town outside San Luis Potosí.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1901, Angela came from a large middle-class family, the only girl out of five children. As a young woman she had a child out of wedlock with a gardener, who was already married.<sup>5</sup> Living in a small town, it was probably next to impossible



*Felix and Angela had five boys who together with Angela's son Joe made up the "Fraga Six."*

All photos courtesy of the Fraga family unless otherwise noted.



*Felix and Angela Fraga around the time of their marriage.*

for her to hide from the scandal. On a trip to Houston with her son Jose, she met Felix through mutual acquaintances, and the two fell in love and married.

The new family ventured into Houston's Second Ward, a community that retained characteristics of their Mexican-American culture. By 1930, they had settled into a rented apartment upstairs at 2419 Commerce Street for eight dollars a month, and the family had expanded to include Frank and Felix Jr.<sup>6</sup> The Fragas lived within walking distance from famous East End landmarks such as Navigation Boulevard and Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Being five minutes from downtown, the Fraga boys also enjoyed the amusements of downtown like the Loew's and Metropolitan Theaters. When the family lived at 2619 Saltus, Angela made an instant friend in the new East End resident Ninfa Lorenzo. Angel remembers his mother and Ninfa always getting coffee together.

Harder than finding a community, getting work presented challenges during the height of the Depression. Felix Sr., like most immigrants, found himself limited to unskilled labor. He worked for Southern Pacific constructing railroad lines but eventually moved up to management—a rarity for a Mexican—supervising a group of five to ten men, and then serving as the "paymaster." After retiring from Southern Pacific, he acquired a job at the famous Shamrock Hotel as a dishwasher. While Felix worked, Angela was the matriarch who made all the family decisions; her sons do not remember a time she was not home.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the economic hardships of the 1930s, the East End was struck by the "The White Plague," or tuberculosis (TB). Angel remembers a family in the neighborhood losing three children in one year, and they put up a sign warning others to stay away. "It was so bad...I was getting TB shots every week," he said. The East End reflected a national epidemic propelled by the overcrowding of urbanization. In 1936, the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that one out of every twenty-one deaths in the U.S. was due to tuberculosis. Before, only private institutions such as sanatoriums, where patients were

nursed for years, treated TB patients; but with the influx of cases in Houston, Jefferson Davis Hospital developed the first public TB clinic.<sup>8</sup>

Doctors diagnosed three of the Fraga children, Guadalupe, Joe, and Frank, with harboring TB. Sadly, Guadalupe died, while Joe and Frank were quarantined at the hospital as part of the effort to contain the disease.<sup>9</sup> Guadalupe's date of death is unknown, but through census records and family stories it is believed she died in her late teenage years.

Born Jose in 1924, my grandfather, Joe "Brown" Fraga, was the only one of the six brothers born outside the United States. Called "Brown" for Joe E. Brown the white actor/comedian in 1930s and 1940s cinema, Joe was very light skinned with light brown hair and stood out in the Fraga line-up. Joe and his younger brothers had no idea growing up that Joe was not Felix Sr.'s natural son. From the time Joe first met his stepfather, he was treated differently. He was not always allowed to sleep in the house and was left outside, hungry and tired. As his daughter Rosalinda stated, "Dad never really had a home." Fortunately, cousins and neighbors looked after my grandfather, trying to make up for what he lacked.<sup>10</sup>

Although Joe did not live at home, he remained under Angela's influence, which meant he attended school. To Angela, school was indispensable, and she insisted the children attend Rusk Settlement daycare, where she volunteered to cover their fees. Joe went on to Rusk Elementary and Marshall Junior High before dropping out to work to help his family. He sold newspapers, which became a side job well into his adult life. "We all sold newspapers but Brown was the best," Angel recalled.<sup>11</sup>

My grandfather had a prime news corner in downtown Houston right next to the Lamar Hotel, a drug store, and the Loew's and Metropolitan movie theaters. Joe's customers came to know him and tipped him generously. Despite having to work, Joe took part in community sports and became a fairly good catcher. When World War II broke out, he enlisted and became Sgt. Joe Fraga, traveling the world fixing planes. Like many immigrants, as a reward for his service, Joe became a U.S citizen.<sup>12</sup> He married my grandmother, Lupe Oropeza, in August of 1948, and the couple had five children. Joe worked for Nationwide Papers as a warehouse manager until he retired.

Born December of 1927, Felix Sr.'s second son Frank was known as the family photographer. He bought his first camera for three dollars when he was ten years old. When looking at



*Frank Z. Fraga, the photographer of the family, continued his hobby into his Navy career, becoming his ship's official photographer.*



*Joe Z. Fraga and Lupe Oropeza married in August of 1948, and the couple had five children.*

family photos, Angel said that Frank took all of them. He followed Joe through school and was well liked by all of his teachers because he was very smart. Angel exclaimed, "He could have gone all the [way] to Rice!" But the war intervened. After the USS *Houston* was sunk in the Battle of Sunda Strait, a two-week campaign got underway in Houston to recruit 1,000 sailors to replace the men who had died. Frank wanted to be a part of that, but at only fourteen years old and 115 pounds, he had some serious hitches in his dream. Unbeknownst to Angela, who could not read English, she signed a form stating Frank was older than he was so he could enlist. He ate bananas for a week to reach the required 120 pounds.<sup>13</sup>

On the night of May 30, in downtown Houston, Frank stood with the recruits sworn in by Rear Admiral William H. Glassford. Frank served for thirty years, working as an electrician on nuclear submarines, including those that spied on the Soviets during the height of the Cold War. Only a few ever discovered his real age and they protected his secret.<sup>14</sup> After returning home, Frank went into the printing business, where he partnered with his brother Lupe, also known as "Champ," in his business, Tejas Office Products, to do all their printing. Frank called it Fraga Printing, and even though the business failed, most of his twelve children are still in the printing business.

Unofficial mayor of the East End, Felix Z. Fraga was born October 29, 1929, the third son of Felix Sr. and Angela. Felix attended the same schools as his brothers and sold newspapers on Sundays in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe and in the afternoons on Congress and Main Streets. He played sports for school and community teams such as the Navigation Wild Cats. Felix was fortunate in his youth to keep close ties with the Rusk Settlement House, which later provided him jobs and scholarships to pay for graduate school. As the first in his family to graduate high school and college, and to get a graduate degree, he set high standards for his younger brothers. Using his social work degree, Felix helped his parents and others become citizens through classes for Spanish-speaking citizens at Rusk.<sup>15</sup> In 1970, Felix became the director of Ripley House, the modern community center that replaced the settlement house.



*Felix Z. Fraga, named after his father, served on the Houston Independent School District board from 1990-1994 and as City Council member for District H from 1994-1999.*

Felix used his influence to better the community when he held elected positions on the Houston Independent School District Board from 1990 to 1994 and Houston City Council from 1994 to 1999. “I never thought I was going to get into elected office by working at neighborhood centers or through social work,” Fraga said. “People got me involved in telling me to run for the school board, and I got elected to that. And then, they said there’s going to be an opening on the city council, you ought to run for that, and I did and I got elected!”<sup>16</sup> Felix is always shown in photos with his wife Nelly standing at his side. Together they had three boys, two of who are still alive. Both Carlos and “Bo” have served their country with Bo following in his father’s footsteps as community developer at Ripley House.

In the winter of 1961, Angel Z. Fraga stood among a hundred people sworn in by the Texas Supreme Court judges to practice law. Angel remembered, “Mom just kept crying and saying she couldn’t believe I had become a lawyer.” Angel, or “Red” as he was known for the color of his hair, was almost as light as my grandfather. Born in July of 1932, he attended the same

*Angel Z. Fraga was the family’s first lawyer, graduating from South Texas School of Law in Houston in June of 1962.*



schools as his older brothers and played on the Sam Houston High School basketball team in the state championship. He went to the University of Houston where he got a degree in business, which included some law classes, and that introduced him to the world of law. Afterwards, he served in the military where he was known as the guy to go to for legal advice, which encouraged him to go to law school on the G.I. Bill. Except for a ten-year stretch when he served as a county criminal judge, Angel maintained his own law firm until his death in 2014.<sup>17</sup>

When I asked about their brother Tom, the first thing Angel said was, “Tom – so smart!” He graduated with honors from Jefferson Davis High School and earned a degree in chemistry at Texas A&M. He married Mary Rendon his freshman year, and

together they lived in an old army barracks. Tom worked his way through college with odd jobs, one of which was a running a movie projector at a drive-in theater.<sup>18</sup> After graduating, he served in the Air Force for twenty-five years. The couple had eight children born all around the world. After retiring, Tom settled in Austin, Texas, where he started a construction company called Fraga and Sons that one of his sons still runs today.

By the time Lupe was born, Angela had given up on having a girl, so they named the last boy in honor of the daughter Felix Sr. had lost so many years earlier. Lupe, “Champ,” is the baseball star of the family. He received a scholarship to go to St. Thomas High School and went on



*Tom Fraga graduated from Texas A&M and served in the Air Force for twenty-five years.*

to play at Texas A&M, where he graduated. Once home, he discovered he did not like accounting work, so “when the opportunity arose to buy an office supply company in 1962, he jumped at it,” Angel recalled. He married Irene, and the couple “struggled together.” Then, in 1974, “Shell Oil committed to using small, minority-owned businesses,” including his Tejas Office Products, which “got a lucrative contract.”<sup>19</sup>

Over the years, I have felt that everyone in my family at one point or another worked at Tejas. As the business grew and Lupe got older, his children took on more responsibilities. Lupe’s oldest son, Stephen, now heads the business and oversees the supply empire his parents created.<sup>20</sup> It recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and holds a huge presence in the East End and greater Houston area.

The grandchildren of Felix Sr. and Angela embody the same values of education and family passed down through generations. Joe and Lupe’s children grew up in East End where my grandmother, Lupe, still resides. The couple had five children: Joe “Bouncie,” David, Lucy, Angel, and my mother Rosalinda, who as the middle child developed a mediator personality, always trying to keep the peace.

During the 1960s and 1970s, their area of the East End still had a predominantly white population. Schools represented the most common avenue that discrimination entered my aunts and uncles’ lives. My aunt Lucy remembers getting sick in school and when my grandmother brought her clean clothes, instead of being sympathetic, the teacher yelled at Lucy and would not let my grandmother take her home. “I remembered Mom being so

sad. I was sick the rest of the day. At St. John’s there were not many Hispanics and I think Mom and Dad were just grateful that they let us into the school.” Despite the prejudice, my mother says, “We didn’t know we were poor, we were too busy having fun.” Like the generation before them, the kids helped the parents make ends meet, selling newspapers and cleaning buildings. The whole family cleaned the Lykes Bros. building for many years, and my mom remembers the workers leaving candy for them, and playing cards with her siblings while waiting to go home.<sup>21</sup>

Today, the family includes the many great-grandchild-



*Felix Z. and Lupe “Champ” Fraga played on East End sports teams like the Navigation Wildcats. Sports are credited with helping the boys stay out of trouble.*

dren of Angela and Felix, of which I am one. Going to college just down the street from where my ancestors started it all reminds me of the sacrifices and the hard work of people who brought me into this world. I carry with me their legacy of achievement, their memories, the view of a similar skyline, and the smells of Maxwell House Coffee (now Atlantic Coffee Solutions). Through the eyes of my family, we can see the transition of an area over a hundred years and see some of the community’s first Mexican American lawyers in Angel Z. Fraga, elected officials with Felix Z. Fraga, and business owners in Lupe Z. Fraga who have made an impact on Houston’s East End and the city at large. But more importantly the legacy of my family is in all of Angela and Felix’s descendants, like myself, who continue to move forward without forgetting from where we came.

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