

## FINAL COPY

## Mary Gonzales Tafoya

Mary Gonzales Tafoya is the daughter of the intrepid Alejandro Panfilo Gonzales (see Alex Gonzales, page XX) and his beautiful wife Alejandra Bracamontes Gonzales. For this interview, we sat at Mary's table in her cozy mobile home on Barnard Court. Family photographs and mementoes are prominently displayed, and there are four little finches chirping in a cage behind me. Children's toys in the living room await visiting great-grandchildren who come to Nana's regularly for love and babysitting.

Mary looks younger than her seventy-four years and is lovely. She dances with a senior folklorico group, *Bailes de Mi Tierra*, that performs on request at schools, senior centers, and so on. They practice twice a week. A picture of her dance group is on the wall above the table. She shows me another picture of herself in a beautiful, elaborate costume.

## Mary Gonzales Tafoya's Story:

As told to Oli Olivas Duncan January 8, 2009.

We dance all over. Last week we danced for the kids at a school in Meeker and a daycare center in Longmont. We took the kids out to dance. They loved it. Next week we're going to Lafayette to dance. We go to nursing homes. We take the people out to dance. The people at the nursing homes get so happy; they have a lot of fun.

Once we went to dance in Erie, and they had a *Mariachi* band. They called me up to sing with them. I sang with them all night. It was really fun.

The girls said, "Gee, aren't you ashamed to get up there?"

I said, "No. I know what I'm doing." And I sang with them really good.

My brother Alfonso and I used to sing at weddings, baptisms, and things like that. My dad really liked for us to sing. He was proud of us. We sang in Spanish. I love to sing.

Dad opened the City Café because they wouldn't serve him and Albert at a restaurant. Albert served in World War II on the *USS South Dakota*. He was home, in uniform, and his leg was all burned from when his ship was attacked. Dad took him out for a hamburger. Everyone else in the place was getting served, except Dad and Albert. Dad threw a fit. He knocked over a pie case, tore the "White trade only" signs off the window, and threatened bodily harm if they tried to serve anyone else. They called the cops. When Chief McPhillips got there, he agreed with Dad.

Dad decided that there needed to be a place in Longmont where Mexicans could go for a drink or to eat and not have to worry about being hassled or not getting served. He approached the owner of the City Café, and the owner was willing to sell. Dad bought the café in 1945. It was located at 333 Main Street. It's called The Office Lounge now.

My dad got here in about 1913. He was only about ten or eleven years old. He went to work on a farm.

Dad told me how the farmer used to yell to the chickens, "The Mexicans are coming. Better get in the house." And they'd all run in the chicken coop.

Dad asked him, "Hey, how come you're telling the chickens that?"

The farmer replied, "I thought I'd just have some fun and scare them with the Mexicans."

My dad said, "Well, I'm a Mexican."

The farmer said, "The heck you are." He thought Dad was white because he was light skinned and had green eyes.

Dad said, "Yeah, I am."

So the farmer quit doing that.

I've lived around Longmont my whole life. Five of us were born in Louisville: Albert, February 25, 1925; Virginia, November 13, 1926; Elsie, December 13, 1929; Me, August 15, 1934, and Alfonso, May 22, 1936. Sandy was born in Fort Morgan November 2, 1931. Joey was born in Erie October 6, 1939. Manuel, April 20, 1928 and Lupe, December 11, 1950 were born in Longmont.

We owned forty acres over by where the mall is. We raised our own beets. We all had to work. If we weren't working hard enough, Dad would threaten to fire us.

"Go ahead, Dad," we would say, because then we could just go in the house.

In 1946 or '47, I had my own little pig. It was given to me by Mr. Lopez who had the farm next to us. It was really cold and I was looking out the window when I saw a colt being born. I told my father.

Dad said, "You better go tell Mr. Lopez or the colt will freeze to death."

So I ran and told Mr. Lopez. He was glad I told him.

He gave me a little pig. I named him Porky. He was so little I had to buy a bottle so I could feed him. He would come to the door to be fed. Porky started walking my brother Alfons and me to school. We went to the Nelson Country School.

One day at school we were talking about pets, and I said, "I have a pet pig."

I don't think the teacher believed me. She offered to give Alfons and me a ride home. I think she wanted to see for herself whether or not I had a pet pig.

I told her, "We can't ride with you, because my pig will be waiting for us."

She insisted, so we got in her car and drove a little way, and there was Porky waiting for us in a patch by the side of the road.

When Porky got big, Dad butchered him. Oh, I cried. I cried so much. Whenever we had pork, I would cry. My brothers were so mean; they'd go, "Oink, oink," and I would cry, and I couldn't eat. My dad explained to me that pigs were meat. What a hard lesson.

My brother Manuel had a cute little calf named Flicka. One day he went out to feed it and found that it had drowned in the river, right across from where the Shamrock station is now, over by the mall. That's where our farm was. If my dad had held onto it, we would have been millionaires. Dad sold the farm in about 1949.

My dad loved to tell us stories. He had dozens of stories. Dad would tell us about *la Llorona*.<sup>1</sup> Even now, if my grandchildren won't behave, I tell them, "I'm going to call *la Llorona* to come and get you," and they straighten right up.

In 1947 my cousin, Kangy Sanchez, had a new bike. His sister Cleo and I decided to ride it into town to buy some candy. We rode down the path to town to this little store that used to be on Third Avenue. When we came out of the store, a police officer was there, standing by the bike.

"Whose bike is this?" he wanted to know.

We explained that it belonged to Kangy Sanchez and that we had borrowed it to ride to town.

"No," he said. "You stole this bike. Mexicans don't have nice bikes like this."

He confiscated the bike. We had to walk home and tell our parents what happened. My dad was furious: at us for taking the bike without permission, and at the policeman for his prejudice, his assumption that we had stolen the bike because “Mexicans don’t have nice bikes.” It’s a good thing Aunt Trinidad still had the receipt for buying the bike. With that proof of ownership, they went down and got the bike from the police station.

[ P H O T O ]

Lupe and Edward Olmos

Here’s a picture of my sister Lupe with the movie star, Edward Olmos. Lupe sent me this picture and I sent it in to *Star* magazine. They sent me a check for \$50. They published the picture in the magazine and said it was from Mary Tafoya of Longmont, Colorado.

Lupe is as pretty as ever. She was married to Joe Blazón; they’re divorced now. She lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Lupe is the baby of the family, and we all took care of her, me especially. People thought she was mine. I was sixteen when she was born, and I took her with me everywhere I went; I took care of her all the time. I actually raised her. My mother was busy with the City Café. Lupe really bonded with me. She relates to me like I’m her mother.

She used to ask, “Are you sure I don’t belong to you?”

I took her with me when I was dating Richard. Even after we were married, I took care of her because my folks still had the bar.

My daughter Mary Ellen lives in New Mexico, too. I love New Mexico. There's no prejudice and the people are so nice. My daughter was supposed to come up for Christmas, but she didn't make it. She was planning to come.

She said, "Mom, get the pork and stuff and we'll make tamales when I get there."

Making tamales at Christmastime is something we enjoy doing together. Then she called and said she couldn't make it. I already had the meat cooked and everything, so she said to put it in the freezer and we'd make tamales next time she came.

( P H O T O )

Richard

( P H O T O )

Mary

I met Richard when we were picking beans together. I was about fourteen. Seven years later I was frying hamburgers at the City Café when he came in. He had just returned from Korea. My dad had this picture of me on the wall.

Richard said, "I know that girl."

Dad was always suspicious and wanted to know how Richard knew me. Richard explained that we had picked beans together.

"Well, she's in the kitchen now," Dad told him.

Richard came back to the kitchen to talk with me. He was really good-looking, and he had dimples. He stayed and he stayed.

"You have to go," I told him. "You'll get me in trouble."

I had to sneak out to see Richard. We'd meet at Collyer Park. I was like Cinderella: I had to get home by midnight, before Dad got home from working the swing shift at the mine.

Richard and I got married September 24, 1955. I was twenty-one years old. Elsie and George were our *padrinos*. Richard died May 4, 2004, just before our forty-ninth anniversary.

( P H O T O )

Tafoya Family: Back row, left to right: Randy, Mark, Chris, Richard, Jr.;  
front row, left to right: Mary, Richard, Mary Ellen

We lived in Frederick for twenty years. We had five children: Mary Ellen born August 3, 1956; Richard, Jr. born October 8, 1957, who is a cement finisher like his dad; Chris born November 12, 1958 does heating and air conditioning in Loveland; Mark born April 11, 1962 has worked for the city for twenty-three years, and Randy born September 1, 1970 works for the Blue Mountain School. We raised them in Frederick.

When Randy was eight years old he got really sick. We took him to the emergency room in Longmont. The doctor said he just had a cold and to give him aspirin. I knew there was something terribly wrong with him. We took him to Children's Hospital in Denver. They found that he had Leukemia. He had to have treatment for four years. It was terrible...the chemotherapy and everything. Finally he got well. You can see from this picture that he looks really healthy.

Richard was in the Marines during the Korean Conflict. He was on the front line. He said Mexicans and Blacks were always on the front line because the brass seemed to think they were more expendable than the other guys. It was terrible for him, and sometimes he would have flashbacks. He didn't like going to the Fourth of July fireworks. All the noise would unnerve him. Once we were at a party in Denver when a guy came in and yelled something in Korean. Richard immediately dove for cover behind the sofa. I was so mad at that guy. I really told him off.

I drove the tri-area ambulance in '73, '74. It was a fun, exciting job. When I first started, I told my husband that I wanted him to go with me on my first call because I was kind of scared. He was in his greenhouse when I got my first call. I ran out to the greenhouse to tell him to come with me. In my excitement, I somehow locked the door to the greenhouse. I ran out to the ambulance and waited for him to join me.

"That chicken. Oh, that chicken," I thought. "Well, I have to go. I can't wait for him."

When I got back, he was still locked in the greenhouse.

The ambulance was parked in front of my house. We used to go all over, even to the coal mines. Once we got a call that a miner got hurt in a coal mine. I was an attendant; I wasn't driving yet. The miner was bleeding from a bad cut on his head. I had to think of something to use to soak up the blood, so I put a sanitary napkin on his head. He started laughing. I made him laugh all the way to the hospital.

We picked up this one guy, Petey Wilson and I. I was the driver and Petey was the attendant. A tractor had turned over and crushed him. We were both really thin, and we were having trouble picking up this big, heavy guy. We tried to put him on the stretcher, but he was so

heavy. Finally we got some help and got him into the ambulance. We started to drive him to the Longmont Hospital. We had notified his wife to meet us at there.

He said, "I don't want to go to the Longmont Hospital. I have a bill there."

We said, "Well, where do you want to go?"

He said, "Please take me to Denver."

So we drove him to the Colorado General Hospital in Denver. His wife was waiting for us at the Longmont Hospital. We had to contact her and tell her he was at Colorado General.

We got called down when we got back to Dacono. They told us, "We told you to take him to Longmont."

I said, "We're volunteers. We don't even get paid. The guy wanted to go to Colorado General, so we took him."

Once we picked up a drunk. He had had an operation which had opened up. He was all bloody. I was in the back with him.

I told my driver, "Open up the window, or you're going to take two drunks to the hospital."

He asked me for money for cigarettes. It was a volunteer job, you know. Instead of getting paid, I was buying cigarettes for this guy.

It was a fun job, though. Truckers would honk at me, especially in Denver. I was so small, driving this big ambulance. I guess they thought I looked cute.

I got my first aid training in Frederick. We made a training movie, but I never did see it. We went to Bennett to make a movie about a plane crashing into the school. Kids were laying around like they were hurt. I was supposed to have a broken arm and a thing up here like I was bleeding. There were five or six ambulances. You should have seen. It was all very realistic, although it was just pretend. Because we were going to be in this movie, Petey and I had our

hair done. As part of the film, a helicopter landed at the school. Our hair was ruined with the wind from the helicopter, and the dust and the dirt flying. Petey and I were laughing, although we were supposed to be serious and in terrible pain. They carried me on a stretcher to an ambulance, and I laid on the thing with all the phony blood in it, and it squirted all over the ambulance window. Then Petey had an asthma attack.

She said, "Mary, I can't breathe, for real...the dirt...the dust."

So they had to get out a respirator and take care of her. That was the only part of the movie that was a real emergency. When I got home my hair was a mess, I was all dirty, and I could hardly see because of the dust in my eyes.

My husband asked, "What happened?"

"It was pretty realistic," I told him. I'd really like to see that movie.

I don't drive the ambulance anymore, of course, but I continue to do volunteer work, especially since Richard died. I volunteer at the American Legion Post 32. I am the Sergeant of Arms in the Ladies Auxiliary. I sell pull tabs on Thursday nights for American Legion bingo. And don't forget my dancing. I love keeping busy.

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<sup>1</sup> Tatum, Charles, Editor. *Mexican American Literature*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1990: 36-39. *La Llorona* is an old tale, hundreds, perhaps thousands of years old. There are several versions. One tells about a woman whose husband was unfaithful and, to punish him, she drowned their children. The story goes that at night you can hear her wailing as she runs along the river searching for her dead children. The story is used to scare children.