

# Los La Rottas de Houston: A Colombian Family's Immigration Story

By Alex La Rotta

Growing up, my siblings and I occasionally asked our parents how we ended up in Houston. I was particularly interested in trying to find meaning in my dual Colombian-American identity. Here we were, this large Colombian family (forty-plus members and counting) spread across Houston, yet it seemed so happenstance. We did not have roots in Houston, or the United States; our family had just arrived, really, and we were trying to learn the language and culture. The irony that my grandmother, Cecilia La Rotta, moved our family here in 1973 for the prospect of “free education” is not lost on me as a Ph.D. candidate who has spent most of his life toiling in academia. Undertaking the study of my family's immigration story accentuates that point in a positive and meaningful way. What follows is hardly a definitive family history, but a singular interpretation with specific objectives, and a formal response to that age-old question: How did we end up here?

I sat down with the elders of my family—parents, aunts, and uncles—and asked about their experiences and remembrances on moving to Houston. Motivated by my growing interest in my family's history, in Houston history, and as a means to communicate our story to the next generations of La Rottas, including my newborn daughter, I inquired about my family's preconceptions of Houston and the United States. What were their expectations and what were their realities when they arrived?

University of Houston sociologists Helen Rose Ebaugh

and Janet Saltzman Chafetz note that mass immigration in Houston occurred mostly within the last few decades of the twentieth century, as opposed to other cities such as New York or Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> The La Rottas' arrival in Houston slightly predates the immigration wave during the 1980s, or “demographic revolution,” as Steven Klineberg of the Kinder Institute of Urban Study at Rice University describes it. According to his synopsis of local immigration patterns from 1982 to 2012, Houston and the surrounding region “recovered from the collapse of the oil-boom in the 1980s to find itself squarely in the midst of a restructured economy.”<sup>2</sup>

Houston's recent recognition as an international city is also reflected in the Migration Policy Institute's 2013 study declaring the city as “the most diverse metropolitan area in the United States.”<sup>3</sup> In early 2015, the *Houston Chronicle* started investigating this immigration phenomenon with its series, “The Million,” documenting the lives of the city's most recent foreign-born arrivals. This recognition helped shape national and international perceptions that differed from Houston's stereotype as just a southern oil-and-gas city. By 2013, Greater Houston was home to over six million people with nearly 1.4 million foreign born — an increase of 60% since the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> Mexican, Vietnamese, Chinese, Asian Indian, Salvadoran, and Honduran immigrants comprise a large portion of these newly arrived groups.<sup>5</sup>

*Three generations of the La Rotta family gather in 2014.*

*All photos courtesy of the La Rotta family.*





South American immigrants are rarely mentioned in these analyses, and, as part of a smaller demographic within the overall Hispanic population, it is a reasonable simplification. The organization of Latin American nationalities into a monolithic “Hispanic” category creates complex identity issues for non-Mexican communities.

In 1965 Congress passed immigration reforms that opened the door to groups previously denied entrance based on quotas by country of origin.<sup>6</sup> According to Latino/a studies scholar Maria Elena Cepeda, Colombian immigration to the United States occurred during the post-1965 wave that brought immigrants to regions generally outside of the American South. Cepeda adds, “while Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and New England are frequent destinations, most Colombians, with the exception of trained professionals, tend to settle in the Miami or New York area.”<sup>7</sup> Seventy five percent of those immigrants went through Miami first, as international airports effectively replaced immigration depots such as New York’s Ellis Island.

Houston has not retained a large Colombian population or traceable enclave, as noted elsewhere. Nevertheless the city’s Colombian population has expanded to roughly 10% of the overall Hispanic demographic with 75% belonging to those of Mexican origin.<sup>8</sup> During the late 1970s and 1980s Central America experienced widespread civil unrest, causing large-scale displacement and immigration to the United States, exacerbated by an economic downturn. Part of Houston’s draw was the city’s booming economy and relative proximity to the border. Colombia suffered from its own civil unrest during the 1980s and 1990s, with refugees often moving internally to cities such as Bogotá or to neighboring countries. Ours, fortunately, is not a refugee story, but elements of Colombia’s complicated, decades-long civil war effect extended family and friends there. Likewise, these events shape Colombian identity as the country



*This passport was issued to Guillermo Salazar La Rotta in 1946. Stamps on the passport read “Valid only for American countries” and the information written in includes birthdate, place of birth, marital status, and profession.*

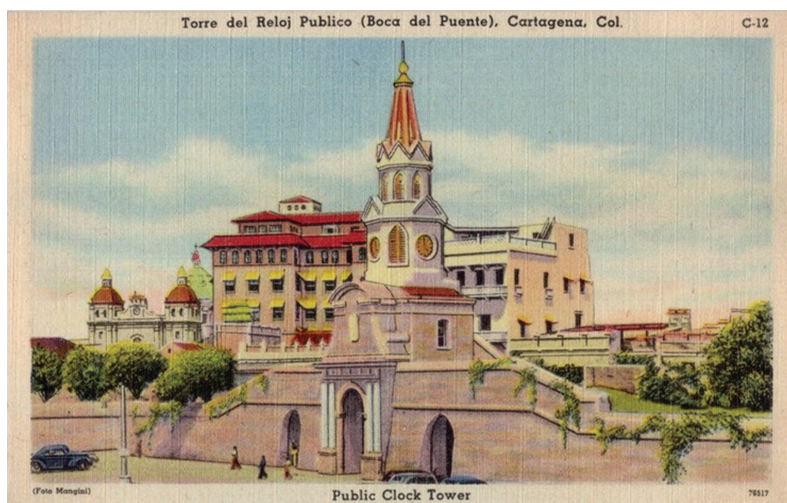
1991 and 2013, respectively, but their stories and spirit live in the recollections of their siblings.

The La Rottas lived in a middle-class neighborhood in central Cartagena during the 1950s and 1960s, coming of age in the distinct Caribbean *costeño* (coastal) region of Colombia — the cultural backdrop of Gabriel García Márquez’s iconic literary works. With its subtropical climate and renowned Spanish colonial features, Cartagena of my grandparents’ generation was a sleepy seaside city on the Caribbean coast, physically and culturally separate from the mountainous and forested Colombian interior and cosmopolitan Bogotá and Medellín.

My grandfather, Guillermo, remembered lovingly as an astute and orderly man, passed away suddenly in 1963 due to a heart attack at age forty-nine, leaving my grandmother solely responsible for the family and estate. She survived in those years by renting out rooms to itinerant workers in the city’s bustling port industries, as well as receiving occasional income from Guillermo’s pension. My aunt, Claudia, who was ten when her father passed away,

recalled her mother borrowing money to finish construction of their house, and her mother’s siblings insisting on adopting the kids to ease my grandmother’s burden. Still, Cecilia resisted doing that, despite the mounting pressures.

The prospect of starting anew in the United States had its appeal, but many of Cecilia’s siblings openly protested against the idea.



*A postcard depicts the Public Clock Tower in Cartagena, Colombia, where the La Rottas lived.*



Many years later, a few of her elder brothers still resented her decision, due in part to their unfavorable impressions of North American society. Santiago recalled a vicious episode when Cecilia's brother told her she was "going to raise whores" if the family moved to the United States, which her brother considered an "evil country" unfit for children.

Over time, the eldest children — Mary Luz, Gladys, and my father, Felipe — left the house following their high school graduations, relieving the financial burden. Santiago observed that his mother "obviously had some reservations about moving, but the overwhelming desire of giving her kids an education and other opportunities was bigger than that, so the decision was made. There was no other choice — she was going to do that anyway."<sup>9</sup>

In 1969 Mary Luz became the first La Rotta to move to Houston when she and her husband, Jaime Jaramillo, settled into a Montrose apartment. They chose Houston because Jaime had a few cousins living there, but a feud soon caused them to stop talking to each other. While neither is still alive, family accounts describe a brief settlement period when they both worked in service and factory jobs. They quickly befriended a young Ecuadorian couple, Angel and Lelia Armijos, who became important family friends in the early years and helped them assimilate. During this time, Mary Luz convinced her mother to bring the family and join them in their new life.

By early 1972 Cecilia had moved the family to Bogotá where they applied for resident visas at the American Embassy. After waiting nearly a year, Cecilia moved the family to Houston on January 27, 1973, just three days after a ceremony at the embassy where she and the kids recited the Pledge of Allegiance in the hand-over-heart pose. (At least they think that is what they were reciting.) The ceremony occurred on my grandmother's forty-ninth birthday — the last she spent in Colombia.

When the La Rottas arrived in Houston, it was a cold and rainy day in the middle of a particularly cold winter. It marked the first time the kids remembered wearing jackets, having never needed them in Cartagena's perennial sunshine. Santiago and Sylvia, the two youngest children, reflected how futuristic their new homeland seemed as they drove home from the airport with Mary Luz, Jaime, and the Armijos. They likened it to Disneyworld: everything was electronic, moving, automated. The doors at the airport magically opened and closed by themselves.



*Cecilia La Rotta poses with her grandchildren. Clockwise from top left: Monica Jaramillo, Carol Jaramillo, Juan Guillermo La Rotta, Sandra Jaramillo, and Carlos La Rotta.*



*Much of what the La Rotta children expected to find in Houston was influenced by postcards they received from Mary Luz, such as this one, advertising the city's attractions.*

Loudspeakers with booming voices echoed throughout the terminals. Even the Coca-Cola machines, with automatic dispensers, "seemed like something from *Star Trek*," Santiago enthusiastically recalled. None of the kids understood English, which some of the people they encountered found odd since they appeared to be white and therefore American. Accordingly, they began to pretend they understood when someone spoke to them and, as an inside joke, made up a gibberish language that they thought sounded like English.

My aunts and uncles knew little about Houston except what they learned from Mary Luz, who sent them postcards of Astroworld, the Houston Zoo, and NASA to enhance the intrigue, causing them to think that they were literally moving to a theme park. She described the wonders of sprawling freeways, an air-conditioned baseball stadium, and an amusement park magically dubbed "Astroworld." These flashy descriptions and colorful postcards of a modern, space-age playground provided her siblings' impressions of the Bayou City before their move.

Santiago and Sylvia also noted that a few of them remembered popular depictions of the Wild West and John Wayne movies, which were in vogue in Colombia. But while the Lone Star State and its iconography were well known, Claudia attested, "Houston was not even on the map for us — we had never even heard of it." Before the La Rotta children left, some of their friends teased them about riding horses to school with cowboys. While that never happened, they did see cows and horses near the main thoroughfares, reminding them of these forewarnings.

My grandmother passed away when I was sixteen years old. I was old enough to get to know and remember her, but too young to think to ask questions about her choices to move the family to Houston. We also had generational, cultural, and linguistic divisions, which may have impeded more meaningful connections, but she was sweet to me. My parents, aunts, and uncles describe my grandmother as graceful, classy, and elegant; she never let the children know of any of the struggles she faced. She was garrulous

and sociable, enjoying her time with her kids, grandkids, and newfound friends in Houston.

Cecilia instilled in her children a sense of pride and, what Sylvia calls, a “sense of togetherness” from the very beginning. Cecilia often described the family’s bonds like a chain, frequently reminding them that the chain needed to remain strong and connected for them to survive in the United States.

My aunts and uncles agree that Cecilia could have made it in Cartagena, but educational opportunities in the United States attracted her. Naturally she wanted a better life for her children. Sylvia recalled that Mary Luz told their mother stories of “enormous, new, beautiful schools” that were free to the tax-paying public. And as new homeowners, that included them, too.

In Colombia Cecilia struggled most with putting her children through private school on her modest income. Public school was, and is, virtually nonexistent in Colombia. Accordingly she decided moving to Houston would enable her children to continue their education and reunite them with Mary Luz and Gladys. As my father wittily put it, “School is very expensive there, more expensive than college. You do whatever you have to do, eat dirt, but you put your kids through private school. The costs were getting increasingly more difficult for my mother.” Meanwhile, Felipe, who was away at college in nearby Barranquilla, further encouraged his mother to move the family. They agreed that he would join them in Houston temporarily after he finished his studies in chemical engineering. His dream job was at the Cartagena oil refinery, where he applied after graduation and shortly before leaving for Houston, but he never got a call back. Reveling in the oil and petrochemical job opportunities in Houston, he applied for his residential visa to stay with his family. After working at a few local oil companies, he started his own oil equipment business in the early 1980s, Kolda Corporation, which he and my mother, Alegria, still maintain.

Gladys moved to New York City for a short spell in the early 1970s but later moved to Houston to meet the other La Rottas arriving at Mary Luz and Jaime’s new suburban home in Alief. Today, much of my family remains



*Felipe La Rotta, Ester de Guzman, and Mary Luz Jaramillo visit NASA in 1975.*

in Alief and Southwest Houston, settling within several miles of Mary Luz and Jaime’s first home. Alief made an immediate impression on the young siblings: its sprawling, semi-rural appearance was unlike anything they had experienced. Cow pastures stood alongside major thoroughfares next to new subdivisions. It was far from the city’s core and less connected than it appears today with rows of shopping centers, buildings, and schools. “It took thirty minutes to get everywhere,” said Sonia, who remembers cruising along Bellaire Boulevard, which was a small, two-lane thoroughfare, and gasoline costing just thirty cents a gallon in the early 1970s.

Though the founding of Alief dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, suburban Alief began in earnest with a series of bond programs in the 1960s to fund new schools that became the bedrock of the fledgling suburb. Sonia, Claudia, Sylvia, and Santiago all attended Hastings High School, Alief’s first public high school. In the mid-1950s developer Frank Sharp transformed Southwest Houston into a modern freeway suburb, Sharpstown, touted as “the world’s largest residential development.”<sup>10</sup> At the core of his master plan was the concept of a self-sustained community with a giant shopping mall, schools, churches, hospitals, country club, and creation of the Southwest Freeway, one of the country’s busiest by the end of the 1970s.

At the time the family arrived in Houston, the Southwest Freeway ended at Fondren Road just before Bellaire Boulevard. From there, a person took Bellaire to travel further south into subdivisions such as Alief and Mission Bend. It was at least a half-hour drive from downtown to Mary Luz and Jaime’s new home on Hendon Lane. Finally, the Sugarland extension of the freeway opened in 1976, making southbound travel easier.

Whenever an elder family member recalls their early Houston experiences, they talk about life on Hendon Lane. For about a year, nine people lived in the modest three-bedroom cottage, including Mary Luz, Jaime, and their first daughters, Monica and Carol. By the time the elder siblings could work, they divided chores and split their



*The author’s parents, Alegria and Felipe, and Claudia La Rotta (center) stand in front of their first home in 1978.*





*The entire La Rotta family in 1975. Left to right: Claudia La Rotta, Sylvia La Rotta, Santiago La Rotta, Carol Jaramillo (toddler), Mary Luz Jaramillo, Jaime Jaramillo, Cecilia La Rotta, Monica Jaramillo (child), Gladys La Rotta, Alegria Anzola, Felipe La Rotta.*

paychecks evenly to pay rent and utilities. Looking back, none of them thought this strange or uncomfortable. “That’s just the way it was. We never thought it was bad or anything,” explains Claudia. Cecilia, Mary Luz, and Jaime were doing the best they could, and everyone was happy to be under the same roof. Fewer individual concerns existed, since they shared just about everything, including one car.

Assimilating into Houston was a challenging experience for the young La Rottas. Beyond the physical relocation, they faced prejudice, but none of these incidents reflected, in their minds, overt and recurrent discrimination. For example, school children sometimes made fun of their inability to speak English so they had to learn the language immediately as they did not know many other Hispanic school children. Claudia recalled being made fun of by one of her teachers for her broken English. When asked about their experiences with racism during that time, many of them point out that many people confused them as Anglo or Italian. No one really knew where Colombia was on the map, thus adding to the confusion and ambiguity. Furthermore, their arrival predated the drug wars and guerilla warfare associated with Colombia during the 1980s. Still, as an Italian-descended family, many of the La Rottas are fairly light-skinned, so that may have made racial discrimination less severe for them.

Some of the worst assimilation experiences were psychological and often a result of school incidents. Claudia, Sylvia, and Sonia described their first interactions with Houstonians, when the girls would just say, “yeah, yeah,” to everything to avoid being considered rude. In case of a threat, they made up a phrase in Spanish, “peligris, peligris!” which sounds like *peligro*, the Spanish word for danger. Claudia endured mental shock; her arms and hands went limp for the first few months. At sixteen she

was unable to cope with the stresses of adjustment to losing her life and friends back home. Sylvia was very confused by her dual identities and did not know whether she should pray in English or Spanish. Santiago even went mute for a while and could no longer speak any language due to confusion. But they had to learn the language and did. With language immersion in school, they only spoke Spanish at home.

During the early 1970s Houston had few strictly Spanish-speaking enclaves or Spanish media outlets, such as Univision. They became fully absorbed in their adopted culture and note how popular culture, from *Star Wars* films to Kiss records, helped them stay in the know and adapt quickly.

By 1974, just a year after arriving in Alief, Cecilia, Claudia, Santiago, and Sylvia moved further south to their own home. Shortly thereafter, they were landing careers, marrying, and striking out on their own with their new families. By the end of the 1980s, our family spread far and wide, from Kingwood to Katy, Mission Bend to Missouri City, and elsewhere. My grandmother passed away in 1998, leaving behind a legacy of children and grandchildren and a new family tree in Houston. Certainly she faced tough times that I may never know, but it is clear she was steadfastly committed to bringing the family to Houston. As Santiago put it, “She didn’t know what was going to happen, but she made it clear that she wanted a better life for her children. She had no money, no options, but she just did it. I think it was truly just a bold decision. And I think we as a family, and the descendants of our family, are much better off because she decided to come.”

I asked my father to reflect on my initial question about how we ended up here. He thought carefully about his mother’s actions, offering various explanations and conclusions. After a slight pause, he admitted, “I think if my father hadn’t died, we wouldn’t have ever moved.” Maybe it is true and maybe that is part of what I wanted to know, trying to find meaning in significant events and their unintended consequences. But out of that tragedy came opportunity through the bold decision to uproot and immigrate. 🌀

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